

THEAKER'S

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Editorial

Stephen William Theaker

Editor

This first issue of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* is dedicated to anyone who ever cried because they felt sad.

Being sad is a feeling, and the stories in this magazine will often be about feelings. Feelings. The way people feel, and the way that some people don't. If you have ever had a feeling you will understand what I am talking about. If you have never had a feeling maybe the stories in this magazine will awaken one in you. That feeling might be disgust, boredom or ennui, but it might just as well be desire, excitement or amity. We shall find out together.

In this first issue of *TQF* I am pleased to present the first portion of my second-favourite ever novel, *Professor Challenger in Space*. It is not the first time it has seen publication, having previously seen print as a special folderback edition, then as a paperback, and then as a rocket ebook. But I make no apologies for recycling the same old material – this is after all one of three issues of *TQF* being produced retrospectively for the year of 2004, in order to bed down the format and give us all a running start at the first issue proper.

I could have course have pretended that these issues had been produced at the appropriate points of the year gone by, and thus given myself the opportunity to be regarded as a great prognosticator in the mould of Arthur C Clarke. For example, in this Spring issue, I could predict that, against all the odds,

the European Championships this year will be won by footballing minnows Greece. But I won't, because the theme of this issue is honesty – honesty and trust – and feelings.

I have another excuse for re-using my crusty old Professor Challenger novel, and that is that it finally went out of print last year, and so is at the moment only available second-hand (there are usually a couple of copies available via Amazon.co.uk).

I will not go into too much detail here about the aims of this magazine – that should really be saved for the first bona fide issue – but this issue might still be the first for someone, and to that person I say, "Hello. This is a slightly silly magazine, full of stories which may not be to your taste, and for that I make no apology. The only true purpose of *TQF* is to make me smile. If it makes anyone else smile (for whatever reason), that is wonderful. Smiling and happiness are good things, as long as they are not at another's expense. But I make no allowances for you, either in my writing or in my editing of the stories selected for publication herein."

One might hope that the person in question has the patience for long expository speeches, but that would of course be to set us on the road of making the allowances proscribed by my own exposition. Perhaps I have been too harsh.

The Editor

Professor Challenger in Space, Part I

‘This Time He Has Outdone Himself!’

‘This is astonishing,’ exclaimed McArdle, the red-headed old news editor of the Daily Gazette. ‘Who would ever have expected the old goat to have quite so much gall left in him.’

‘What is it?’ I enquired, in the secure belief that I could never be surprised by the gall of Professor Challenger, my erstwhile colleague in certain well-documented adventures.

‘Take a look at this.’

He showed me the copy of an item which was apparently to appear in the next edition, the surprising text of which was as follows:

The Most Honoured and Admired
Scientist of Our Time
PROFESSOR GEORGE EDWARD
CHALLENGER Wishes to Announce
That Following His Coronation and
Popular Acclamation He Is Now to Be
Called
KING GEORGE I
Beneficent Ruler of Ell Ka-Mar, Its
People, and All Related Properties

‘Well, what do you make of that, Malone?’ One eyebrow rose as if to say that Challenger had finally and indubitably crossed the fatal line between genius and insanity. Although in the light of such evidence it was difficult to disagree, I bore in mind the fact that most of Fleet Street had considered the scientist unhinged for some time – although I knew that not to have been the case. ‘We received this an hour ago, to be placed in the next possible edition, and, let me

add, Professor Challenger-’

‘King George,’ I interjected with a smile.

‘Professor Challenger,’ he repeated, ‘demands that a full page be given over to it.’

I read the announcement once again, saying, ‘It would be unwise to judge a man of Challenger’s quality too harshly or hurriedly.’

‘Ah, loyal to the bitter end, are you?’

‘It hardly seems bitter. If he is on the way out, at least he seems cheerful.’

‘In Challenger’s case, that’s rare enough to immediately show that something is not quite right with him,’ answered McArdle. ‘However, you are right to be loyal: Challenger has provided both you and the paper with some excellent stories over the years. It seems to me that the old boy may yet have one final story to tell.’

I could not help a wry smile as the instincts of the news editor came to the fore. ‘Even if it should prove to be his epitaph?’

‘We understand each other very well,’ he answered. ‘In all the years of Professor Challenger’s notoriety only one journalist has entered his home without being forcibly ejected in a matter of seconds.’

‘Almost true,’ I pointed out. ‘I was ejected, but I found my way back in.’

‘Uniquely! You should now return once again, and discover the meaning of this information.’

I looked him sternly in the eye.

‘It could be dangerous, you know.’ He received the information in good humour.

‘A bonus shall await your return.’

I laughed and looked one final time at the advertisement.

'I am sure that there is a perfectly good explanation for this behaviour. Presumably some native tribe of Africa or the South Americas that he has discovered has begun to worship him, or something of the sort. Though, admittedly, Ell Ka-Mar does not sound familiar, and his various journeys have been described to me in excruciating detail over the years.'

'Naturally that was my first thought.'

He indicated a pile of documents on the table, clippings from scientific journals and popular newspapers among them, as well as transcripts of the speeches made by Challenger to various gatherings, scientific and otherwise. Of late he had often found a more agreeable audience outside the scientific establishment, one which aided him in the funding of expeditions if it did nothing to stimulate his fiery intellect.

'The file on Challenger has been thoroughly searched, and nowhere is there record of the name 'Ell Ka-Mar'. Needless to say, neither is that designation to be found in any atlas or dictionary.'

'A recent expedition, then?'

'I'm afraid not. As far as we can establish, it has been at least a year since last the Professor left these isles.'

'If he had left the country, why would he have done so in secrecy? And if this 'kingdom' stems from an earlier voyage, why has he chosen to conceal it until now?'

'Those are the very questions that I want you to ask him. However, my personal feeling is that this whole thing is a product of some whim, a middle-aged fancy of a man who has never been one for modesty.'

'For all he's done,' I told McArdle, 'any civilised country would already have made him king. Perhaps he has grown tired of waiting for the fall of the House of Windsor and has begun to set the foundations of a new abode for the nation's sovereignty.'

'I certainly hope so, as that would make for a most interesting series of articles.'

'So do you intend to publish the announcement?'

'I don't see why not,' he replied. 'Challenger has paid in advance, and it will certainly make for more interesting reading than the usual. Yet again the Professor will make the *Gazette* the talk of London!'

McArdle returned to his office and I gathered together the tools of my trade. I donned my hat and overcoat and went out into the fog. Within five minutes I was in a hansom cab on the way to Enmore

Park, Kensington, the home of England's newest monarch. The household had but recently returned from the place in Rotherfield where we had experienced the adventure of the Poison Belt.

I was not inclined to share the pessimism of McArdle as regarded Professor Challenger, a gentleman who had partaken of many apparent insanities over the years but who had rarely been counted among the fools when all was said and done. If Challenger had seen fit to pronounce himself King, then until I was in possession of evidence to the contrary I would assume he had good reason to do so.

Of course, it had been a matter of some months since last I had encountered my old friend, so I must admit that it was with a slight – and no more than slight, I hasten to add – feeling of trepidation that I laid a hand upon the Challenger knocker and signalled my presence.

I saw the handle begin to move. As a precaution I took a step back. It was not without the bounds of possibility that Challenger had arranged some contraption designed with the specific aim of warding off members of the press. Happily, the door opened slowly to reveal the gentle form of Mrs Challenger, and, it seemed, she was happy to find that it was I at the door, and not some more venomous specimen of Fleet Street fauna. And yet I felt she would have been somewhat happier had there been no one at all at the door, and happier still had there been no reason for anyone to be there.

The bellowing voice of that reason bullied its way past Mrs Challenger in order to make assault upon my eardrums.

'Crawl back to the cesspool that spawned such abominations as yourself,' Challenger cried, 'and endeavour to ensure that your brother pond-swills do not follow you in laying siege to my home! Shall it forever be my lot as a man of science, Mrs Challenger, to put up with these harassments? When will old Austin be back? He knew how to deal with these blasted ragamuffins.'

She smiled and I relaxed at this proof evident that Professor Challenger had not strayed too far from his norm.

'The King must learn patience with his witless subjects!' I called as Mrs Challenger let me pass by. Going through that door was akin to going into the British Museum through the back entrance and finding yourself among the strangest artefacts of all, the items that had not yet been, and perhaps never would be, classified or explained. Mrs Challenger took my coat and hat and hung them upon what might once have been the totem of a South American

tribe, and I remain convinced of the fact that there was the brooding sarcophagus of some unknown pharaoh in an alcove of that most bizarre of entry chambers.

'I see that the Professor has been re-arranging the furniture.'

Mrs Challenger sighed. I know of no woman who has better played the role of nursemaid to unruly genius – and it was a mere role for her, of that I was sure, for in the course of my researches into the Professor certain scientific papers had been unearthed under the name of Anna Smith. The last of Miss Smith's well-received papers had been published shortly before that person's transformation into Mrs Challenger. One who had never met her might have believed it a case of the butterfly becoming once more a caterpillar, but I say this, I never saw her unhappy with Professor Challenger. Perhaps the unhappiness came when the professor left on his expeditions. At the back of her mind, I might go so far as to suspect, there came sometimes the thought that if she had never married him, Challenger might have consented to the company of Miss Anna Smith on his most perilous voyages. As it was, she was required to keep the home fires burning, a task she fulfilled with a measure of contentment and, possibly, a touch of resignation.

'Is his announcement to be published, then?'

'I'm afraid so,' I informed her. 'A full page is to be devoted to this astonishing news.'

'I rather think he has outdone himself this time.'

'It would appear so, but then that is a king's prerogative.'

'Will there be an editorial?'

'That depends upon McArdle. He is usually off the mark quite quickly, but I believe that he might wait for my verdict.'

'And what is your diagnosis, Doctor Malone, you Irish scandal-sheet merchant!'

Professor George Edward Challenger roared into the room, immediately dominating it as if the very air we breathed had been designed with him in mind. Oh foolish deity, that created a world with any thought of placing such a man upon it! To see him is to be at odds with him and to hear him is to be insulted by him in the most colourful manner. He has often been described as a cave-man in a lounge suit, and that rings true in more than one way. Without doubt the Neanderthal is not a distant cousin of the Professor, and then also, as well as resembling the men who once lived in the cave, he is not at all dissimilar to the cave itself. His is a yawning cavern of a personality, a crack in the face of the mountain that is the world,

an abysmal threat to the sanity of the rational modern man as he stares right back into your rational modern eyes and demands the attention of your most irrational ancient fears. 'I am here!' he cries, finding echo in the darkest realms of your soul. 'I am here! Deny me if you can!' He is the bear-cave, the warm cave, the cave that you always needed and were always afraid of! He was always the staunchest of companions, and finally I found him to be the warmest of friends, yet even I should be dismayed to find that maelstrom of activity and restless intellect unchained. To put it another way, Professor Challenger was an ambush of a man. Make of that what you please.

'Does Irish ancestry place me outside the jurisdiction of his Majesty?'' I bowed my head in mock respect.

'If I said it did not, your blood would doubtless lead you into fruitless combat with me upon that point!'

He kissed his wife and took me by the arm, leading me into the study, a room as full of strange and unfathomable objects as the entry chamber. The items in this room tended to be made of yellowing wood pulp and cloth as opposed to the other room's products of carved bone, stuffed animal and chiselled rock. Many of the books in that study would doubtless have amazed the clerks of the British Library – not least because a number of volumes had been smuggled out of that august establishment in the Professor's trousers. Challenger called for whisky and cigars before setting me right, as he put it.

'Malone, my dear fellow, when the time is right, you shall be fully informed as to the exact nature, dimensions, &c of my little kingdom, but in the meantime,' – here he gave what was doubtless intended as a conspiratorial wink, but which upon his simian visage appeared instead as a threatening leer – 'you should be ashamed of yourself, for assuming that my kingdom can be described in terms of the mundane geography with which you are acquainted! There is no doubt in my mind that the intelligence and certainly the imagination of the average reporter has long been on the decline, yet I had hoped a little more of my companion on the journey into Maple-White Land!'

At this point Mrs Challenger brought him a glass of whisky and a large cigar. He gulped down half of one and placed the other in his mouth with an irritatingly smug expression upon his face.

'Sometimes, Professor, it seems you enjoy nothing better than to be in possession of a great secret while being considered a madman by the better half of

London.'

'And which half is that?' He deigned to remove the magisterial cigar in order to reply. 'The half which resides beneath the ground, as opposed to above it? That portion of the population, in my humble opinion, is often the half with the most wits, the best behaviour and the most interesting things to say.'

'I see that monarchy has mellowed you.'

'By God I hope not!' He flung his cigar on the floor to indicate his feelings upon the matter. 'The fact that I have now attained high office does not mean that my work is over – though such a reward, of course, is much less than I am due for my various services to the particular development of swamp slime that it pleases us to call humanity!'

'In the pursuit of scientific advancement there is always work to be done-'

Challenger cut me off before I had even reached my full flow.

'So much is obvious, even to a journalist, I should imagine, but at the present time more pressing work requires attention. My kingdom...'

Challenger paused to see if he had my attention. I humoured him, as not to do so might have involved a cuff about the head and ejection from the premises of the most erudite ape-man of our time.

'Yes?'

'My kingdom is in trouble.'

I nodded in what I endeavoured to make a sympathetic manner. I fear that I was less than successful. The professor leapt from his chair like a bear from a trap. (If anyone should wish to argue my simile, let me assure them that Professor Challenger was as unlike a greyhound as it is possible to be.) He grabbed my shirt collar and pulled my face unpleasantly close to his.

'You think me deranged? Pah!' His voice was like a tidal wave and he held me full in its course. I struggled to prevaricate.

'Perhaps if I had some idea of the location of Ell Ka-Zar..?'

He pushed me back into the chair with an expression of disgust and returned to his original position. The whisky glass was again lifted to his lips and this time it was completely drained.

'I am of the honest and frank belief that the construction of the first domestic building sounded the death-knell of our species! Once able to surround himself with apparently solid and comforting walls, Man did his utmost to banish the world of the exterior from his thoughts. It was the death of courage, of

that species of imagination which led people to make plans for the difficult times and confront them as an immovable force, and the birth of the craven fear of the unknown that paralyses modern man whenever he is exposed to anything and anyone that is in the least bit surprising!'

I waited for him to proceed to more relevant subjects, and after a number of minutes spent berating me for both my failings and those of all other modern men (the sovereign Challenger naturally being excused from the charges) he returned to the subject of his kingdom.

'The name of the place, as you would know if proper attention had been paid to my communication, is Ell Ka-Mar, and where you err, Mr Malone, is in assuming my kingdom to be of the earthly variety!'

Though I made every attempt to conceal it, something within me gave way. It seemed that the worst was true, and that Challenger, Professor George Edward Challenger, that name recited as a mantra by journalists when they wanted to crack the head of a charlatan or unpick the stuffed shirt of an obdurate establishment man, had finally broke.

'Professor Challenger,' I said, trying to affect the old heartiness, 'a heavenly kingdom is the reward of all good men. Do you mean to say that you have received your part of it in advance of the final curtain?'

He smiled a wicked smile and got to his feet. I have never known a man so happy to follow his own route, regardless of how infrequently it has previously been trod. I, who have made more than one unusual journey with him, have often thought that he would prefer always to travel alone, were it not for the fact that it was often convenient to have both witnesses and pack-carriers at hand.

'You are entirely correct,' he said with a clench of one meaty fist, 'in what you say if not in your assessment of an old colleague who believed himself to have earned your trust and respect.'

He uncurled his fist and held it out to me.

'Come along, Malone. My kingdom is indeed of the heavenly sort, and if you step with me into the garden I shall reveal to you the means by which one may attain it.'

What could I have done? Fearing somewhat for my life if I accompanied him, and fearing for it more if I did not (for if Challenger did not do for me it was certain that McArdle would), I took Challenger's hand and went with him into the garden.

A Most Audacious Mechanism

How can I begin to describe the object that confronted my eyes in the garden? The first sensory information that I managed to digest informed me that it was large – of a size to fill the best part of what was quite a large garden. It was roughly cylindrical, the end to my left (which I assumed to be the front end of the apparatus) tapering to a point. It was apparently built from a mixture of metals and wood. Along the side which faced me was a large fin, growing from left to right, and I later learned that an identical fin ran along the opposite side.

‘What is it?’ As I made the enquiry I struggled to take in more details.

The end which I choose to describe as the back was not in my view, and I walked round to examine it as Professor Challenger began to discourse upon the object.

‘This, my dear Malone, is, as I believe to have made perfectly clear, the means by which one can attain the kingdom of Ell Ka-Mar! Is further explanation necessary? Even a journalist cannot be so dense as to require additional elucidation!’

‘I fear that I am so dense, and quite possibly denser still,’ I admitted, ‘for I am still in the dark as to the nature of this mechanism.’

The back of the ship, or the base of the cylinder, revealed itself to have three large holes, though I could not make out what lay beyond them.

‘Is it some engine of war, an impregnable vehicle to take upon the battlefield? With such a mechanism you could win any kingdom.’

I was not convinced that such was the case, and Challenger only confirmed my opinion.

‘Did I not say that my kingdom is not earthly?’ He took a few steps towards the machine. ‘Perhaps you are of the opinion, Malone, that through creating such an engine of war to serve the English monarch some God has seen fit to award me a heavenly kingdom? Which God would that be? Thor? Ares? Or perhaps that fellow from the Old Testament? Come now, young man! You will have to do better than that! For one thing, has the matter of the disintegration machine slipped your insufficient mind?’

‘Of course not,’ I said indignantly, because – need

I say? – it had, temporarily. ‘Poor Mr Nemor. Is he still..?’

‘Yes,’ answered the Professor brightly, ‘he is still... as you so delicately put it. Or as *I* might put it, he remains in a state of permanent disassembly! Ha ha! Though I might occasionally have recourse to a reliable rifle, or even a sturdy battle-axe, I have no truck with the invention of engines of war! Would that all wars were still conducted with fist and foot!’

‘Such an arrangement would doubtless be to your benefit,’ I observed, ‘in view of your impressive physique.’

‘You are too kind, Malone.’ The look on his face was less than grateful.

He gave the mechanism a hearty slap on the side, and it let out a mighty boom. His construction was plainly hollow. ‘Now listen to me,’ he ordered. ‘When I said that my kingdom was heavenly, I meant it!’ He pointed upwards and I looked in that direction. It was a foggy day, as I have already indicated, and this meant that my gaze was blocked by a thick and dark ceiling. However, for one solitary moment, the fog dissipated and the clouds above that cleared, and I found myself looking at blue sky.

I turned to Challenger, who stood with one hand upon the contraption as another man might pose with a prize bullock or a family. I opened my mouth slowly, and allowed the words to form in their own time.

‘Does it fly?’

Professor Challenger let out a mighty cry. ‘Hurrah! The boy has finally got it! Now at last we shall begin to move along at a decent rate of knots.’

‘It does fly!’

‘Not a step forward, yet neither is it a step back! But hurry, time is of the essence. The starter must be quickly finished, as the main course is yet to come!’

‘A flying machine!’

‘Yes, yes.’ Challenger had begun to show distinct signs of irritation and I apologised.

‘You must understand how incredible this is to me, how incredible it will be to everyone!’

Professor Challenger nodded gravely, though I could see that he was struggling to contain his impa-

tience.

I ran forward and threw my arms around his stout torso. 'Professor, you are not insane! I understand everything now!'

With a slight movement of his shoulders he shrugged me away. 'In that case,' he said, 'write it all down before you forget.'

'No, I see it all. With this flying machine-'

He interrupted me, saying, 'I call her the *Rocket*.'

'The *Rocket*! With this flying rocket you have conquered the kingdom of the air! Which, I presume, you have ventured to name Ell Ka-Mar. Let me inform you most sincerely, Professor Challenger, the fact that you remain sane is of the greatest moment to both Edward Malone and the readers of the *Gazette*.'

Challenger could hold himself back no longer. With all the force at the disposal of those mighty lungs he bellowed, 'Get in! At once! And stop jabbering like some idiot politician!' He took hold of a handle which had previously gone unnoticed, at least by this ever-observant correspondent, and wrenched open a door. He put his arms around my body, in grotesque imitation of the affection with which I had earlier embraced him, and bundled me into the stygian darkness of the vessel's interior.

'Professor Challenger! I must protest your treatment of my person!'

There was no reply, and as I attempted to escape from my supine position I saw what little light entered through the door blocked out by a huge and monstrous form. Professor Challenger slammed the door shut behind him – the reverberations through the vehicle's structure made my teeth rattle – and I heard movement towards what I shall term the 'nose' of the vessel.

Abruptly, the lights were on.

I found myself in a tangle of machinery, a spider's-web of pipes and tubes wrapping around me as if to choke the life out of the human foolish enough to have fallen into their grasp. I was dead and buried in an iron coffin. The engine held me and I would not – dare not – escape, for in doing so I would only encounter its likeness in every factory, every mill, every pocket watch and every pair of steel-rimmed spectacles. The floor began to shake; though I outdid it in trembling. I felt the power building and I felt my own drain away. I had fallen into its lair, its place of power, and there...

And there was Challenger.

He was looking at me with the strangest expression. 'Tell me, Malone, do you suffer from the fear of enclosed spaces, known to the so-called savants as

claustrophobia?'

I desired to regain my dignity, but for the moment I had considerable trouble finding my voice.

'Ah, no,' I answered, stumbling over those difficult syllables.

Challenger frowned with disappointment, then turned his back on me. 'A pity,' he said, 'as the next hour would have provided me with the opportunity for a most rigorous and intensified case study of said condition.' He appeared to be fiddling with some controls, though I could not possibly have attributed any purpose to them at that point in time.

Suddenly I felt much better. However unusual might be the situation and vessel in which I found myself, *it was under the control of a man*. Do not demand that I justify how I felt. There are times when we react to events at a level more fundamental than that of mere rationality. Perhaps for one moment I reverted to the cave-man of the type my fathers once were, and it saved me to see a fellow cave-man at the controls.

The machinery, the pipes and the tubes, and the very walls themselves, retreated from my new-found self-control, and I began to get to my feet.

'Challenger, you presume too-'

I fell over. The floor of the *Rocket* seemed somehow unsteady. Challenger looked back over his shoulder and let loose a hurricane of laughter. 'Still looking for your air-legs, eh, Malone? Better be quick; you're going to need them!'

I tried again, and this time managed to steady myself against a fearsome-looking array of cogs and flashing lights. I peered at the lights, attempting to make a determination of their provenance, but injured pride soon returned me to my primary task.

'Professor Challenger, I demand an explanation! You presume too much of our long-standing and possibly soon-to-be-ended friendship. Kidnapping is somewhat beyond the pale, even for you. And I insist that you keep this contraption on the ground until one is provided!'

'Oh, I presume, do I!' he laughed, like a house being torn from the ground. 'And a kidnapping is to be provided?' I scowled; he knew what I meant. 'Malone, prepare yourself for some news. Are you ready?'

I straightened my tie and re-tucked my shirt. 'I am ready.'

'Are you sure?'

'Enough, Challenger – I had but a moment of weakness. I am a newsman, now give me the news!'

'We are in the air!'

'We are-'

‘We are flying!’

‘Ah! Of course we are!’

‘What a scoop for the *Daily Gazette*!’

He was right of course, and the most basic aspect of my personality began to reassert itself. I am a journalist, and if one day I am required to report on Armageddon, after a moment of readjustment I shall do so, though there be no office left in which to file the article. It was time to stop boggling and time to start collecting the facts regarding this most extraordinary machine.

I made to question Challenger on the subject, but he was more close-mouthed than ever, saying nothing but that soon all would be revealed. That much more remained to be revealed made me stagger a little, though it was typical of him to retain information until the potential force of its impact had reached an optimum level.

As nothing more was apparently to be gained from the inventor, I essayed to fathom the secrets of the invention. I was wholly unsuccessful. Perhaps Professor Summerlee, our sceptical colleague in previous adventures, might have made some sense of the mess of panels and pipes – I suspect that even Lord John Roxton would have discerned more than myself – but for the moment I had to content myself with the knowledge that Challenger was apparently at the controls and that we were apparently in the air. I could have verified the latter by opening the door by which we had gained entry to the machine, but I elected against this course of action, for fear that the means of egress might fulfil its purpose rather too eagerly at this dangerous height. There is a similar problem upon fast-moving trains. The only thing to catch my attention was the fact that the holes visible from the rear of the craft were not to be seen from the interior. A wooden wall, littered with the usual mechanical odds and ends (I call them that, though presumably in the scheme of the *Rocket* they had some part to play) separated us from those strange openings.

At length I sat back down on the floor. Nothing could be gained in this situation except a little rest, and I wondered if my shaken nerves would even allow me that much.

True to form, when Challenger realised that I had

given up he provided me with further mystification.

‘Stand up,’ he began, and I followed his instruction. ‘Now you see that panel to the left... No, the other panel, you foolish fellow. Yes, that one. Now pull the first lever from the left and take a look at the far end of the room.’

I had done as he said and before my eyes a portion of the wooden wall slid back to reveal a cubby-hole of sorts. There was a washing bowl, taps and a toilet, and I looked back at Challenger in wonder.

‘This is astonishing.’ He seemed unimpressed with my observation.

‘The journalist is flying through the air at a good many number of miles per hour, and he is impressed by a toilet! I did not intend to shake you up to quite such a degree. Steel yourself for further marvels, then, as if you pull the next four levers of that panel, different sections of the wall will reveal in turn a hammock, a range of nutritious and tasty foods (prepared at my behest before your arrival by my good lady wife), a medical kit and a decanter of whisky with four matching glasses.’

‘What is revealed by the sixth lever?’

‘I see that your usual inquisitiveness begins to return. Whether that is a good thing remains to be decided! The sixth lever will reveal something of the greatest import, and I shall decide when that should occur.’

‘Did you mention four glasses?’

‘I believe that four was the figure mentioned. Now be so good as to make use of the bathroom facilities. We are soon to rendez-vous with that man on whose opinion you once placed so much worth as to collaborate in making him – in the eyes of the public, at least – the judge of my integrity.’

‘Professor Summerlee?’

‘One and the same, though I shall be the last to complain if he has changed.’

‘But he is in South America!’

‘That is correct, Mr Malone. Now kindly prepare yourself, as we are due to meet him in’ – he consulted a set of revolving wheels on the console to his right – ‘approximately five minutes.’

I gave up trying to understand and did as I had been told.

A Surprise Visit

Mr Summerlee, Professor of Comparative Anatomy, was at that moment lying behind an upturned rowing boat and attempting to avoid the worryingly well-aimed arrows of the Sh'Amon tribe of darkest Peru. Unfortunately for he and Mr Herando, the last surviving members of the expedition, they had not even the protection of darkness, as the only light in the jungle came from above the river at their backs, where the trees and plants had been gracious enough to leave a small clearing in the green roof that kept everywhere else in bizarrely-coloured twilight.

'We are experiencing proof positive,' he told his companion, 'that the eyesight of this tribe has singularly failed to atrophy.' He paused to consider the matter as another arrow whistled mere inches over his head. 'Of course, there remains the possibility that other senses have developed to a higher level to compensate.' Another arrow passed over, sliding off the top of his beige tropical hat. 'Hearing, for example.'

Mr Herando seems unusually quiet, he thought to himself, for a man of his notably strong opinions where the biological mechanisms of the South American jungle are concerned. Twisting his head to the left, he noted with sadness that the baritone voice of Mr Herando would never again rumble through the humid corridors of the University of Buenos Aires. An arrow had pierced him through the eye.

Summerlee examined the feathered flight of the arrow with interest. 'Really,' he said out loud, 'this shall have the most interesting consequences for the study of the South American pygmy!'

The sound of his voice evidently aided his assailants in finding their range, as the next arrow pierced the pith helmet and carried it off into the river behind him. Summerlee did his best to burrow down into the mud, but as a virtual rain of arrows began to fall around him, he was forced to recognise that this might very well be the end. He had considered actually crawling under the boat, but it was obvious that to do so would remove all inhibitions of the Sh'Amon, leaving him trapped like a beetle under a chamber pot, whereas at present they preferred to keep their distance, just in case the Englishman revealed himself, under closer examination, to be in possession of certain death-dealing objects of which they were in great awe.

Unfortunately for Professor Summerlee, he was in possession of no such objects, due to their having been kept in the pack carried by the hired hand Santos, who had been the first man to succumb to the less than tender attentions of the pygmies. He had fallen into the river with an arrow through his heart and sweet Amazon had borne him away.

If only, thought Summerlee, I had some means to convey my findings to my colleagues in England. Challenger himself would be forced to admit that I had made quite a find!

But at that moment, as my esteemed companion prepared somewhat prematurely for death (Naples was still some way off) he found himself cast into darkness. A more suggestible man might have suspected that Indian magic was at work, but Professor Summerlee took the more commonsense view that one of the arrows had finally found its target.

Oh well, he thought, here I go.

Within a second the darkness was answered by the screams of the Sh'Amon pygmies, doubtless in jubilation at the death of one they considered their enemy, thought he.

The deductions he made from this thought were twofold. Firstly, that as he did in no wise believe in the continuation of the mind after the death of the body, the body must still be alive. And secondly, that if he was still alive, the darkness of his surroundings must come from a source other than the failing of his own light, so to speak.

From the screams he could hear, the pygmies were dashing in the opposite direction as quickly as their legs could take them. Their eyes, he believed, were probably more attuned to the darkness than his own. What natural cause could effect such darkness? A thundercloud? An erupting volcano? Or had some mighty dinosaur somehow escaped from Maple-White Land? He turned onto his back, visions of flashing teeth and claws running through his mind.

It was none of these things, and yet it did seem alive, spewing steam as it dived towards the river like some terrible iron dragon.

At least, so Summerlee told me, once we had taken him on board.

Once the *Rocket* had passed below the level of the jungle roof the sunlight was able to pass once more through the gap, and it found a most worthy subject

of its illumination in Professor Challenger's astounding machine.

Summerlee cried out, 'It is beautiful!' He got to his feet and tried to clean off the muck in anticipation of being greeted by a gentleman. 'I was able at once,' he later told me, 'to distinguish the fine work of our English foundries.' Sadly he was to be disappointed in one respect, as after the *Rocket* came to rest upon the bank of the river (squashing a number of trees as it did so, which bent as if matchsticks under its weight) the door opened to reveal none other than his old rival Professor Challenger.

I fear this came as quite a blow to Professor Summerlee, but he took it on the chin and moved forward to shake Challenger's hand.

'Professor Challenger,' he began, 'I have made the most remarkable discoveries in the sphere of tribal development.'

'So I see,' replied Challenger, examining the remains of the expedition.

Summerlee pursed his lips, then proceeded. 'I had feared for my success in bringing this information back to England, and...' He trailed off.

Challenger prompted him. 'Yes?'

In the face of opposition Summerlee's strength returned. 'I am pleasantly surprised to find that I shall, in fact, be able to do so.'

Challenger's face had begun to turn a deep shade of red, and as I exited from the vessel my concern grew that he might finish the job that the pygmies had abandoned.

'For crying out loud,' I told Summerlee, 'ask him about his precious rocket!'

'Your arrival was most propitious,' said the worthy professor after a minuscule pause, 'and I confess to some scientific interest as to how it was effected.'

That was as far as he would go, but Challenger clearly regarded it as a victory. With a smile he said, 'Summerlee, you shall be told everything when the time is right! However, firstly I wish to add Lord John Roxton to our party.'

Before we left Peru, Challenger led us in clearing up the destruction left by the pygmy attack. The rowing-boat was turned right way up, and Summerlee and I were assigned to lifting the bodies of the dead into it. One time while Challenger was back inside the vessel, Summerlee leant over to me and whispered, 'The confounded man is worse than

ever!'

'Are you afraid to say it aloud?' asked I mischievously.

He dropped Mr Herando's feet in the mud and raised himself to his full height.

'How dare you say that! I am afraid of no man! And if I was' – at this point he began to yell – 'that man would not be the infernal Challenger! I demand satisfaction, Malone.'

'And you shall have it,' I replied with evident contrition, 'but for now Mr Herando requires your attention. Do you accept my full and sorrowful apology?'

'I do,' answered Summerlee as he picked up the feet of his former travelling companion. 'Farewell, Mr Herando.' On a count of three we tossed the Argentinian into the boat. We went back to pick up another of the dead. 'And in view of the fact that you have seen fit to retract your shameful accusation, I shall admit that while I feel no fear, I would be unhappy should Challenger, with his infamous temper, decide to leave me behind.'

'You would have a wonderful chance to study the pygmies should he do so.'

'That is quite true,' he concurred. We had finished with the dead, and were now collecting numerous specimens of Sh'Amon technology. He picked up a particularly fierce-looking arrow, the head of which was a furious explosion of iron barbs. 'And yet, I believe that for the moment I shall be content to consider what I have already learnt of them.'

'No time for that!' bellowed Challenger as he emerged from the *Rocket*. 'Adventure awaits us!'

'I feared as much,' said Summerlee. Then to me, 'It is not my imagination – he is definitely worse.'

'You must make allowances. He is a king now, you know, or at least so he tells us.'

Professor Summerlee's reaction does not require description.

Finally Challenger brought a pair of thick ropes out from the *Rocket* (where he kept them hidden I do not know) and had us tie one to each end of the boat. For his part, he tied the other ends of the rope to the nose and the back of the *Rocket*. Then he ushered us inside and we lifted off, carrying the boat as a ghastly gondola beneath us. I wonder what the pygmies made of this bizarre sight. In my nightmares I dream of them worshipping an idol of Challenger and his ship. If that really occurred, let us hope the unholy religion does not spread.

Farewells to Mrs Challenger

The grisly rowing boat had been deposited in Buenos Aires and the *Rocket* had returned to the Challenger residence, stopping *en route* in Kenya to pick up Lord John Roxton, who had been waging a guerilla war against certain unprincipled big game hunters. Though initially he loosed a few rounds upon seeing us in the distance – we all have nightmares of the pterodactyls of Maple-White Land – he was soon gathered unto our collective bosom. He behaved with his usual aplomb upon seeing us emerge from the ship, and he was more than pleased to hear the promise of adventure to come.

Mrs Challenger welcomed us home with a fine spread of food upon the dinner table, and all thought of discussion was banished for the moment as we luxuriated in the finest tastes and smells that all England has to offer. Mrs Challenger made a few polite enquiries of Lord John and Professor Summerlee regarding their respective adventures, but their replies were necessarily quite perfunctory, and the good lady took this not as impoliteness, but as testament to the quality of her kitchen.

After the meal the four of us gathered in the study – a number of volumes had to be transferred upstairs to create enough room – and settled in our upholstered chairs with whisky and cigars. All told, it had been less than five hours since last I had sat there with Challenger.

At first we discussed old times, patted each other on the back over adventures, ribbed each other mercilessly over misadventures, and generally waited for Professor Challenger to decide it was time to give us an explanation. However, he chose to keep his own counsel until shortly after six thirty, at which time the evening edition of the *Gazette* arrived. Mrs Challenger brought it in to us.

'I thought that you might like to see this,' she said to her husband. She passed him the folded newspaper then retreated, obviously in fear of an explosion of the type often seen in that household. As she left, she whispered to me, 'No editorial, indeed!'

For the five seconds that it took Challenger to unfold the newspaper, three of the men in that room did not breath. Indeed, as a precautionary measure

Lord Roxton removed the whisky decanter from Challenger's reach. I looked at Lord John, he looked at me, and Summerlee looked Challenger dead in the eye as the newspaper was straightened.

Finally, Challenger broke eye contact with Summerlee and regarded the front page.

Then he laughed, and the atmosphere cleared. We all smiled. 'Who would have thought McArdle would run quite so far with the story! And with his finest bloodhound still out on the trail!' In a matter of seconds he had read the story and he passed it over to me.

Not possessing Challenger's facility with the printed word it took me a little longer than him to read the article, but it read as follows:

CHALLENGER THE LUNATIC?

Editorial by McArdle, News Editor

Shocking as it may seem to those who have always regarded him as one of the finest minds of our generation, and unsurprising as it may be for those who have always thought him the most dangerous type of madman, this paper, despite a long-standing and fruitful relationship with Professor George Edward Challenger, famed explorer of Maple-White Land and one of the few men who managed to avoid the general fate as the planet passed through the poison belt (though even to this day there are those who dispute the credibility of these events, despite all evidence to the contrary), is duty-bound to report that said individual appears to have finally gone the way of many of the greatest minds of our age. He claims to be the King of Ell Ka-Mar, and while this paper takes no position on the validity or otherwise of this claim, it must point out that this 'kingdom' is not to be found on any map, in any atlas or in any dictionary. Professor Challenger's extraordinary announcement is to be found on the third page of this very newspaper. 'The strain of living and working on the very frontier of scientific advance-

ment,' said the noted brain specialist, Professor Quigg ...

There was a good deal more of the same. In fact, it appeared that a major proportion of the newspaper had been devoted to the story.

'Well,' I said to the topic of discussion as I passed the *Gazette* onto Lord John, 'what do you make of that, Professor Challenger? I must say that to find myself so described in a national newspaper would hardly cause me amusement.'

'What do I think of it, Malone?' He gulped down his whisky, giving me opportunity to notice that his face was of a colour which would normally have occasioned a modicum of alarm in me. Thankfully, for once the redness was the result of hilarity rather than ferocity. 'I think the title unusually apt. I think that it has been some time since McArdle last wrote a leader article – he would never have allowed any other journalist to ramble so. Finally, I think it is amusing to see them so ready to write me off! It shows that I have disturbed them to a most agreeable level in the past!'

Lord John had digested the article and examined Challenger's announcement before speaking. Now he handed the newspaper to Professor Summerlee.

'I must say, old boy, you are taking all this extraordinarily well. So is the advertisement a joke or what? Own up, there's a good fellow!'

'I own up to the fact that the advertisement itself was something of a ruse, as I knew it would get Malone down here faster than a Frenchman heading for a romantic tryst, or an Italian fighting a duel.'

'So it is a joke,' said Summerlee. Although he did not think it was, that did not stop him hoping. Challenger had already made too many discoveries for one day, in his opinion. 'You just wanted to get Malone down here sharpish to take a ride in your mechanical Pegasus.'

'I am afraid not,' said Challenger with sincerity. 'Ell Ka-Mar is absolutely real, and we shall travel there in the morning.'

The rest of us looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. For the moment there was little we could do but play along with his game.

Once each of us had finished his cigar we hailed two hansom cabs and went back to our respective lodgings. I imagine that quite any other inhabitants of the homes of Summerlee or Roxton were more than surprised to find returned men who that very morning had been in Peru and Kenya respectively. It is fervently to be hoped that Mrs Summerlee and Lady Roxton – if such personages existed, as neither man was wont to talking about his domestic life –

were not engaged in dalliances with their gardeners when the husbands returned.

The two other men shared one cab, as they were heading in the same direction. I took the other, and though originally fatigue led me to bid the driver take me home, within a few minutes duty bade me instead travel to the offices of the *Gazette*. Upon my arrival I was pounced on by McArdle and several of the paper's other luminaries, but I was forced to follow Challenger's example in requiring them to wait for the explanation (or as much of it as I was able to give them). Much piqued by my mention of the fact that on the morrow I was to make a most unusual journey, it was all I could do to prevent them reading the article describing the day's astonishing events over my shoulder as I wrote it. In fact, I swear that once, having an uncanny feeling of being watched, I turned to see McArdle at the top of a convenient flight of stairs trying to read my work with the aid of a pair of binoculars!

My report finally complete, I threw it to the wolves and found myself an empty room. I was lying on a couch with the door locked before the baying began. I ignored it and attempted to snatch as many winks as were possible under the circumstances. The noise outside the door died down once they realised that I would not be stirred, but as they moved away I heard arguments begin to spring up as they fought over the significance of my article.

When dawn broke through the disreputable grimy



windows of the office I awoke immediately. In all truth, I had not slept well, with thoughts of what was to follow. In view of the possibly fatal consequences of an extended adventure with Professor Challenger my first action upon waking was to write a short will, leaving the contents of my desk to McArdle, the copyright of my books to my mother (each of them so far had met with reasonable, though not outstanding, success; I had yet to try my hand at fiction), and what money I had in the bank to Mrs Challenger, as I suspected that Challenger himself had probably spent every penny he had on his beloved rocket-ship. Little was I to know that the following day, my will would be held up as proof – on the front page of the *Gazette*, no less – that I had gone to my certain death on a suicide mission. Luckily, my mother has more sense than to believe everything she reads, however sensational.

My second action was to unlock the door and then rush to the bathroom – a wake of eager reporters formed behind me as I passed through the office. ‘No comment,’ I said as I went to wash my face. One person did ask a pertinent question for which I had an answer, concerning the fact that Challenger’s wonder ship had never been spotted by the populace of London. ‘When you walk through London, even on the rare occasions that the fog clears, do you not take a great deal of care as to where you put your feet?’

After confirming with McArdle that I was going on a journey with Challenger and getting confirmation from same that I would be paid for the time I was away, I grabbed my coat and hat from the room where I had slept and set off once more to Challenger’s house.

It was actually Professor Summerlee who opened the door for me. As I stepped into the house and walked through to the study I saw Mrs Challenger deep in discussion with Lord John Roxton in an ante-room full of dust-covered documents. She noticed my looking and gave me a wave, turning my face crimson with the thought that my gaze might well have been thought accusatory.

‘Come into the study, Malone,’ ordered Summerlee. ‘Challenger is in the garden with his blessed rocket. Everything is all set – he wants us to be off before the press is here in force. We have heard from the *Gazette* that your article is expected to well and truly set the cat among the pigeons!’

‘That’s true,’ said Lord John, coming up behind us. We remained on our feet because our usual chairs had been removed from the study. ‘Challenger’s already had one telegram from the Prime Minister and three from the Minister of Defence! They want

us to stop everything while they take a look at his flying boat.’

I laughed. ‘I can imagine Challenger’s reaction!’

Summerlee became grave. ‘His reaction was as one might have expected – had the Prime Minister himself been there he would surely have received the kick delivered in the actual event to the telegram boy. However, the matter may be more serious than expected. This morning I heard a rumour from a member of my club that the Defence Minister might even go so far as to send the army down here to grab the thing.’

‘Hence the rush to get going.’

‘Exactly,’ said Summerlee. ‘If you have yet to eat breakfast-’ I indicated that such a luxurious interlude had yet to open up in my schedule. ‘Mrs Challenger has some bacon and eggs ready in the kitchen. Then clean yourself up’ – I was not aware that I was so rumpled as his tone indicated – ‘and be ready to lift by seven.’

I nodded and followed his orders with no small enthusiasm, at least as far as breakfast was concerned. The food provided by Mrs Challenger was of the usual wonderful quality, tasting exquisite enough to satisfy the most committed gourmand and being filling enough to prepare the boldest adventurer. I do not lay claim to those titles personally, but Professor Challenger and Lord John Roxton would be justified in doing so, and they seemed to be fully prepared for the wildest adventures that might befall us.

By seven I was in the *Rocket*. Professor Challenger had made use of the hours since dawn to secure our four upholstered chairs inside the vessel.

‘A capital idea,’ I declared, and Challenger graced me with a smile.

‘I thought that the place could use a little comfort after I saw you down on the floor the other day.’

‘It was fully as uncomfortable as it looked. These chairs shall be a boon to all who travel in the good ship *Rocket*!’

‘That is more true than you might have thought,’ said Challenger with a crafty wink. ‘The next journey of this bird will last a little longer than its last.’

‘I hardly think so!’ My error in contradicting him was proven by the traditional reddening of his face. Undeterred, I soldiered on. ‘On our last voyage, we travelled to Peru and back, stopping off at Argentina and Kenya on the way. It took less than five hours. I cannot conceive of a voyage that could possibly be appreciably longer!’

‘That is correct,’ he thundered. The floor of the rocket-ship trembled in sympathy. ‘You cannot con-

ceive of such a voyage. Indeed, you can conceive of nothing! That, Malone, is why you are a reporter! You cannot conceive for yourself, and so you report upon the conceptions of others!

I exited sheepishly from the ship, and found Summerlee, Roxton and Mrs Challenger waiting outside. Summerlee was sitting on a hamper of freshly prepared concoctions from the Challenger kitchen, while Roxton and Mrs Challenger were once again deep in conversation. As Summerlee was evidently out of earshot of their low voices he made a conspicuous show of ignoring them. I made a mental shrug, and addressed the whole party.

‘Professor Challenger appears to be ready.’

‘Well, this is it, then,’ said Mrs Challenger sadly, half-turning to me. ‘Off you go again.’

Roxton made eye contact with her once again, but broke it embarrassedly when he realised that Summerlee and I were also watching. ‘Off we go,’ he said to her, flushing under his collar. He entered the ship, taking pains to avoid our curious eyes.

‘Goodbye to you both,’ said Mrs Challenger to the two of us that remained. ‘Good luck on your journey, and remember that it may prove to be more dangerous than my husband suspects. Caution is not his strong point, and at times you may need to provide it for him.’

‘Despite his most fearsome roars,’ answered Summerlee, ‘I shall endeavour to follow your wise counsel. Farewell, Lady Challenger!’

‘No Lady I,’ she laughed, ‘but merely a humble queen.’

Summerlee paused for a second and lifted his ear to the wind. ‘Do you hear that?’

I confessed that I did not.

‘I shall inform Challenger that it is time to depart.’

He followed Lord John.

‘Farewell, then,’ I said to Mrs Challenger. She was about to reply when the wind brought to both of ears the sound of a multitude of horses clattering their way along the roads in our direction. A further few seconds and we could here the shouts as infantry men were brought forward to cover the front of the house.

‘Goodness me,’ said Mrs Challenger with irritation, ‘do they expect George to fly his rocket out of the front door!’ There was the sound of knocking at the door, and a loud voice began to make itself heard over the noise of the soldiers and horses. I presume it was a bailiff of some kind, come to detain the *Rocket* at His Majesty’s pleasure. ‘I suppose I should go and ready some cakes and tea for them. They will be so disappointed to find that the bird has flown.’

‘Goodbye, Mrs Challenger.’

‘Wait, there is one more thing.’ I confess to my readers that I felt slightly ill at ease, worried that some confession regarding Lord John was in the offing. She reached into a concealed pocket and took out a ring. The band itself was thin and narrow, though it was made to fit an enormous finger. No stone was mounted upon its diameter, but instead a strange set of intertwining metal spirals, like a minuscule brooch. ‘Please give this to my husband.’ I agreed and moved towards the ship.

She called after me. ‘Give my love to Professor Challenger.’ I assured her that I would, and then I was once more within Challenger’s flying womb. Summerlee and Roxton had already taken their seats and I followed suit.

Challenger looked back at us. ‘Prepare for lift-off!’ he shouted, and then we were on our way. The journey into adventure had begun!

Inside the Spaceship

'Gentlemen,' announced Challenger, 'we are on our way to the Moon!'

If any other man had made such an announcement, we would have laughed.

'Jolly good,' said Lord John Roxton. 'Luckily we've brought plenty of sandwiches.'

Professor Summerlee appeared to be equally unshaken. 'Shall I have the opportunity to exercise my skills in comparative anatomy once we arrive?'

'Well!' said I. I may not have laughed, but I was certainly surprised.

Professor Challenger seemed rather disappointed that the reaction to his statement had been so muted. 'For goodness' sake, you fellows, we're not talking about a walk in the woods!' He had come away from the controls – apparently the course had been set – and had turned his upholstered chair to face our three. He reclined as far as he was able and eyed us suspiciously. 'Did you sneak into my laboratory and consult my notes?'

'I did nothing of the sort,' said Lord John. 'Professor, if you produce a dozen marvels a day the twelfth will always receive less rapturous applause than the first. You must learn to pace yourself.'

'And besides,' continued Summerlee, 'your good lady wife saw fit to inform us of the fact this morning. She thought it unfair that we should be taken off to the Moon without having any say in the matter.'

'Well, this is a fine conspiracy! What about you, Malone, were you with the plotters?'

Summerlee answered for me. 'He was not. Mrs Challenger was persuaded that the reactions of the journalist should be honest and natural.'

'Her desire was not to deprive you of your enjoyment.'

'Even so,' said Challenger, still far from placated.

'King George,' I declared, 'consider my surprise to stand for the surprise of my co-travellers, and console yourself with the thought that it is the movements of my heart that shall be a matter of public record. In these circumstances Professor Summerlee and Lord Roxton may be dismissed as irrelevant.'

'Why, many thanks for your consideration,' said Lord Roxton.

Summerlee took up the thread. 'To dismiss us at this point would probably involve a fall of several hundred feet. I cannot add the weight of my opinion in support of this proposition.'

'That only makes it more attractive!' Challenger took the opportunity to gleefully make adverse comment upon the weight or otherwise of Summerlee's opinion.

When the chance arose, I made to say my piece. 'We are on our way to the Moon, you say?'

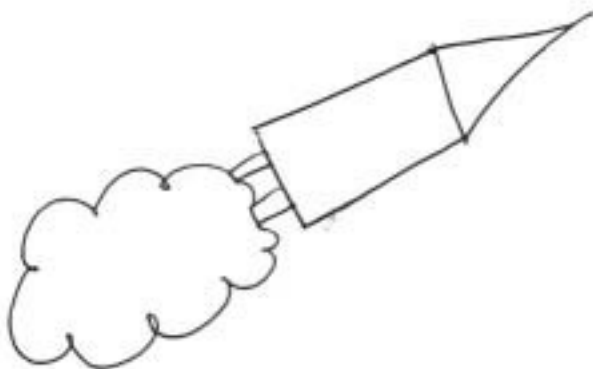
'I apologise,' said Challenger, and it was rare to hear those words issue from that fearsome throat. 'I allowed these poltroons to divert my attention away from the divulgence of necessary information. How much did she tell you?' This last was aimed at Summerlee.

'Not a great deal,' he replied. 'She simply informed us that this evening we would stand upon bright Luna. The rest is yours to tell.'

Challenger was much heartened by this news, and he prepared to sermonise on the adventure to come.

'You do not need to stand, you know,' said Professor Summerlee. 'This is not the British Biological Society.' To me he said, 'He is insufferable, is he not? Give him five words to say and he turns them into a speech.'

'You are correct,' said Professor Challenger, declining to re-seat himself, 'in stating that this is not the Biological Society. However, it might as well be, for all that the others are worth in comparison to we two.' He made a full, deep bow in Summerlee's direction. That modest and dedicated scientist rolled his eyes while Roxton and I cheered. 'Malone, we are indeed on our way to the Moon. In particular (and it is necessary to be particular, as the Moon is a world not unlike our own, though everything there happens



to be grey in colour, with various and differing areas and countries), we are on our way to the kingdom of Ell Ka-Mar – the country of which, you may have heard it said, I am the reigning monarch.’

‘I apologise for speaking of more mundane matters,’ said Summerlee, ‘but is there any chance of our learning how this contraption of yours works? I confess to a great deal of curiosity on the matter.’

‘The details are too technical to go into at the present time, as we shall soon reach our initial destination, but-’

‘Surely the Moon is not so close already!’ exclaimed Lord John.

‘I am afraid not. First we are making a short hop to a much closer locale. But to continue, the motor of the *Rocket* utilises certain advances I have made in the realm of atomic physics, which allow the ship to be propelled at high speeds. Certain other devices, by producing waves of sound which interfere with the noise of the engine, ensure that flight is virtually silent.’

‘Congratulations on a fine piece of engineering,’ I said to the inventor. ‘Why have you not published anything with regard to your atomic physics? Surely such an advance would be of the greatest interest to the whole world!’

‘It already is,’ said Professor Summerlee drolly. ‘Did you not hear the army laying siege to the Challenger residence?’

Challenger nodded in vigorous agreement. ‘They are ignorant of the physics of the atom, but they know that whatever engine powers this first lady of flight must be worth having. They shall never have it!’

‘But Professor, this atomic power of yours could change the world! It could feed the hungry and heat the houses of the poor! Why must you keep it hidden?’

‘Because it is too dangerous. Was it the Home Office that sent the Army to knock on my door? Was it the Salvation Army? No, it was the Ministry of Defence. Atomic power can all too easily be turned to destruction. Let me explain-’

‘Here he goes again,’ sighed Summerlee.

I shushed him. ‘You have no interest in the matter?’

‘This is the newspaper report of his invention. I shall wait for the scientific journal.’

Professor Challenger cleared his throat and Summerlee waved for him to go on.

‘Thank you,’ said Challenger. ‘We know from our own experience that the Earth has a core of molten lava. Now, imagine this if you can: everything

around us, the chairs we sit on, the air we breathe, and the wood and steel that separate us from the clouds (we are now hovering above London, by the way) is made up of tiny atoms, everything. Think of each of these as being like the Earth. When a hole is pricked in the Earth a volcano erupts, a vital outpouring of that long-withheld kinetic energy. The atom is the same – open it up and all the energy contained within is released. This is the principle on which my space rocket operates. However, it is also the principle upon which a bomb could be devised. A mass outpouring of such energy could incinerate entire cities!’

All of us were silent for some minutes as we contemplated the possible result of Challenger’s invention. ‘Hence your decision to keep quiet.’

‘Hence. Perhaps if one day a more enlightened government ruled at Westminster, things might change.’

‘You realise, of course,’ piped up Summerlee, ‘that once people are aware that such a process is possible, it is only a matter of time before it is rediscovered.’

‘Yes I do, and I have chosen to let the matter rest with the conscience of the next man who discovers it. However, if I am still around, and he makes the wrong decision, I might well decide to take a hand in changing his mind!’

‘Well said, old man!’ Lord Roxton led us in a cheer. ‘Hip hip!’

‘Hooray!’ shouted Summerlee and I.

Professor Challenger held out his hands and quieted us. There was a drop of water on his cheek. On any other man I would not have hesitated to call it a tear. ‘My friends,’ he said, ‘- and I feel that after all our adventures, I may call you that – I thank you for your support.’

We all cheered again.

‘Now,’ said Challenger. ‘Before we continue on our journey to the moon I have a little surprise for you, Malone.’

‘Surprise is now my closest companion,’ I answered. ‘He is an old bedfellow, and it would be churlish to begrudge him another visit.’

Challenger smiled and raised himself out of his chair like a mountain pulling itself up from the roots. ‘Come with me,’ he said. The three of us removed ourselves from our chairs and followed Challenger to the front of the cabin. We stood there a moment while he fiddled about with the controls. ‘Usually this panel would remain in place, as to have it open during interplanetary flight might prove dangerous, due to the effect of cosmic rays and such.’ We three

listeners nodded wisely. 'Look at this!'

And look we did, as a wooden panel of three metres in width and two in height (I intend to use the European measurements here, due to their having always found favour with Challenger) drew aside to reveal a window onto the outside world. What did we see there but the offices of the *Daily Gazette*, the windows full of excited and frightened faces, photographers hastily setting up their equipment, artists sketching for all they were worth and my fellow journalists scribbling away in shorthand? This last group seemed less motivated than the others (although this may be my vanity speaking), because they knew full well that a certain colleague of theirs was getting the full 'scoop'. I assumed one particularly animated figure to be McArdle himself, doing his utmost to pass on some last minute instructions. Of course I could hear nothing of what he might have been saying.

However, though I previously wrote 'What did we see there but..?', it soon became apparent that the members of my trade were not the only occupants of the *Gazette* building. We realised this upon a clouding of the Challenger brow – and a clouding of that brow had been known in the past to result in thunderbolts and lightning in the vicinity. Following his gaze, we saw that upon the topmost level of the building, in the chambers of the newspaper's owner, Lord Rample-Smith, no less, servants in His Majesty's Army were preparing to launch an artillery round at our beautiful *Rocket*!

'Disgraceful!' said Summerlee.

'Absolutely, old fellow,' said Lord John Roxton. 'How do they expect to bring down a bird this size with such a low-calibre cannon! I wouldn't want those fellows along on a rhinoceros hunt!'

For a moment Challenger was lost for words. Then he opened a little drawer in the console and took out what appeared to be a cannibalized telephone mouthpiece which was attached to the console by a long and curling wire. He flicked a switch mounted on the side of the mouthpiece and began to speak as if he were using a telephone. Though we heard nothing but his unamplified voice, the effect was soon visible

as the people in our view, soldiers and journalists both, put their hands tight over their ears.

'Put aside your puny weapons,' ordered Challenger. 'There comes a time to put aside childish things. Hear my words! End all war! Cease the exploitation of others! Forget foolish religions and devote your lives to the study of science! As I, Professor George Edward Challenger, speak, so shall it come to pass!'

With that, he switched off the speaking-machine, closed the window panel and pulled half a dozen levers. He turned back to us and said, 'We are on our way, gentlemen.'

'Challenger, really...?' I said.

'What?' he thundered.

'You laid it on a little thick back there, don't you think?'

'Of course he did,' said Professor Summerlee. 'Kingship would never be enough for this megalomaniac, I knew it from the start. Challenger will not be satisfied until they make him God!'

His professorial rival disagreed and tried to maintain his dignity after what had, after all, been a rather odd thing to do. 'Nonsense. I simply gave them food for thought. It cannot do any harm.'

'He could be right, you know, fellows,' said I. 'Perhaps in the storm of indignation that will doubtless follow some bright spark might pipe up and say, "Well, maybe it isn't such a terrible idea, after all."'

'Even so. It smacks too much of the actions of the Vernian crazy-man for my liking.' That was Summerlee's final word on the matter, which did not bode well for the voyage to come. Roxton and I did our best to make him accede to the view that it was nothing but a harmless prank, but to no avail, and it looked like the large cabin area might prove too small after all, with two such personalities in conflict within it.

'Here we go again,' said Lord John.

'Off to the moon!' shouted Challenger, trying to inject proceedings with rather more enthusiasm. Let it be recorded that his efforts met with much more success when he brought out the whisky and cigars.

Three Englishmen and an Irishman in an Interplanetary Spacecraft

Challenger was always prone to showboating, although I suppose that in the circumstances it was quite justified.

‘What do you think of that!’ he cried, as irritatingly pleased with himself as ever.

‘I’m reminded of nights spent in Africa,’ said Lord John, taking the cigar from his mouth, ‘with her shining above, the monarch of the skies, with the stars her handmaidens...’ He raised the whisky glass to his lips, turned it bottom up, closed his eyes, and let the golden fluid slide down his throat. ‘And now,’ he continued, tipping his head back as we all looked at him in bewilderment, ‘I am reminded of nights spent with the monarch of Denmark’s wife, a charming lady...’

He fell silent. We waited. Was he to resume his story? The answer was no, as we realised when the cigar began to fall from his hand. Challenger leapt forward with all the alacrity he had previously demonstrated when being pursued by the beasts of Maple-White Land, but was unable to catch the ill-intentioned tobacco stick before it touched down. He scooped it up in one great hand, scowling at the ashen mark upon the polished floorboards.

‘He’ll pay. Oh how he’ll pay!’ laughed Summerlee, earning himself a look from Challenger which might have been used to tan cow-hides.

‘And yet,’ I said, ‘the whisky glass remains in his hand.’

Challenger saw fit to allow a pause in his glowering at Summerlee and informed me, ‘The first thing a gentleman learns is to never drop his whisky glass! The second thing-’ he began, but what would surely have been a most accurate observation on the upper classes was interrupted by Summerlee, never willing to let pass a chance to exacerbate the friction between them.

‘Is not to split his infinitives, dear Challenger! You realise that you’re setting Malone a bad example – and the nation’s journalists need no further encour-

agement to mangle the King’s English!’

Challenger smiled, and although I continued to listen, I returned my gaze to the window.

‘You are a professor in comparative anatomy, are you not?’

‘You know I am,’ replied Summerlee, rather haughtily. I could imagine how he would be pushing back his shoulders and lifting his nose in the air. ‘However, that does not mean-’

‘Ah! Ah! Ah!’ said Challenger, doubtless wagging a finger.

The Moon was beautiful.

‘In comparative anatomy, I repeat, and thus, one would assume, unless you are a complete nincompoop – a condition from which I have, though lacking hard evidence as yet, suspected you to suffer – a believer in Charles Darwin’s theories on evolution. Would you concur?’

A halo surrounded her, caused by the fact that Challenger had taken the *Rocket* to a position which placed Lady Moon between ourselves and Master Sun. Thus, he explained, we were protected from the harmful effects of cosmic rays emanating from our local star. To benefit my readers, I had asked Challenger what those harmful effects might be. His answer, once I had sifted through sackfuls of verbiage disguising the fact that he wasn’t quite certain, seemed to be that anything might happen. We could be fried like sausages! Or we might find our bodily chemistries strangely altered, turning we four into beings that would be regarded as fantastic upon our return to Earth.

‘This line of questioning is-’

‘Ridiculous. Yes, I know,’ said Challenger.

Why, one might ask, did Challenger bring us halfway around the Moon in order to approach with the window open? Well, that takes us back to my initial point, i.e. that Challenger was a showboater. He wanted to show off. Need I confess that I’m glad he did? The Moon was beautiful beyond human



words, with her dark heart and her golden halo. If Challenger's Moon-dwellers truly existed – a fact by no means yet proven (although in view of the fact that he did possess a Moon-rocket, we were all prepared to believe him in other Moon-matters, pending further data) – their poetry, if they wrote any, must have been lovely. On the other hand, they would never see her like this, with starshine on her shoulders and a twinkle in her eye. In fact, I considered, the Earth would probably play a large part in their poetry, hanging in their sky as it must. I wondered what they had to say about us? Nothing good, in all likelihood, I smiled to myself. After all, the only Earthman they had met was Challenger!

'I merely want to draw your consideration to the idea that evolution applies not only to the kingdom of animals, but also to that of language. To boldly split,' he paused there, probably to grimace his best approximation of a smile, 'the infinitive is no crime, if it aids comprehension! Language lives, no less than any animal, and it must grow, change or die!' I imagined him folding his arms and sitting back in his chair with an air of triumph.

The Moon seemed larger than before.

'A very interesting hypothesis,' replied Summerlee, a little calmer now that Challenger had turned to more civilised methods of debate, 'and yet a simplistic one. Firstly, you must consider that evolution, as I see it, does not take place within a single organism. Through mating choices, certain characteristics are passed on to the next generation, while others are not. How, then, does this apply to a language? The process is more complex than you indicate.' Challenger pshawed. 'Secondly, if one ignores

the rules of a language, whatever the short term benefits might be, comprehension in the long term could only be impaired.'

I realised that I could no longer see the stars.

'Your mistake,' responded Challenger, 'is in believing that speech conforms to-'

'Challenger!' I shouted. 'We're crashing!'

'There,' said Summerlee, 'his utterances were perfectly grammatical and we understood them perfectly. Down your route lies chaos, Challenger!' I heard him get to his feet. 'Incidentally, Challenger, are we, indeed, crashing?'

The groaning of wood and a subsequent heavy thud announced that Challenger had thrown himself to his feet.

'Of course we're not,' he said with a rumble. As Summerlee moved to stand at my shoulder, Challenger rushed to the control panel. He pulled one lever, pushed another and twisted a third till it fell right off. 'Of course we're not.'

We were still moving. Something Challenger had done had switched on an enormous torch, evidenced by the cone of light which now emanated from the *Rocket's* nose. With horror I realised I could discern that light's termination upon the surface of the Moon. The diameter of that circle's termination was growing exponentially. No longer our sweetheart Mistress Luna was she, but rather a cold-hearted Milady, eager to crush us to her bosom! We were going to crash!

'Do not become alarmed, my friends,' said Challenger, frowning at the control panel, 'but I think you had better hold onto something.'

The crash was not as bad as it might have been. I awoke to the sound of Challenger slapping me in the face. A few seconds later the pain from his blows reached me and I cried out, 'Stop! I have woken!' I took my first conscious breath of the thin, dry Moon-air.

'Thank goodness,' said the brute, 'I wondered if we'd lost you for a moment!' He helped me get to my feet. My surroundings were quite astonishing. 'Sorry to wake you like that, Malone old boy. You know how much I hate to hit a journalist!'

I tried to smile. 'All your practice was not in vain.'

I have now reached the most astonishing part of my story. Well, at least the most astonishing part of my story so far – let me assure you that there is much – worse or better? – let us just say, *more* to come. While on Earth I had many amazing adventures with Professor Challenger, Lord John Roxton and Professor Summerlee, but our exploits once we headed into space were even more incredible. I am

sure that when this account is published, there will be many who ask why I delayed so long in making these journeys a matter of public record. The convenient answer would be that I was following the instructions of Challenger, naturally cautious in light of government attempts to steal his invention. Hold to that explanation if you are the kind of reader who chooses not to confront the unknown, who would rather content oneself with a pat solution rather than learning the terrible truth – and the truth *is* terrible. The actual reason for this account being written and released at such a late date will be revealed before this tale ends. There will be many among you who will remember the article I filed with the *Gazette*. Was not that the full story? Obviously not, as that piece of journalism took our group from the Earth to the Moon, around her serene majesty, and then back again, without further incident. For reasons which will become clear, I described our outward journey and our return home, but neglected to mention what happened in between. (Even so, I believe McArdle got a pretty good story out of the whole affair! People don't go to the Moon every day! Or at least people from our planet don't...)

I was standing on the Moon, looking at the Earth. An odd irony, that Earth never looks so beautiful as when you are three hundred and eighty thousand kilometres away from her – a fact that has become progressively more true as this twentieth century has progressed. While this view of my home was amazing, my surroundings were no less so. I was a few metres away from the crashed *Rocket* – I presume that Challenger had pulled me out before trying to revive me. The ship appeared to be relatively undamaged, and had come to rest on its side. When I questioned my rescuer, he explained that at the last minute he had brought the *Rocket* under some semblance of control and brought her in to land suddenly and at a very sharp angle. The forces caused by such rapid turning and deceleration had caused the less hardy of us to black out – it was an exaggerated version of the effect you might have felt when a steam train turns a corner at high speed, whereby you are slightly pressed to the left or right. Professor Summerlee had now received the slightly unkind attentions of our gorilla-like nurse, and was rubbing his eyes a metre or two away from me. As Challenger switched his attentions to Lord John Roxton – who had, in any case, slept through the whole approach – Professor Summerlee opened his eyes and became the third man from our third rock from the sun to see the surface of the Moon close up.

As Professor Challenger and I had done before

him, he looked to the Earth, he looked to the *Rocket*, and then he looked at the landscape around us. The ship had landed at the bottom of a wide valley, or perhaps a dell, the sides of which rose up to form our horizons on each side.

'We've landed in a crater!' said Summerlee, and when he said it, it made perfect sense. We had indeed ended up at the bottom of one of the many craters on the Moon's surface, some of which are visible from the Earth. 'The ground, like dust!' Still sitting, he was letting a handful of the moondust trickle between his fingers. 'Is the whole planet like this, Challenger?'

'Not to my knowledge,' answered Challenger, who had wearied of slapping Lord Roxton's face. He released his hold upon his patient's shirt-front, and I watched as the unconscious head fell slowly towards the ground. 'The rest of the planet is much like our own Earth, with grassy fields, swamps, icy wastes, cities and everything one might wish for, except, as I have said, for the fact that everything is grey. This fine dust,' he bent down to examine it more closely, 'is unfamiliar to me. Finer than sand,' – he caught up a little in his hand, stuck out a tongue which wouldn't have shamed the mother of Grendel, and dipped it in the stuff – 'and tasteless. Dead. Hmm.' One mighty paw stroked his impressive chin. 'Probably the result of the special conditions existing within the crater. Perhaps the remains of the impacting meteor which caused the crater in the first place.'

Professor Summerlee nodded in agreement. 'Very interesting, Challenger, but this is hardly the stuff kingdoms are made of, is it?'

'As I said, dear Summerlee, the rest of the world is as bountiful and glorious such as must cause even the coldest fish among men to cry with joy! And the people, so full of boundless happiness and welcome!



You will be astonished!

Professor Summerlee, stung by the insult, was all set to make a pithy rejoinder, but I cut him off at the pass, observing that Challenger's welcome must have been very warm indeed, if they made him their king, before asking, 'Could one of you explain why Lord Roxton fell so slowly to the ground?'

'Certainly,' said Challenger, getting to his feet. Summerlee, realising that his position on the floor might be considered less than elegant, followed suit. 'It is quite simple. A large magnet holds a pin more firmly than a small magnet. Planets, from my experience, exert a similar force upon anything in their vicinity. The Moon is a smaller planet than our Earth, therefore it holds us less firmly.'

'That seems clear enough,' I replied.

'Of course it does,' said Summerlee, 'although it doesn't explain why the Moon remains in place, spinning in a circle, rather than being dragged towards the Earth.'

'The theory needs refining,' replied Challenger, 'but this is not the time for idle chit-chat. A new world awaits you, gentlemen!'

We heard somebody mumbling behind us. 'Not now, your highness, I must go to the Moon...'

Professor Challenger strode over and gave him one good, healthy slap across the face. 'Wake up, Roxton,' he yelled. The echoes made Summerlee and I put our hands over our ears, but either the slap or the yelling did the job, and Lord John Roxton got somewhat unsteadily to his feet.

'Thanks for that, old man. Might have been lying there for hours, otherwise.'

'You would have deserved no less!' said Challenger with feeling. 'The whisky you drank was to have lasted us the entire trip!'

Lord John looked at his feet rather sheepishly. 'I'm sorry about that.'

Challenger scowled at him, then turned to me and

said quietly, 'Fortunately, I saw fit to install a small distillery in a secret compartment in the *Rocket*, so there's no fear of going short.'

I laughed and clapped him on the back. 'Three cheers for foresight!'

Professor Summerlee agreed. 'A man without whisky is a sorry creature indeed.'

'Now it is time to introduce you to the true marvels that our new-found mistress has to offer,' proclaimed Challenger. 'Let us hope that our mutual spouse, lovely Earth, does not learn of our promiscuity!'

'Does Mrs Challenger know about all the ladies with whom you are keeping company?' I enquired of him.

'Follow me!' he cried, beckoning us on with one trollish arm. 'To Ell Ka-Mar, the city on the Moon!'

'We are already there?' asked Lord Roxton.

'I would not say so if it were not true,' said Challenger gruffly. 'Although we held our position relative to the Sun and the Moon as we approached, the Moon was still moving in its course around the Earth. Thus, the surface of the Moon was turning, from our perspective. Although our final landing was somewhat sudden, I had timed our approach accurately.'

'To Challenger's kingdom!' I cried, and Roxton endorsed those sentiments with a cheer (cut short when he realised how much it hurt his head).

Professor Challenger began to climb up the hillside, and we followed. The dusty nature of the ground made the going difficult, but the low gravity of the Moon compensated, and soon we reached the ridge along the top of the crater-hole. Our ascent had thrown up a lot of dust, and until it settled we saw nothing. When it settled, what the four of us saw was so horrible that not even Summerlee thought it appropriate to make a joke at Challenger's expense.

The King of Ell Ka-Mar

‘This is my fault,’ said Professor Challenger, sitting among the ruins with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. The fine grey dust covered him from head to toe.

After the dust had slowly fallen to the ground, leaving our view from the crater’s rim unimpaired, we had seen a dead city. ‘Ell Ka-Mar!’ had cried Challenger, but with anguish instead of joy. We had stood sadly by while he leapt down the side of the crater, bellowing with rage. Within three or four bounds, because of the Moon’s relatively low gravity, he had reached the nearest of the ruined buildings, and we watched, powerless to help, as his first touch caused what little remained of it to crumble away.

‘That can’t be true,’ Summerlee was saying to reassure him. ‘You could never have known.’

Challenger shook his head. With his pale coating and mournful features, he looked for all the world like the spirit of the souls lost when the city died.

‘I knew – they had asked for my help, you see. But none of us thought the danger so imminent! If only we had returned sooner! But now they are dead, all dead, and I’m to blame. A whole city died with the name Challenger the curse upon its lips!’

He fell silent for a moment, before a new horror came to mind. ‘From what they told me to expect, the rest of the Moon is probably just as devastated.’

Consoling somebody in such a situation is impossible. Worse than impossible, it is insulting, but I had to try, and it was not as if Challenger was incapable of taking a few insults on the chin. ‘We haven’t found any bodies,’ I pointed out.

Challenger merely looked at me dolefully, and left it to Summerlee to reply. ‘Look at the state of the city, Malone! It’s been completely destroyed, every brick in every building annihilated, till nothing is left but dust! Do you think anybody could have survived that?’

I shrugged, and for a few moments more, there was silence. Lord Roxton was the next to speak.

‘Challenger – George.’ The use of his Christian name provoked a response from the Professor, but even that scowl was heart-breakingly lifeless. ‘I think it’s about time you gave us the full story, old boy. Straighten everything out before we head back to Earth.’

Challenger sighed deeply, causing a tiny hurricane in the dust clouds about him, but he got to his feet. ‘Yes, I suppose you’re right. The time for secrecy and showmanship is gone. But let’s go back to the ship first. There’s nothing to be done here.’

‘And in any case,’ said Summerlee, ‘we could all use a glass of whisky.’

‘Whisky?’ said Roxton, perking up a little, then remembering himself. ‘Sorry.’

‘I began working on the *Rocket* shortly after the episode of the Poison Belt,’ said Challenger, as we all sat back in our upholstered chairs. Each of us had a glass of the whisky freshly produced by Challenger’s high-speed distillery, except Lord John, who contented himself with some coffee. Summerlee was filling his pipe with tobacco from his pouch, but nobody else had elected to smoke. This was no time for cigars. ‘If such an event could happen once, there is every chance that it could happen twice, thrice or four times every Wednesday! Imagine if the Earth entered a poison belt which, instead of rendering the people of Earth unconscious, killed them outright! And poison belts are by no means the only astral calamity lurking in wait for the Earth as she sails in apparent serenity through the cosmos. Evidence of this we have seen outside, though I wish we had not.’

‘Knowing that others could not be relied upon to rise to the challenge, I made it my own duty to develop a space-craft, which, in case of emergency, could be used to carry people away from the dying Earth.’ He paused, seeing that I had a question.

‘But the *Rocket* is so small. Though you know I would not wish to belittle this wonderful ship, she could carry only six or seven in comfort, perhaps as many as twenty in a pinch. Does that mean you had planned to hand your invention over to the government after all, in the end, for mass production?’

‘Hmm, rumbled, aren’t I? The fact of the matter is, Malone, that the *Rocket* is a prototype, and that, yes, it was my intention to give construction plans to the government in case of emergency. But you have seen the government’s reaction to news of my invention. It has left me in a quandary. If I gave the plans to the British government now, there is no doubt in my mind that they would not hesitate to use them to selfish ends. However, if I keep the plans to myself until some critical day, how could the required

number of ships ever be built in time?

'The ideal solution would be to release the plans to an international organisation, a league of nations, but as yet no such entity exists. I have spoken to certain political and international figures of my acquaintance, but I've yet to find a man worth trusting with such a secret. Perhaps one day I will be able to share my knowledge with the whole world, but I doubt it. Our world, too, will die. London, like Ell Ka-Mar, will be incinerated, and Mrs Challenger with it.'

Summerlee interrupted his increasingly melancholic discourse. 'Events here on the Moon seem to indicate that the need for your ships may come sooner rather than later.'

'That's right!' declared Lord Roxton. 'Challenger!' he said abruptly. 'Pull yourself together, man! Tell us what happened when you came here before, tell us what you learnt! Maybe we can't save the Earth, but four friends such as we, with a spaceship, four rifles and a mobile distillery, can have a blasted good try!'

'That's the spirit,' I agreed. 'Don't give up now, Challenger, not after all we've been through!'

'You're correct, of course,' said Challenger, jolted from his most un-Challenger-like self-pity by our heartfelt appeals to his better side. 'There's always a chance, however slim, and if anyone can take hold of that chance and wring it for every scrap of opportunity, it is we four! Lucky am I, to be blessed with such companions!'

'And you didn't even have to kidnap us,' said Summerlee. 'You're far from being a Vernian crazy-man, and this submarine doesn't have to finish its voyage at the bottom of the sea, crushed under the pressure and springing leaks at every joint! We'll rise to the surface, after all!'

'Quite,' said Challenger with a quizzical look and a raised eyebrow. 'Perhaps Roxton – *John*,' (he said the name with as much sarcasm as it would bear) 'is not the only one over-indulging in the complimentary whisky.'

Summerlee harrumphed, but it was noted that when he finished his drink, he poured himself coffee in the *Rocket's* miniature kitchen. Yes, that is correct, a kitchen! Challenger had revealed his craft's latest marvel, a fully functioning *salle de cuisine*, which would have done justice to many an English home if it had not been so tiny! 'Will wonders never cease?' I had asked. 'Not while we travel with Challenger,' Lord Roxton had replied. Challenger had revealed it upon our initial return to the ship, once it became clear that the sandwiches provided by Mrs Challenger were running low. They were so deli-

cious, we had not been able to stop ourselves from eating them continuously during the entire voyage to the Moon! (Excepting breaks for whisky and cigars, of course.) It is a wonder that, full of bread and ham as our stomachs were, we were able to perceive the Moon's lower levels of gravity at all!

'I shall start at the beginning,' said Challenger, a new fire in his voice now. 'I built the *Rocket* in response to the affair of the Poison Belt. Once it was finished, I decided to take it on a test run. It wasn't my intention to fly to the Moon, but after a few hours of flying around, the Earth began to seem rather *passé*. There's only so much you can take of flying over the same old cities and deserts and jungles. If you have read *Robur Le Conquérant*, you'll know what I mean.'

'Then, hovering above Timbuktoo, I poked my head out of the top hatch-'

'There's a top hatch?' Roxton asked.

'Unless I'm losing my mind, I believe I just said so.'

'Sorry for asking,' said Roxton. 'But I can imagine how a top hatch might be useful on a ship like this.'

'Kindly leave the imagining to me in future, Lord Roxton! If I want you to hang out of my spaceship blasting at comets with your rifle, I'll tell you.'

'If there are no further interruptions, I'll continue.' We all shook our heads, slightly cowed by the return to what passed for normality with him. 'I opened the top hatch and stuck out my head, to take in the night air. It was cool and breezy. Then I saw the Moon, and I was struck by the notion of travelling there. At first I dismissed the idea, much like yourselves when first informed of my journey. Although my aim in building the *Rocket* had been to create a means by which men might leave the planet, I had not planned to do so on the first excursion. But the idea returned to bother me over and over, like a pesky gnat buzzing around my head, until finally I afforded it serious consideration. Why shouldn't I go? Well, I had little in the way of rations and the hull integrity of the *Rocket* had not yet been tested for its airtight qualities. The first point would not become a problem if I didn't spend too long on the Moon, and the second point could be dealt with immediately. I closed the hatch and flew down to the Niger, and then along it until I reached the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic, where I immersed the *Rocket* in water, before lowering her to the bottom of the sea, where the pressures are greatest. There were no leaks. So you see, despite the irritation caused to me by Professor Summerlee's inane comparisons with the *Nautilus*, my ship can indeed function as a submarine, should it be neces-

sary.'

'Or should she require a good wash,' I said brightly, before realising that the reason she might require a good wash right now was because she was coated with the incinerated ashes of a dead civilisation. Challenger pursed his lips, bringing to my mind the image of two duelling walruses.

'Having proved that the *Rocket* was airtight, I was almost ready to go where no one had gone before – space!'

'How galling it must have been to find someone already there,' said Summerlee wryly.

Challenger ignored him. 'As it was night in Africa, I flew the *Rocket* over to Australia, where it was able to dry off in the sun. I didn't want to risk the potential hazards of water freezing on the ship once I headed out of the Earth's atmosphere. I spent twenty minutes bathing myself and the ship in the sun on the top of Ayers Rock – can you see the tan? – before getting back inside and setting the controls for the Moon. The ship is piloted using readouts which combine the results provided by two main sensing machines, or sensors, as I choose to call them. One sensor emits sound impulses, like a bat, and from monitoring the rate at which they return it provides valuable information about what is up ahead. The other sensor monitors attraction rates of various cosmic bodies, such as the Earth, the Sun, the Moon, Mars and Venus, allowing you to plot your position according to them.'

'That is very impressive,' said Summerlee, speaking for all of us.

'Thank you. And, so that I can see where I'm going when the window is shut, there's a specially shielded peephole on the instrument panel.'

'The journey to the Moon was uneventful. Where we were busy eating sandwiches and bickering on the second journey, I concerned myself with monitoring the *Rocket*'s performance and taking measurements of the void beyond the ship. My conclusions in that regard are that space is, as I expected, not entirely a vacuum, although it has many of the qualities which we might associate with one. For example, if Lord Roxton were to amuse himself, after having imbibed large amounts of my whisky, by leaning out of the top hatch, he would be subject to explosive decompression.'

'What does that mean?' I asked, in my role of journalist and straight man.

'His eyes would pop out. Followed by his brain and the rest of his innards. Strictly speaking, space cannot be regarded as an 'ether', as the substances within it are discrete, but substances within it exist –

dust clouds, for example. Who knows what else?'

'Approaching the Moon, I was of course astounded by her beauty. Manoeuvring to an appropriate position, I opened the viewing portal, and slowly approached.' He noticed that Lord John was about to ask a question. He held up one hand and put his whisky down with the other, before pressing his fingers to his temples. 'Were you about to ask why I could not control our approach this time?' Roxton nodded, impressed, and Challenger picked his whisky back up. 'I could have made quite a living in the music halls, you know. I'm not certain of the reason, but I would speculate that it might have been down to a sudden surge in the Moon's gravitational powers, possibly caused by the aftermath of this widespread destruction.'

'When we return to Earth,' said Summerlee, 'we should search for any evidence of strange occurrences at sea – tidal waves, whirlpools, flooding, that kind of thing. That would support your theory, Challenger.'

'It may be my imagination,' I said, 'but I feel much lighter now than I did when we arrived.'

Challenger nodded sagely. 'That would correspond with what I was told to expect. Before long it will be impossible to breath on the Moon without special apparatus, as she loses her grip on the little air she presently has. I will come to that soon.'

'When I was close enough to the Moon, the most astonishing scene appeared before my eyes. I wish you could all have seen Ell Ka-Mar in her full glory as I did. No city on Earth could compare to her, least of all smelly, dirty London! Tall, thin buildings, graceful, elegant and made of wondrous materials! Shining domes and lustrous arches! Wide open parks and sinuous walkways! That the Moon had a low hold on them meant that the people could travel easily from place to place without resorting to trains or horse-drawn carriages (not that there were horses on the Moon), and it meant they could build their buildings tall and their monumental artworks taller still. The tallest construction of all, the first to resolve itself clearly in my viewing portal, was an enormously grand and slender portrayal of the leading scientist of their age, erected within his lifetime! Would such a thing ever happen on our grubby little planet?'

'Thus I had my first glimpse of the Moon-dwellers other than as tiny dots moving around the city beneath. I brought the *Rocket* to a halt and regarded the statue. From what I could glean from it, the Moon-dwellers were remarkably similar to us in shape. Evolution had carried us in similar directions,

although it was hard to see why, conditions being so different on the two worlds. The statue itself was grey, but as everything else on the surface was too, that was not particularly conclusive as regards the colouring of the natives. In all likelihood, they had materials available in no other colour.'

'That is quite bizarre,' said Professor Summerlee. 'My reading of anthropological articles – there are many places where anthropology and comparative anatomy meet, as you know – has given me the impression that one of the earliest skills learnt by primitive humans was to make colours, even if only by scraping a leaf along a rock. How these aliens had the ability to create enormous statues but were so backward that they were unable to generate any colours whatsoever is beyond me. If there was no colour on the planet at all, they could at least have generated some through the refraction of light to brighten up their city!'

'Maybe they just liked their city that way,' I said helpfully. 'Or perhaps they were colour blind.'

'That may well be the case,' said Challenger, although Professor Summerlee was unsatisfied. Even Challenger seemed unconvinced, ruminating over it a moment before he continued with his story. 'After having considered the statue, I prepared myself mentally and flew the *Rocket* down to the ground. My arrival had already attracted much attention, although while examining the statue for clues I had not been able to see the crowd gathering beneath my feet. As the *Rocket* approached, they bounded out of the way with their thick, strong legs.'

'I closed the portal as I landed – when I opened the door our two races would meet each other for the first time, and I felt it would be ungentlemanly to gain the upper hand by first examining them from within the vessel (though that might have been considered the wiser course).'

'The rest is quite straightforward. I opened the door and the mayor of the city came to meet me. Like her fellow Moon-dwellers, she was powerfully-built, with lean muscles and thick-set bones. I had anticipated that their skin would be grey, but it was not. It was a rich, brown colour, which left them looking like exceptionally strong specimens of the Hindoo people, excepting of course their dark blue hair and the prehensile tentacles which served them as ears. We got along famously, and as it turned out that their food was perfectly edible, I decided to stay a while. I spent the following two weeks being tutored in their language by their very best teachers. Soon I was fluent and able to converse with my hosts on many matters. I learnt much from them regarding mathe-

tics, the sciences and the arts, although they were unforthcoming in many ways about themselves. In response to this, I reserved my right to hold back about matters pertaining to Earth, but this was never an issue between us until shortly before I left. I believe that both parties considered it to be nothing but simple caution, entirely appropriate when representatives of different worlds came together. During all of my time there I found them to be the most amiable hosts one might wish for. They were always friendly, always ready to talk, and always ready to share a bottle of wine and exchange a few choice drinking songs, and yet I felt there was always an undercurrent of sadness in their discourse. Though I tried to discover the cause of this sadness, I could not. Strangely, as the constant parties and merry-making that surrounded me wherever I went in Ell Ka-Mar grew in intensity, so did the sadness. This is a mystery which I was unable to fathom until the day before my return to Earth.

'As usual, I was awoke by my two attendants, Malsoe and Julia – did I mention that, like us, the Moon-dwellers were divided into two sexes, male and female? Well, such was the case, although there seemed to be more women than men, and remarkably few children. The children I did see tended to be very young – barely more than babes in arms, at most. Presumably most of the other children were at school. There is a sign of the superior nature of their society for you – all the children were at school, not just those whose parents could afford it, with the rest left to steal for their living on the streets!

'Malsoe and Julia woke me with song, before laying my clothes for the day on the bed. I thanked them, but that day they did not leave. "I believe," said Julia, "that you will require our assistance to attire yourself today, Professor Challenger." She was quite right. When I got up and looked at the clothes, they seemed to be nothing but a jumble of unrelated pieces of cloth. However, once they had dressed me the garments made perfect sense. I looked fully as handsome as the day I married Mrs Challenger, although Julia and Malsoe complained about the lack of ear tentacles for hanging the *wardwuufts* on. Apparently my ears just weren't large enough to have kept them up.

'When I was ready, the two ladies led me from the bed-chamber, through the city and to one of their many great plazas. This, in fact, was the plaza on which I had landed, all those days ago, and there, indeed, was my beloved *Rocket*, just visible over the heads of the crowd. To my eyes, it looked as if the whole of Ell Ka-Mar had congregated there on that

day. When they spied my approach they all began to applaud and wave their tentacles in the air. I found this very gratifying, but as Jula and Malsoe led me through the crowd towards a stage that had been erected beside the ship I felt sure that I saw tears in the eyes of some of the people. I tried to ask my guides about this, but either I couldn't make myself heard above the noise of the crowd, or they just didn't care to answer.

'Once I was upon the stage, the people cheered, and I waved, though I had no idea what was happening. For a moment I felt slightly chilled, as I realised how similar all this was to certain Aztec rituals of which I had heard stories. This feeling soon fell away, as I could not believe the gentle and friendly Moon-dwellers capable of such atrocities.

'The Mayor approached me, and we smiled at each other. Had I not been so happily married, romance might have blossomed in that unlikely quarter, but it was not to be. She spoke to me, then, saying this, although my translation is somewhat loose. "Professor Challenger, you came to us from Earth, in your mighty star-spanning craft, and we have been happy to welcome you to our world."

"Thank you," I replied. "It has been entirely a pleasure."

'The people cheered for me once more.'

'Weren't their throats sore by now?' asked Summerlee.

'The Mayor continued, without, I will point out, interruption. "Professor Challenger, we, the people of Ell Ka-Mar, would like to bestow upon you our greatest symbol of recognition. It is but an honorary title, our society being entirely egalitarian, but the honour in that honorary is no small thing. We wish you to become the monarch of Ell Ka-Mar, the protector of the realm, and, therefore, because Ell Ka-Mar is the capital and largest of our settlements, the King of the Moon!"

'Unusually, you will agree, I was at a loss for words. But finally I managed to stammer out my acceptance, and there was much rejoicing as the coronation ensued. It was no crown, but instead a golden ring with which they presented me. As far as I could tell, it was the only thing on the planet (apart from the people) which was not grey. I should have it here somewhere, in my pockets.'

As he searched his jacket, a sudden thought came to me – hadn't Mrs Challenger given me a ring to give Challenger? I had a look in my own pockets and, sure enough, there it was. 'Is this what you're looking for, Professor? Your wife gave it to me shortly before we set off – I'm afraid that in all the

excitement of the journey I forgot to pass it on to you.' I handed it over for his inspection.

'Yes, yes, that's it,' he said. 'Don't worry – I got it from you in the end, that's what counts.' He passed it on to Lord Roxton for his examination, and he in turn passed it on to Professor Summerlee. 'I remember now,' said Challenger. 'It had been chafing my finger a bit, and Mrs Challenger took it away to have it adjusted.' He took it back from Summerlee and placed it upon the ring finger of his right hand. 'There, fits like a dream. Now, where was I again, Malone?'

'I think he knows,' I said to the others in a mock-weary fashion. 'He just wants me to say it out loud. I believe, Challenger, that you had just been crowned King of Ell Ka-Mar.'

'That's right, my boy. Ha, ha! I doubt if McArdle will ever print it!' In the event, McArdle was never given the option. 'After the coronation, things returned much to normal for the rest of the day, or as normal as they ever were on the Moon. However, something had changed for me. The title they had bestowed on me may have been honorary, but it was nothing to be sneezed at, and if they had done so much for me, the least I could do for them was to try and root out the cause of the trouble which had brought sadness into their lives.

'I may have determined to try and help them, but they were hardly open in discussing the matter with me. After I had made enquiries of everyone I knew, from Jula and Malsoe to the Mayor herself, I found myself summoned into the presence of that great scientist whose impressive statue I have already described. I had previously met him only at social events, and I had never really had the chance to speak to him for very long. In fact, I had often had the impression that we had been deliberately separated. His name was Aikor.

'He welcomed me to his laboratory, and as he showed me around we began to talk. "They tell me that you're trying to help us," he said to me, while holding up a peculiar grey compound for my inspection.

"Something's wrong here," I said. "I can tell from the sadness in people's eyes, from the way their tentacles droop when they think I'm not looking."

"You're very perceptive. But what makes you believe that you can help? How can you save a whole world?"

'I was dumbfounded by his words. "Is it that bad?"

"My liege, it is that bad and much, much worse. Soon a force will strike this planet, a force that we

cannot stand against. We will be gone. Our gravity machines will be destroyed and our atmosphere will evaporate into space. Our little grey world will die.”

‘I searched for something to say. “Is there nothing I can do?”’

“You could remember us, hopefully with a smile. You can tell your fellow Earthmen about us – let us live in your memories.”

‘I turned from him, feelings of anger and hurt boiling inside. His resignation to his fate made me feel foolish and immature – strange, but then, for all I know he might have been a thousand years old. I began to walk away, but turned back again. He was replacing the grey compound. “I have my ship. I could ferry you to Earth! I couldn’t save you all, but at least some would survive.”’

‘He shook his head. “We have our own ships, George. That isn’t the point. If we went to Earth, the force of which I spoke would follow us there, and your people would needlessly die. Running is not an option for us.”’

‘Challenger,’ I said, ‘this is terrible, but you cannot blame yourself. How could you be to blame?’

‘Before I left, I spoke to Aikor once more. He looked tired and feverish as he dashed up to the entrance of the *Rocket*. “Challenger,” he said, “you were right. There is a chance, but it is so desperately slim! We need your help, but there is great risk. I would not say a word to you of this, if I didn’t know you to be the kind of man who would consider it an insult to his honour if I did not.”’

‘I grasped his hand firmly. “Speak, Aikor! What can I do?”’ Quickly he told me that according to his calculations there might still be up to a month before the evil force arrived on the Moon. That would, he believed, be more than enough time for me to return to Earth, collect my comrades and come back to the Moon, where he would have told me of our desperate mission into the unknown.’

‘But it wasn’t enough time,’ said Summerlee sadly.

‘No. If I had hurried, if I had collected Malone in the *Rocket*, eschewing secrecy, if I had done this or that, we might have got here in time.’

I shook my head. ‘You can’t blame yourself, Challenger. You were back here within two days.

That should have been plenty of time. It wasn’t your fault.’

The others agreed with me. ‘You offered to put your life on the line for them,’ said Lord Roxton. ‘Nobody could have asked more of you.’

Even Summerlee spoke up, and there was no sign whatsoever of the words sticking in his throat. ‘Under the circumstances, Challenger, no-one could have acted more nobly or shown more compassion.’ Perhaps for his own sake he should have stopped there, but on the other hand, perhaps not, for his next words did much to break the melancholic mood that had once more taken hold of Challenger as he reached the end of his story. ‘Though you have the aspect of a brutish gorilla-man, within you beats the heart of an altogether gentler creature.’

Challenger growled and leapt up from his seat. ‘Why, I ought to break every bone in your body!’ Summerlee held his head high and Challenger walked over to the kitchen where he began to prepare himself a sandwich. ‘But I know you’re only insulting me to make me feel better! The effort’s much appreciated!’

We all laughed, and Summerlee winked at Roxton and I.

‘I should stop feeling sorry for myself,’ Challenger continued. ‘Perhaps we could still have a look around, analyse the dust for clues as to what happened, &c. If the Earth is ever threatened with this force that destroyed the Moon, it would help if we had previously gathered all the available information.’

None of us disputed his assertion, and as he sat back down with his sandwich we began to discuss the possible nature of this mysterious force. We had precious little to go on – was it a natural phenomenon or a fleet of intergalactic warships? We had no way of knowing, but perhaps we would after searching the Moon for clues.

‘We’ll have to get started soon,’ said Challenger, ‘because my instruments show that within three or four hours the air-’

He fell silent, and none of us took up the conversation, because we had all heard the knock at the door.

The Strangest Mechanical Creature

To say the knocking at the door gave us a fright would be more than an understatement. We were on a dead world, the inhabitants disintegrated by who knows what, and there was somebody at the door!

We had all turned to regard the door, wishing we had x-ray vision, or at least a spyhole, to let us see who was out there.

‘Could it be a survivor?’ asked I.

‘A survivor of that?’ said Challenger with scepticism. ‘Not bloody likely, is it? But I suppose one of the Moon-dwellers *could* have hidden at the bottom of a cave or something.’

‘More likely it’s one of the aggressors,’ said Lord Roxton. ‘Where do you keep the rifles, Challenger?’

The leader of our expedition looked around the room at our resolute faces. ‘It’s good to travel with such companions. But please consider the fight you might be getting into. This may be the most dangerous thing we’ve ever done!’

‘Don’t you mean to say,’ said Summerlee, ‘that this might be the most exciting adventure we’ll ever have!’ Roxton and I applauded his sentiments.

‘You are good men all,’ said Challenger. ‘But you are mistaken in one respect. This will not be the most exciting adventure we’ll *ever* have, because the next adventure to come will always be more thrilling yet!’ With our acclamation ringing in his ears, Challenger went to the control panel, where the twisting of a knob or two caused part of the wall opposite the entrance to fall away, revealing four rifles. Each of us picked one up, although we allowed Lord John to make his selection first.

By the time the knocking came again we were ready, the four of us spread out with our guns trained on the door. Challenger, his vast meaty hand holding the rifle as if it were a pistol, nodded to us. He reached the other hand to the little drawer in the console and pulled out the mouthpiece of his speaking-machine. After using his thumb to adjust a small dial on its side, which presumably turned the volume down from the deafening levels he had employed in London, he flicked the switch which turned it on. At the time I could not understand what he said, but he later provided us with a translation of the Ka-Marian

he used.

‘Who goes there?’ he said.

There was no reply.

‘Move around to the front of the ship.’

‘Challenger,’ I said. ‘Will we be able to hear their answer?’

He switched off the speaking-machine. ‘Yes – there is a second mouthpiece embedded in the outer hull of the ship. It will pick up any vocalisations they make, and transmit them to us. Of course, if they shouted, there’s a good chance we’d hear them anyway.’ He frowned. ‘Let’s see if they understood.’ He repeated the process which had previously opened the viewing panel upon a scene of raucous London, and the wooden panel drew aside.

At first we could see nothing but the dusty inner wall of the crater, but then, inching into view, came one of the most peculiar beings I have ever seen. It seemed to be a woman, or at least fashioned in the shape of a woman. Her hands were up in the air, in the traditional human gesture of surrender, and she was facing us as she edged sideways onto the screen. She wasn’t human. She wasn’t one of the Moon-dwellers – a moment’s glance at Challenger’s astonished expression was enough to prove that beyond question. *She seemed to be made entirely of metal!*

‘A metal woman!’ I exclaimed. ‘Look at her pinafore! The pockets full of cleaning instruments! The bizarre gleaming hair! She’s so beautiful, but so strange!’

Professor Summerlee had just two words to say on the matter. ‘Quite remarkable!’

Challenger had more to say. ‘It seems to be some kind of mechanical housewife.’ Quite naturally, we had by now ended our guarding of the entrance to regard the peculiar vision upon the screen. Challenger stood before the screen as we gathered behind him. Dragging his eyes away from her, he turned to say, ‘One can easily imagine the advantages over the flesh and blood type!’

I wondered if he would ever learn to appreciate his spouse before it was too late.

‘I think we should let her in,’ said Summerlee. ‘She seems friendly enough.’

'We can't be sure,' I said. 'For all we know, she might have been the agent of the Moon's destruction.'

Challenger and Roxton scoffed, but foolishly I credited Professor Summerlee with a little more caution. 'We should take Malone's warning seriously,' he said. 'She might have dusted them to death.' He began to laugh, then realised no-one else had joined in. He looked at Challenger's face, then thought for a moment. 'Oh, I see. Dusted them to death.'

'A pun to die for, so to speak,' said Challenger. 'However, it is my opinion that this woman is friendly. But I am not being recklessly incautious, in my opinion. Consider this, Malone: if she destroyed the land of Ell Ka-Mar, could this ship stand against her? I sincerely doubt it. If we keep her locked out, what do we gain? Our only option will be to return to Earth having learned nothing. She may offer us important information.'

'And you never saw her in Ell Ka-Mar?' asked Roxton.

'No,' confirmed Professor Challenger. 'She may have been there but I never encountered her, or, indeed, any other mechanical humanoid of that type.'

Professor Summerlee chose this as his moment. 'This is obviously the problem for the solving of which you have brought me with you, Challenger. As a professor of anatomy, it is my considered opinion that the mechanical housewife is not of Ell Ka-Mar.'

'How can you be so sure?' I demanded, playing my part as well as ever. Challenger put his rifle down and scratched his chin, trying to figure out the answer before his rival spoke.

'It is really quite simple,' Summerlee said. 'She has been created to look like a woman-'

Challenger managed to steal his thunder. 'But she has no ear tentacles!'

'Quite. Therefore, she has most likely been created in imitation of earthly life.'

'Impossible! If anyone could do such a thing, I would know about it!' blustered Challenger. 'And in any case, she is here on the Moon, and we are quite definitely the first men on the Moon!'

'The alternative is that there is human life, akin to ours, elsewhere in the cosmos.'

We were all dumbfounded by his statement. The ramifications were incredible. Had she been left there by human destroyers? Was Earth some forgotten colony of a star-spanning empire? As we all got over the initial shock of Summerlee's words, the cabin began to ring with the noise of the thousand and one questions which each of us had to ask. In the

end, Challenger brought a stop to the discussion, which was taking us nowhere.

'Gentlemen,' he said, banging his fist against the console for emphasis. He barely batted an eyelid as injudicious placing of his bang caused four whisky glasses to be thrown out of the wall and onto the floor, where, quite naturally, they shattered. 'Gentlemen! There is only one way to get answers to our questions, and that is to invite our strange visitor into our ship. My sensors show that the atmospheric loss outside has not yet reached a critical level, and so I shall now open the entrance.'

Within five minutes the mechanical housewife was inside with us, and Challenger was closing the door behind her.

In perfectly good English she thanked us for welcoming her to our spacecraft. Challenger told her to think nothing of it, and offered her a drink.

'Some oil would be nice,' she said.

Challenger went to the back of the cabin to look for some.

'So,' I began, 'you are a mechanical woman.'

'That's correct,' she said. 'I am a Mark One Mechanical Housewife, designed to serve the needs of my master – or mistress, of course – without delay or fuss. Thank you,' she said, as Challenger offered her a glass of oil.

He raised his eyebrows to us, before commenting, 'I believe the rest of us could use some lubrication too.' He poured each of us a glass of whisky and we all sat in the upholstered chairs, except Lord Roxton, who, ever the gentleman, gave his up for the mechanical housewife. Challenger told him to stamp on the floor in a certain place, and lo and behold, a stool rose up for him.

'It's a nice ship,' said the woman of metal. 'I can see you have put a lot of work into it. Nicely spick and span, too.' Then she noticed the broken whisky glasses, which we had all forgotten. 'Dearie me!' she said, before getting out of her chair and walking over to her discovery. She held out her left arm, which telescoped out as the hand curled up, forming a cylinder. The offending pieces of glass were sucked up into her hand, and then presumably up her arm and into her body.

Challenger smiled at us. 'What Mrs Challenger wouldn't give for an arm like that!' We all laughed, and he then asked our visitor what would happen to the glass.

'I will digest it,' she replied. 'The atoms forming the glass will be smashed, providing me with the energy I need to perform my functions. If I ate too much, I would simply eject some into a suitable

receptacle.'

I found myself liking this strange woman, with her forthright talk of ejecting and receptacles. There was no false modesty about her. She was very engaging, and despite her unusual appearance, I felt myself becoming quite smitten with her. Before my readers throw their copy of my book down in disgust, let me just ask them to compare the mechanical housewife with one of my other loves, Gladys Hungerton, who entreated me to pursue a life of excitement, before abandoning me for a solicitor's clerk when I took the time to do so! There was a sweetness about the mechanical housewife that went beyond her programming, and to this day, I cannot think of her golden locks and shiny face without fondness.

She returned to her chair, where she continued to drink her oil.

'Tell me,' she said, 'how you came to be on the Moon.'

'We were thinking the same about you, as a matter of fact,' said Lord Roxton. Now we were getting down to business, our faces had hardened a little. Hers, of course, did not need to, being apparently made of steel.

'Oh, my master sent me,' she said casually. 'He wanted me to look things over. He'll be here soon.'

We Earthmen looked at each other. Who was this master of hers, asked Challenger.

'You'll find out,' she said. 'Why are you here?'

By mutual consent, arrived at through a sequence of nods, frowns and shrugs of the shoulders, we elected to leave this part of the conversation to Challenger, what with his being the King of Ell Ka-Mar.

'I am here in my official capacity,' he replied, 'as the King of Ell Ka-Mar.' He waited to see her reaction, but predictably nothing showed upon her face. However, I should make clear that although her face was made of metal, it was not immobile. Her black eyes moved around in much the same manner as a human's, she had little copper eyebrows which she raised or lowered to indicate certain moods, and her golden lips moved with a beautiful softness which entranced us all.

'You were the King? Did they crown you at the

last minute and send you off on a desperate mission?'

'Why, yes,' he said. 'How did you know?'

'The Master knows all. He is supremely wise and supremely enlightened, and sometimes he chooses to trust me with his knowledge. You must prepare yourselves for his arrival. Soon he will be here.'

'Certainly,' said Challenger. 'Would he like a glass of whisky?'

'You react with typical human flippancy,' she said with a smile. 'But that is not a problem. Were you not human the Master would have no interest in you.'

'Is your master human, like us?'

'The Master is unclassifiable. He simply is.'

'Do you know what happened to Ell Ka-Mar?'

'The Master knows, and if he chooses, he will tell you.' She was still smiling, but Challenger was not. He clenched a fist behind his back, but he made a commendable effort to maintain his composure. His beard was fairly bristling with frustration.

'Is there nothing you can tell us? What is your name, for example?'

'You can call me the Mechanical Housewife,' she replied, but before she could go on, there was a palpable change in the atmosphere. Outside the ship we could hear the first rumbles of a great thunderstorm. The smile fell away from the Mechanical Housewife's face and she flew to her feet, standing to the sharpest attention any of us had ever seen.

'I am the Mechanical Housewife,' she announced, in strident tones quite different from the gentle manner in which she had addressed us before. 'I am the herald of he who is to come!'

The thunderstorm outside broke with a crashing sound that could not have been equalled by a dozen earthbound volcanoes. Challenger jumped from his comfortable chair and rushed to the control panel. 'It's the air – it's exploding off the planet! No one will ever breath on the Moon's surface again!'

Roxton, Summerlee and I had taken up our rifles once more, although I can't say to what purpose we were expecting to use them.

'Prepare yourselves, humans,' shouted the Mechanical Housewife, 'for the Coming of Master Zangpan!'

The Coming of Master Zangpan

We would have prepared ourselves, if we'd known how. We had no idea of what we were supposed to be preparing ourselves for. Challenger took the wise step of closing the viewing portal – the storm raging without was doing its best to get within, and it was unlikely that the glass would have resisted its attentions much longer. We were all on our feet once again, our guns in hand, and we backed up until we had our backs pressed against the back wall of the cabin, as far away as possible from the entrance, the now-concealed viewing portal and the Mechanical Housewife, who had started to glow and crackle with a blue electric light.

'Should I give her a blast of the old Winchester fury?' asked Lord Roxton.

He was addressing Challenger, but I answered first. 'No! We have no right!'

'She could be endangering the ship,' said Challenger.

'You didn't have to let her in,' I said, 'and what you said then still applies!'

'Besides,' interjected Professor Summerlee, 'if you shoot her she might just explode.'

'Jolly good point,' acknowledged Roxton, although he didn't lower his rifle. 'But I'll keep her in my sights, just in case.'

I found myself fervently hoping that he wouldn't need to fire.

The shocking blue fire around her was intensifying – it seemed to be reaching a climax – then suddenly a tongue of flame flickered out from the level of her belly to the centre of the cabin, where a blue sphere of light developed into a man-sized cocoon, still attached to the Housewife by the crackling umbilical. From her mouth emerged the first truly inhuman sound we had heard her make, a metallic scraping of iron against steel, and then the light died, leaving us to regard the strange, strange man who now stood inside the *Rocket*.

'Sorry about the racket,' he said, blithely oblivious to our stupefaction as he examined the cabin. 'And sorry about all that Prepare for the Coming of Master Zangpan stuff! I'm still trying to get that old programming out of her system. She used to work for

some guy called Cosmosus, Galacto, something like that. What was his name, Housewife?'

'You programmed me to forget, sir.'

'That's the spirit, Housewife!' He now turned his full attention to us, after having fully examined the interior of Challenger's craft. 'However, don't mistake the antipathy I feel towards the Mechanical Housewife's melodrama for a willingness to be taken lightly. Far from it, take me very seriously indeed, at peril of your lives.'

I was trying my best to follow his instructions, but it must be said that Master Zangpan, for all his impressive talk and the astonishing way in which he arrived in the *Rocket*, was a less than imposing figure. He *was* tall, about five feet eleven inches, with impressively handsome oriental features, but in other aspects, notably his clothes and hair, he was quite peculiar.

His black hair was straight and extraordinarily long, parted in the middle and falling in waves down to his shoulders. I had never seen a man with such long hair outside of an art gallery. In fairness to him, although its style looked odd to my eyes, it was very clean and well-coiffured. His moustaches were as long as Lord Roxton's were short, lushly lounging across his upper lip before dropping down to hang like curtains beside his firm chin. When he moved his head they swung to and fro like dancers in the royal ballet. As for his clothes; well, they require a paragraph of their own!

He wore a smoking jacket, nothing out of the ordinary there, you might think, but this particular smoking jacket was fabricated from velvet – purple velvet, no less – with silver stitching! The buttons, each of them the size of a penny farthing, were also silver. The collars of the jacket were wide enough to moor a boat upon, and embroidered upon them, as upon the cuffs, were the oriental symbols for yin and yang, contained within a ring of minuscule writing. His shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, shimmered in the light, refusing to stay a single colour. It had the same quality as oil floating in water beneath the sun. His tie, fastened but loosely about his neck, was purple, matching his jacket. Now I come to the most bizarre

part of all – the trousers (if one can call them that in decent company – and I do like to regard my readers as decent company). Vertically striped with red and black, they were improperly full and loose, and very long, stretching down to cover his feet entirely (except when he moved around, thus revealing a pair of emerald sandals).

As I said, it was difficult to take him seriously, but by God we tried, given the circumstances!

Challenger, probably feeling for once that he was not the worse-dressed man in the room, took it upon himself to be the first of us to speak. ‘Master Zangpan, I presume?’

‘Right on the nose!’ said the strange fellow. ‘Whether you’re right as to the rest of me, I’m afraid I’d have to check!’

‘Why are you here?’ asked Challenger, ignoring all but the essential substance of Master Zangpan’s reply.

‘I’m here to help, George! What do you think I’m here for? I’m here to help you save your planet!’

He took a seat while we pondered his words. He chose the chair with the plushiest upholstery, the most comfortable cushion and the strongest springs, i.e. he chose Challenger’s chair, but somehow Challenger kept the display of his irritation to a slight growl. I resolved to take the initiative.

‘I suppose you had better have a drink, then,’ I said.

‘Thank you, Ned, that’s very decent of you. Come on George and John, sit with me. I love this gentlemanly stuff. Do you have cigars, by any chance?’

I indicated that we did, and prepared new drinks for everybody, including the Mechanical Housewife (who whispered to me that she should be careful – earth oil always made her tipsy). Challenger stamped the floor in a certain place, causing another stool to spring up. I was about to return to my chair, when he reminded me of the cigars. I turned to get them, but what greeted me upon my return but the fact that Challenger had appropriated my chair! As I handed out the cigars he studiously avoided my eye. I then retreated to the vacant stool, sending an accusing look towards Lord John, who shrugged. I scowled in return. Maybe it would have been difficult for him to stop the mighty Challenger taking my upholstered chair, but he could have at least warned me! For all I knew, I might now have to travel across the galaxy on that uncomfortable wooden seat. (Future travellers in space would do well to bear in mind the irritation that can be caused by the understocking of comfortable chairs.)

Apparently ignorant of the tiny drama going on

around him, Master Zangpan was taking his first sip of the whisky. Ever so slightly the glass was tipped and a trickle of golden fluid passed between his lips. Almost immediately he spat it out in disgust. ‘My goodness,’ he said, as the Mechanical Housewife dashed forward to wipe it from the floor and his trousers. It didn’t stain. I briefly considered taking her seat. ‘That must be the most revolting whisky I’ve ever tasted!’

Professor Summerlee reached out and placed a restraining hand on Challenger’s forearm. (Although one can imagine how little effect it would have had in the event of Challenger actually launching in Master Zangpan’s direction!)

‘It is from Professor Challenger’s own distillery,’ I pointed out. ‘Possibly it has not had enough time to mature.’

‘Yes, well,’ said Master Zangpan with a frown, ‘that could be it.’ He brightened up again as he remembered the cigar in his hand. ‘At least I still have this to enjoy!’ Declining to use the cutter offered by Lord Roxton, he bit off one end of the cigar and stuck the other end in his mouth. He clicked two fingers to produce a flame with which he lit the cigar. Taking one puff, he threw the cigar at the Mechanical Housewife, who caught it and swallowed it whole.

‘You didn’t like my cigar?’ said Challenger, with barely repressed fury. ‘You didn’t like my whisky!’ The fury was not so repressed now. He got to his feet



(thus proving the inadequacy of Summerlee's restraint) and pointed one hamburger finger at Master Zangpan. 'Well, I've got news for you, Mister Zangpan! I don't like you! I don't like your ridiculous clothes, I don't like your long hair and I don't like your drooping moustaches!'

Challenger's ill-kept facade of civilisation was rapidly disintegrating, as he devolved before our eyes into the mud-fighting ape-man who persists within each of us. In a similar situation, would we all have behaved so? Probably not – most of us would probably have been too frightened – but we would all have wanted to. To disparage a man's whisky and cigars is to strike at his very soul!

Master Zangpan seemed impervious to Challenger's aural assaults. 'Do you know what?' he asked, when his assailant paused for breath. 'The

upholstery in this chair is very lumpy – do you have another?' At this point the redness of Professor Challenger's face communicated to him that something was amiss. He watched with amusement as Professor Summerlee, Lord John Roxton and I attempted to hold Challenger back. 'I can see that you are not happy here, either, George. I think we should all go to my pad now. Housewife?'

'Your pad?' I panted. Holding Challenger back was a challenge fit to have earned the Professor his name. 'What do you mean?'

As I spoke, blue electrical fire swept out from the Mechanical Housewife and enveloped us all. Shocked by this, the three of us released our hold on Challenger, and as the cabin of the *Rocket* faded from existence I saw him put his hands around Master Zangpan's throat.

Zangpan's World

'Let go of him, Challenger!' Master Zangpan's face was becoming as purple as his jacket, and those sausage-shaped fingers remained locked around his throat, despite my pleas. The Mechanical Housewife took up the argument.

'Professor Challenger, I think I need to remind you that in comparison to you and your friends, Master Zangpan is virtually a god! What you are doing is grossly disrespectful!'

Thus far, she met with as little success as I had.

'It seems,' said Challenger through gritted teeth, 'that sometimes even a god needs to breathe!'

At this point the Mechanical Housewife lost patience with the Professor and delivered a blow to his neck with the edge of her hand. He sank to the ground as Master Zangpan gasped for breath. While the Housewife administered to the wounded throat and pride of her master, I checked over my colleague. He seemed to be fine – his pulse steady and his breathing regular – save for the fact that he was not conscious. Seeing my concern, his unlikely conqueror informed me that he would awake within a few minutes. This left me at ease to join Professor Summerlee and Lord John Roxton in considering the destination to which my mechanical sweetheart had

transported us – what Master Zangpan had called his pad.

My first guess had been that the moustachioed mystic had used the word 'pad' mistakenly to indicate his home. Perhaps English was not his first language – in fact, despite his appearance, there was as yet no reason for any one of us to believe him human at all, except possibly Challenger, who had looked into two frightened eyes as his strangling grip tightened. Alternatively, perhaps Zangpan was using 'pad' in some new sense, because 'home' hardly seemed adequate for the place in which we found ourselves.

Shall I describe it to you? I know my readers – yes, you'll cry, unwary of the consequences! But sometimes even a reader should be wary, lest they learn of something so terrible that it invades their dream-world, makes an ungodly nest there and prevents them from ever sleeping soundly again! The dank stench of nameless horrors, the indescribable obscenity of bawling creatures from the dark underbelly of the universe, the monstrous gibbering insanity of certain rotting otherworlds – all these things haunt the dreams of men and women who *probed too far*.

On the other hand, sometimes a reader should be wary lest they learn of something so wonderful that it makes their own life seem tawdry and threadbare in comparison.

Zangpan's World belongs to the latter category.

I stood on a rectangular plain, the area of which I judged to be about one square kilometre. It was covered with richly green lawn grass, much as one might find on any village green in England. A few gentle hillocks were dotted here and there to provide variety, and to create little dells into which we could see people going. Though some readers may not be pleased by this revelation, not all of those people were fully clothed. Those offended by this will probably feel modesty to be saved by the fact that those people were not human.

Beside me lay Professor Challenger, to my left were Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife, to my right stood Professor Summerlee and Lord Roxton. The six of us were roughly in the middle of the plain. It was very pleasant – the air was fresh and fragrant of newly mown grass, the weather was warm but not sultry. Thankfully, though, there was no one playing cricket. That might have been too much for us in such bizarre circumstances.

Bizarre? Yes, dear reader, bizarre, for I have not come to the most incredible part. When I said that the plain was a rectangle with an area of one square kilometre, did you wonder what lay at the edge of that plain? In your imagination, perhaps you placed there a small country road, a green-leafed wood or a row of quaint cottage houses. You would have been wrong to do so, because at the edge of that plain there was nothing – literally nothing. The plain was floating in the air!

Now consider this: without moving my head one whit I could see at least fifty more floating landscapes in the sky, dancing about one another like playing cards being blown in a delicate hurricane. If I did move my head, I could see five hundred more, and even if I didn't, the slow spin of the ground beneath my feet would bring bright new slivers of land into my sight. Each of them was different – some were green with Earth-style trees and grass, others seemed to be blue with rippling water, yet others still were profligate with unexpected combinations of colour of which I could make no sense – but all had one thing in common. They were truly beautiful. Even the buildings which I spotted on many of the slivers were of breath-taking beauty, seeming to grow naturally from their settings and glittering with light. As I watched the near side of one sliver tip up and away from us, revealing a new

and equally lovely landscape beneath, I realised that each of these slivers had two wondrous sides. Within my view there was enough living space for everybody in London.

Blasphemous the thought may have been, but it crossed my mind that Heaven would be a disappointment after this.

One of the many baffling things about the dancing slivers was that I could not place them in any context. We were not in space, as far as I could tell – all the slivers seemed to share one atmosphere, a fact demonstrated as yellow beings on one patch of spiky land called across to some similarly coloured fellows on our patch. But then neither were we on a planet, quite clearly. If I squinted enough to see past all of the slivers, right at the back of them there seemed to be a solid wall of dark blue. Looking around, and waiting for the slivers to move enough to leave gaps, I came to the conclusion that the entire system was enclosed by a gigantic blue sphere. Perhaps we were actually inside a hollowed-out planet! I resolved to consult Master Zangpan on the matter as soon as he came to his senses.

I doubt if I need to describe the conversation held by Roxton, Summerlee and myself at that point – you can imagine how the three of us were completely flabbergasted, barely able to string a few words together to make a sentence. Eventually Professor Summerlee said something worth reporting.

'Do you see over there?' Roxton and I followed the line of his pointed finger until our eyes came to rest on a pleasant looking piece of land a couple of kilometres above our heads. 'I do believe that those fellows are human.'

Squinting as best I could, I was unable to come to any firm conclusion. 'In these surroundings I am unwilling to discount any possibility,' I said. 'They might be men like us, or members of Zangpan's race, whatever that may be.'

'We do not yet know that he is not human,' pointed out Summerlee.

'Oh, I'm human, all right,' said a weary and sore voice. Master Zangpan had awoke. 'More than that, I'm from Earth – and not all humans do come from Earth.' He got to his feet, rubbing his tender throat. 'The people you can see around you in Zangpan's World are the citizens of time and space! They are all beautiful – on the inside, that is – people who I have allowed to share the wonders of my domain! Do you like it?'

'Like is hardly an appropriate word,' I said. 'This place is incredible.'

I would have continued in a similar vein, but

Summerlee showed more interest in getting to the bottom of the whole thing. He made me feel somewhat guilty – I am the journalist of the group after all! ‘Where are we?’ he asked. ‘What is this place? We have a lot of questions, Master Zangpan.’

‘If your friend hadn’t tried to strangle me, Professor Summerlee, I would already have begun to answer them. Speaking of that brutish man, is Challenger awake yet, Housewife?’

She went over and gave him a gentle kick, producing a groan from the supine investigator.

‘Good, good,’ said Zangpan. ‘Give him another kick if you like – that would certainly make me feel better.’ It seemed the Housewife could tell he was joking, as she didn’t take him up on the offer. ‘Would all of you like a drink? Personally, I need to wash the taste of Challenger’s abominable whisky out of my mouth.’ Without really waiting for an answer, he clicked his fingers, causing what would best be described as a cake trolley to appear beside us. I hesitated in calling it a cake trolley for two reasons. The first is that it bore no cakes, or at least nothing that I recognised as cakes. It did, however, bear a wide selection of colourful drinks. The second reason is that it had a mechanical head at one end and seemed to be self-powered.

‘Master Zangpan, sir! Welcome back, sir, we all missed you very much here!’ I suppose I should have been surprised to encounter a talking cake trolley, but as Roxton said to Challenger, the twelfth marvel of the day always impresses less than the first. Of course, when calculating the impression made by a new marvel, one must take account of what preceded it, and I’m afraid that a talking cake trolley seemed sorry indeed in comparison with the floating plains of Zangpan’s World.

We selected our drinks with the trolley’s help, although we four travellers all elected for non-alcoholic beverages – we had all drunk enough for one day, and even Summerlee and I were starting to feel the consequences. Professor Challenger was now on his feet again and had happily refrained from once more attacking Master Zangpan (striving to comprehend the nature of his surroundings was occupying all his attention, although he did take the time to distance himself from the Mechanical Housewife).

‘Would you like food?’ asked Master Zangpan. ‘I don’t mean to be rude, but you all look like you could use it.’

I was beginning to feel very tired – in fact, it struck me at that point that almost twenty-four hours must have passed since we took off from Challenger’s back garden. It had been a very long

day, and only Roxton had slept in that time – unless you count Challenger’s enforced unconsciousness as sleep. Having a good round meal and then dozing off on the oh-so-soft ground seemed like a very attractive proposition.

Seeing that all of us would like food very much, Master Zangpan pointed at the ground. ‘Eat the grass.’

The four of us answered in bewildered unison. ‘Eat the grass?’

‘Certainly,’ answered Zangpan. ‘The grass has been specially engineered, not only for comfort and fragrance, but also for nutritional value and taste. Believe me, you’ll find it most delicious.’ To demonstrate, he reached down, plucked a handful of green blades, and placed them in his mouth. There was silence for a moment as we watched him take his time over his grass – he was obviously determined to savour every mastication. Eventually he swallowed, with pleasure written all over his face. ‘I know you have many, many questions, but right now you all need to eat and sleep. I’ll leave the Mechanical Housewife with you for the night, to help with any problems and to keep the sightseers away.’

‘Sightseers?’ asked Challenger, suspiciously.

‘Yes,’ answered the Zangpan with amused frankness. ‘Sightseers. You and your friends are celebrities here. In terms of Earth’s chronology, you are the first men to walk on the Moon! The first men to even leave the planet! And certainly the first men to visit Zangpan’s World!’

‘But what about you?’ I asked. ‘You said that you were from Earth.’

‘And so I was, dear Ned, originally, but I’m from the future so I don’t count.’

With that parting shot he left us with the Mechanical Housewife and the talking trolley. She encouraged us to fill our bellies with the grass, and after overcoming our initial reluctance we did so. It probably isn’t necessary for me to attempt to describe the felicitous textures and tastes that greeted my tongue with every mouthful. In fact, I would be committing a grand disservice to you, for without wishing to give offence to the hard-working housewives, kitchen staff and chefs of Great Britain, I can say in total confidence that you will never eat anything so good.

After eating we stretched ourselves out on the grass, which revealed itself as a bed the equal in quality of the meal it had earlier been. The light around us seemed to dim, and Challenger and the others soon dropped off. But I found myself lying on my side, peering through the darkness at the lovely

(to my eyes) form of the Mechanical Housewife. I felt a twinge of jealousy as I watched the trolley offering her a glass of his oil, but I felt bizarre joy as she shooed him away and said for him to return in the morning.

I closed my eyes, feeling that in general matters were in a state of equilibrium, even if they were not positively in my favour. Then the balance shifted. I heard mechanical footsteps approaching me, a mechanical body lying down next to mine, and eventually I felt – not mechanical – but soft, warm lips kissing mine. I opened my eyes and looked into the expressive black ones of the Mechanical Housewife.

‘Your lips, they aren’t cold,’ I whispered. I hoped the others were asleep.

‘They are composed of gold heated to a semi-liquid state. Special programming ensures that they are warm, but not too hot, and flexible enough to provide emphasis when I speak-’

‘And softness when you kiss?’

‘That’s right, Malone.’ She did it again.

‘You can call me Ned.’

‘Are you sure? I have observed that the use of first names seems to cause irritation among the members of your group. Especially when Master Zangpan does it.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ I laughed (quietly, of course). ‘That’s because we prefer to reserve the use of our first names for more intimate relations.’

She was puzzled now. ‘But you’ve known me for less than a day. Professor Challenger and the others have been your companions through so many adventures. How can you be more intimate with me than with them?’

I lifted myself up on one elbow, angry. ‘What are you trying to say about me? Just because the four of us travel without women aboard doesn’t mean-’

‘Ned, shush! You’ll wake your friends!’ It was true – Challenger was beginning to groan threateningly – but I felt very upset with her. ‘Lie back down. This is very silly of you.’ I followed her instructions, and she placed one hand upon my brow. It was warm, but hard. ‘There is no reason for sensitivity in such matters here. Last time anyone counted, more than fifty races were represented on Zangpan’s World, and between them they make use of every bi-polar gender combination you could imagine!’

‘Well, you should still respect our sensitivity in the matter.’ The stroking of my brow and the way she

kissed me at the end of each sentence were doing much to mollify me, but I still felt somewhat prickly. ‘In any case, I can’t imagine very many combinations. And I’ll stick to the one I’m familiar with, if that’s all right with you.’

‘Oh Ned, you silly Earthman, it was you that brought sex into this in the first place, not me.’ I tried to disguise the fact that her frank use of such an explicit term had rather startled me, lest she think me an incorrigibly backward type of fellow. ‘I’m talking about friendship. Why do you all keep each other at arm’s length? Why are you all so formal with each other?’

I tried to give the matter serious consideration, but her delightful kisses were taking up rather too much of my brain-space. ‘It’s not just a question of formality – it’s also a matter of dignity and respect for each other. It permits us to work together without embarrassment.’ That was as far as I could go before giving up to her embraces. Unfortunately, intrigued by what I had said, she chose that moment to cease her attentions and lie back on the grass.

‘I think I understand what you mean. By working your problems and arguments out within a formalised framework, which is, one might say, a symbolic arena, you are able to fight your battles and resolve your conflicts without causing wounds or hurt to each other’s fundamental being. Very interesting.’

‘Mmm,’ I agreed, wishing she’d get back to the job she had abandoned.

‘But does it really work?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said musingly, as I ventured to kiss her on one shiny cheek. ‘We’re all still friends.’

‘You must be right,’ she said. ‘Otherwise Master Zangpan would not have chosen you for the mission.’

Before I was able to ask what she meant by that she pulled me to her and kissed me languidly. When that kiss ended, she got to her feet, helped me to rise and led me to one of the dells I had previously noticed. I was a little hesitant in following her, although I honestly believe that fear was not an issue. For one thing, I really did need to sleep, but the meal of grass had pepped up my energy somewhat, and in any case the others, I reasoned, wouldn’t mind if I slept late in the morning – in view of the circumstances.

Some Unpleasantness

'Listen up,' said Master Zangpan. 'I shall begin by answering a few of your inevitably tedious and mundane questions about myself and my world. When your brains catch up with your bodies I shall tell you of the quest on which you must embark. And embark upon it you must. Or I shall kill you.'

By the time I had opened my eyes the following morning, the Mechanical Housewife was gone. I presumed that not requiring sleep she had become bored while I partook of it. Hearing the Challenger bellow on the other side of the hill, I pulled my clothes back on and ran over to rejoin the group. Challenger stood there, hands on hips, while Summerlee and Lord John sat on the ground, idly chewing on grass as they waited for the Housewife to turn up. I fancied that a dark look passed between the three of them as they saw me approach.

'Enjoy yourself?' asked Challenger.

'A gentleman shouldn't ask that of a friend,' I replied.

'Whoever said I was a gentleman?' he replied, and the others laughed.

'In that case, I'll say that a gentleman will not answer.'

'In my opinion,' said Professor Summerlee, 'a gentleman marries before behaving in the manner you did last night.'

I offered him a clenched fist. 'Show me a church that will marry me to the Mechanical Housewife and I'll have the banns read tomorrow!'

'Don't get so indignant,' said Lord Roxton. 'He's only jealous, young fellah-my-lad! She's a very sweet lady, and I think every one of us has a soft spot for her.'

He was trying to make light of the little confrontation, but I felt that the smiles of Challenger and Summerlee were not particularly sincere.

The lady in question arrived before long. Ignorant, wilfully or not, of the knotty atmosphere that surrounded our little gang of irregulars, she bid us good morning and took us straight to a place where we were able to shower and groom – special cleaning machines even washed and pressed our suits as we did so. She then brought us to this place.

'As you have discovered this morning, transportation between the slivers is virtually instantaneous. You need merely resolve to travel, and mentally-

attuned robots will sense and take action upon your decision.'

'What the devil is a *robot*?' demanded Challenger.

'It, or he, or she, is a thinking machine,' replied the Mechanical Housewife. 'Such as myself, for instance. The word was first used by a Czechoslovakian writer, Karel Capek, after being invented by his brother. Devils do not enter into it.'

I mentioned that I had not heard of the writer – surprisingly, as I fondly imagined myself a connoisseur of the European literatures.

'He created the term in 1920,' smiled Master Zangpan, 'when the lovely play Rossum's Universal Robots made him famous. I imagine that your puny human minds are confused in no slight fashion by my mysterious talk of the future. Like a doctor of the soul, I can alleviate your derangement, the tonic I prescribe for your bafflement being an explanation of the nature of Zangpan's World! However,' said the mysterious Master, 'you must return the gobstoppers when we are done!'

Summerlee and Lord John shrugged at each other, while Challenger and I partook of frowning.

The room in which we sat was one of many in a complex housing the work of two of Master Zangpan's friends – a pair of engineers by the names of Klothe (pronounced Klo-Ter, though he said that if we wished to say it differently there was no reason why we should not) and Melenkius. The former was tall and thin, the latter short and chubby, but both looked reasonably human. They wore matching habits, akin to those of the monk, but with deep pockets overflowing with technical gadgets. They nodded in jolly confirmation of Zangpan's words.

'His words are incontrovertible,' said Klothe.

'And wholly unbelievable, you may think,' said Melenkius.

'And yet, they *are* true,' continued Klothe. 'Let me expand.'

He waved us to the seats, and his partner elected to remain standing. This particular room was quite small, although it accommodated all eight people easily. It was only small in comparison to the other rooms in the complex, some of which could have accommodated Challenger's *Rocket* three times over, if they had not been full to the rafters with electrical and mechanical junk! Having selected a seat which

looked friendly enough, I was surprised to find it squirming beneath me as I lowered myself into it. However, once I was sitting, it stopped moving around and proved to be quite comfortable. Master Zangpan explained that the chairs automatically adjusted themselves to suit whoever or whatever sat in them. Professor Challenger noted with glee that they were not actually as comfortable as our own upholstered chairs in the *Rocket*, and the taller of the two engineers explained that to be the price the chairs paid for their adaptability. Neither he nor Roxton nor Summerlee seemed very comfortable with the situation, never mind the chairs. They seemed to be whispering to each other and exchanging nods and frowns in a conversation from which I was excluded. Their comportment had certainly changed since I had left them the previous evening, and it couldn't be put down entirely to jealousy. I had the very strong feeling that prior to my awakening the morning had seen a conversation of some significance.

Once all were settled Klothe resumed his explanation.

'Zangpan's World is like the blind idiot god Azathoth, in that it is co-terminous and co-existent with all points in time and space. Don't ask how that works exactly, because, to be frank, it is a bit of a mystery to us all. However, what it means is this: from this domain it is possible to exit to anywhere in time and space. Isn't that incredible!?!'

Melenkius took up the story with equal enthusiasm. 'In theory, that's fine, but in practice it would be a bit awkward, with people meeting their grandmothers and so on. Therefore, although the Doors of Time exist, for the sake of convenience Master Zangpan keeps them locked.'

Master Zangpan now spoke himself. 'This place was created in the later part of the twentieth century as a result of certain tantric experiments I had been conducting. It is a dimension unto itself, or unto myself, as it stems from my godlike abilities. Once I had opened up what I call the Zang Dimension the internal chronology of the place kicked off and I let folks come to visit.'

'We were among the first to arrive,' said Melenkius. 'We set up the slivers and created the atmosphere. After that, there was plenty of room for everyone.'

A question came to mind, though Challenger sneered as I asked it. 'What lies beyond the blue sphere?' I didn't understand his attitude. Surely he was as interested in the answer as I?

Klothe replied, 'More of the same. This realm is

infinite, as is the number of slivers within it. The blue sphere simply marks the edge of the inhabited area. Its purpose is purely psychological, to stop people worrying about what is *out there*.'

'When, of course,' said Melenkius, 'there's nothing out there at all, except undeveloped slivers. When there are new arrivals, slivers beyond the wall are programmed to their specifications. When the people are ready to move in, we expand the sphere to enclose their new homes.'

'Most of the inhabitants on Zangpan's World, like the divine Master Zangpan, are from the late twentieth century, but there are a few exceptions.'

To me Klothe's words seemed innocuous enough, but they had an extraordinary effect upon Challenger.

'You make occasional exceptions, you say! When it suits, you pluck innocent travellers from their rightful place in time and space!'

'Professor Challenger,' said Melenkius, his round face showing concern, 'surely no one is here but of their own accord?' When his only reply was a contemptuous snarl, he turned to Master Zangpan. 'Is this true?'

The Zangpan shrugged. 'It is of no consequence. Or rather, the fact that they had no choice is of no consequence. The fact of their being here, as you know, is of very great consequence indeed.'

'Even so,' said Klothe, 'we must protest.'

'Be my guest,' said Master Zangpan to them, before loosing a grim smile upon the rest of us. 'And of course, that applies to all of you. Literally.'

At his words, a shadow fell across my heart. Had I misjudged our hosts so terribly? It had become quite clear that my companions believed so, to the point where they had neglected to include me in their counsel. For one horrible moment, as I watched my friends spring into action on a nod from Challenger, I was forked upon the horns of a dilemma.

But it *was* just *one* moment, and the very next saw me putting all my strength at the disposal of the British cause. As Challenger leapt upon Master Zangpan I rushed to the Mechanical Housewife to prevent her from taking a part in the conflict. Doubtless she could have brushed me aside had she wished, but not without doing me injury. Our night together had evidently meant as much to her as it still did to me.

In the meantime, Summerlee and Roxton had seized hold of the two engineers, who were flustered and rather shocked by the sudden violence of our actions. They calmed down once it became clear that Challenger wasn't actually attempting to kill Master

Zangpan.

'Summerlee,' said Challenger. 'Leave those two to Lord Roxton and help me tie up this rascal.' Together they tore strips from Master Zangpan's jacket and bound him to the chair. This caused a solitary tear to trickle down his cheek.

'You ruffians,' he said bitterly. 'What a waste of a beautiful jacket! You couldn't use Melenkius's habit, could you? Oh no, it had to be my favourite purple smoker!'

'Be quiet!' ordered Challenger, waving a meaty fist in the finely cut face. The Mechanical Housewife made a move, but I responded in kind, holding my ground.

'It's all right,' I assured her. 'No one will be hurt. We just want to sort everything out. I'm sure there's been a terrible misunderstanding.'

Soon Klothe and Melenkius had also been tied to chairs, and Challenger made sure that the Mechanical Housewife knew that if she tried to make a move he'd get to Master Zangpan first. But in all honesty, she didn't seem particularly distressed by the unpleasantness. I told myself that it was because she knew us all to be decent and honourable men.

Finally, Challenger was satisfied with the new seating arrangements. He paced up and down before his captives, obviously undecided on the next step.

I was first to break the silence. 'What's this all about, Challenger?'

'Don't you understand, Malone?' A pair of eyes that would have paused Beowulf did not hide their suspicion. I half-expected him to have me bound with the others. 'Are your eyes so closed to what has happened? Love is truly blind, then.'

'No, I do *not* understand. Maybe if you had invited me to your conference this morning I would.'

'Your invitation was destroyed at your own tawdry hands when you spent the night cavorting with the enemy!'

'The enemy?' I looked at the grim faces of my companions. 'Do you go along with this, Lord Roxton?' If the Mechanical Housewife had seemed undistressed before, that was not now the case. Her flexible features showed hurt.

He shrugged. 'Let Professor Challenger explain. It makes pretty good sense.'

Master Zangpan chose this moment to speak. 'Yes, let Professor Challenger explain. Let him explain why he is abusing my hospitality so! Let him explain why he is acting like such an oaf! And let him explain why he ruined my best purple jacket!'

'Don't listen to him, Malone,' said Challenger. 'That's the way they work, lulling us into a sense of

false security. That's why he sent his mechanical whore to you last night!'

I saw red at his words and would have landed a punch upon his gargoyle face if Professor Summerlee had not placed himself between us. 'Come on,' he said to Challenger, 'don't you think that's a little strong? Apologise to Malone *and* the Mechanical Housewife.'

'I stand by my words,' said Challenger staunchly. I swear that in my life I had never hated anyone more, but I forced myself to consider his words. After all, we were in unfamiliar territory and he was our leader. Summerlee saw that I was ready to listen.

'Just get to the point,' he said to Challenger. 'Tell him what you told us.'

Challenger met my cold hard stare for a moment before commencing. 'Why are we here, Malone? They brought us here, didn't they? We have already established that we were, in fact, kidnapped. The question is why. Why was the Mechanical Housewife on the Moon? Why did Master Zangpan come there? Why did they kidnap us? Do you have an answer?'

I indicated that I did not. I suppose that I had put it all down to coincidence.

'The answer is quite clear to me – we were kidnapped because we were the only people in the normal universe to know of one of the most heinous crimes of the century! We were kidnapped because we were about to search for clues regarding the destruction of Ell Ka-Mar. Dear Malone, we were kidnapped because, and I do not say this lightly, we were going to discover that *Master Zangpan destroyed the Moon!*'

I gaped in astonishment.

'He has confined us here to ensure that no one ever bears witness to his villainy! In all probability, when we arrived the Mechanical Housewife was searching for survivors, to finish them off. A cleaning-up operation, so to speak. The Housewife persona is nothing but a sick joke.'

Summerlee saw that I was shaken. He put a hand upon my shoulder. 'You have to admit it makes sense, son.' It certainly did, except for one thing – I couldn't believe my steel-worked sweetheart capable of such atrocity. Master Zangpan, on the other hand... well, one should never trust a man whose trousers are wider than his head.

I turned to the Mechanical Housewife and looked into her eyes. 'Is it true?'

A trickle of oil ran from one steel eye's span. 'How can you ask that of me?'

'Ask yourself this, Malone, and then ask her,' said

Challenger. 'Why did she seduce you? And it was a seduction, I have no doubt. She came to you in the night, despite the fact that you had hardly spoken to her – and you had certainly made no confession of love.'

It was a valid question, I realised. I had never questioned her affection before. Perhaps it was because she was mechanical. I had assumed it was part of her programming to be friendly.

'You think your questions are so profound,' she said angrily to Challenger. His apparently ironclad accusations had pierced her steel heart. 'But the answer is actually quite simple. I fell in love with you years ago, Malone, when I read your novels.'

'Is it possible?' I was dumbfounded, not for the first or the last time that week. 'I have not written any novels.'

Klothe piped up, 'She's from the future, remember.'

'That changes nothing,' maintained Challenger. 'Master Zangpan must answer the charges I have placed before him.'

'Very well, Challenger,' said Master Zangpan. 'Those charges will be answered. But not by me. I would have preferred to keep this from you, so that you could have performed your mission with clear conscience.'

'The mission!' I said, remembering the Housewife's slip the night before.

As Master Zangpan spoke, we watched in amazement as his moustaches lengthened, assuming the aspect of two strange black sinuous tentacles. They extended until they reached the bonds which held him in the chair, and untied him.

'A skill I learnt from a great-uncle of mine, Master Longbrows,' he said to our amazed expressions. 'A lovely old man, he used to fight demons with his eyebrows near the Mystic Mountains.' He got to his feet, shrugging off his shredded jacket and looking regally resplendent in his shimmering shirt and enormous trousers. He walked up to Challenger and stared him in the eye.

'By your arrogant and boorish behaviour you have forced this upon me, though foolish compassion had made me wish to spare you the pain. I no longer believe I owe you that level of consideration. You will have to live with your crimes.'

'What do you mean by that, you preposterous buffoon?' said Challenger, raising himself to his fullest height. 'Your ridiculous attempts to confuse the issue are pointless. I am guilty of nothing but pride and excellence! You are a mad dictator and a vicious killer, and though it should take my life to do it I will make you pay!'

'On the contrary,' said Master Zangpan, with sadness despite the invective piled upon him. 'Professor George Edward Challenger, King of Ell Ka-Mar, by the powers vested in me as ruler of Zangpan's World I charge you with the murder of the Moon!'

Challenger looked to us in horror. 'This cannot be! I did nothing, I was their King! I loved them, as they loved me!' There were tears in his eyes, and as he fell to his knees in despair we rushed to his side. Could it be true? Challenger's grief-stricken reaction made me wonder. I looked to the Mechanical Housewife for assistance. She passed me a handkerchief for Challenger.

'I'm sorry,' she said softly, 'but it is true. Challenger was responsible for the annihilation of Ell Ka-Mar.' I couldn't believe my ears.

'No!' screamed Challenger, like a wounded bull protesting against the sword through its heart.

I looked to Klothe and Melenkius – even they had freed themselves from Challenger's carefully tied knots. 'You showed concern for us before, when you learnt that we were kidnapped. Is this true?'

They regarded each other, nodded, then turned back to me. It was Melenkius who spoke. 'I'm very much afraid that it is, Mister Malone.' I shook my head in disbelief. Was there no escape from this nightmare?

'What's more, my dears,' said Klothe, 'Challenger must pay for his crime in blood.'

Reparations and Preparations

'Now that the sailboats of anger lie becalmed upon the ocean of your passions,' said Master Zangpan, 'I shall explain why you're here. Something, note you, that I was in the middle of doing when you so rudely assaulted us. That wasn't cool, guys, but I'll forgive you this time.'

We had all sat back down, even Challenger having regained his composure (though he was clearly still an unhappy man), while our host had stepped before us to deliver his lecture. The drinks trolley had finally turned up, full of apologies about not being there when we woke and going on about 'some rowdy Dra-wak-oos', whatever they were. With a glass in my hand, whisky in my belly and the Mechanical Housewife starting to smile at me again, things weren't looking quite so bleak. The matter of Challenger's crime and punishment still concerned me, of course.

Master Zangpan asked Challenger to tell him all he knew about Ell Ka-Mar, and my friend meekly did as he was told, describing his arrival there, his stay and his coronation. Master Zangpan nodded sagely throughout.

'As I suspected,' he pronounced, once Challenger had finished. 'They told you nothing of their imminent doom until the last minute, and even then all you learnt was that a force of some kind was coming for them.'

'I think it's time for all you old-time Earthmen to learn something of the true history of Ell Ka-Mar. This may shock you, but it was a colony of escaped slaves. They established themselves there about one hundred years before you discovered them, Challenger. Everything on they created on the Moon was grey for one reason – camouflage. They knew they were lost if anybody noticed them. For the same reason they lived a manifestly low-tech existence. Their erstwhile owners were monitoring your solar system, among others, searching for signs of Ell Ka-Mar. Unfortunately, Challenger my friend, you led the villainous bunch of no-good slavers straight to the kindly Ka-Marians! As soon as you arrived on their world they knew the game was up. Their calculations had indicated that the first humans would not

reach the Moon until the 1960s or the 1970s – your precocious intelligence cost them their home!'

'Damnation!' said Challenger. 'What a fool I've been. I should have known. The sadness in their eyes when they looked at me – I thought it was an appeal. It was not. It was the sadness of one who regards his executioner and forgives him for what he does.'

Professor Summerlee spoke up. 'But there is no reason to punish Challenger for those events! He could not possibly have known the consequences of his actions. In fact, why didn't they just shoo him away, instead of making him welcome?'

'Shooing him away would have done no good at all. They knew that their slave-masters would routinely investigate any interplanetary travel whatsoever, and they knew it was the end of their little dream of freedom. They made Challenger welcome and they made him their King so that somebody would remember the peaceful life they had enjoyed.'

'So why punish Challenger?' asked I.

Master Zangpan shrugged. 'Punishment is not really the word. Challenger created a very heated atmosphere just now, and my response to that was ill-befitting. I was carried away by a lust for verbal vengeance! However, there is something he can do for the people of Ell Ka-Mar. Remember the quest of which your friend Aikor spoke? Fellow humans, you may yet make the attempt!'

'I would have done anything for them. I still will,' said Challenger sadly. He sighed profoundly. 'You were not right to keep the knowledge of my guilt from me – though it will weigh heavily upon my conscience, that is only just. Nevertheless, your motives were pure. I apologise most fully for my suspicions of you. You are a generous and noble man, with, if I may say so, the most incredible moustaches. I will replace your fine jacket at the first opportunity. And what can I say to you, Mechanical Housewife? I know that nothing will ever make up for the slanderous and despicable things I said about you and your relations with Malone. The shame of my words will always haunt me, but please accept my apologies and my promise that if you should ever choose to marry my young friend I should be proud to be best man.'

His hangdog eyes ached with sincerity, and she received his bow with gratitude.

'Don't get carried away,' said Lord Roxton to Challenger. 'There would be two other candidates for that position, you know!'

We all laughed, until Challenger spoke sadly once more. 'Indeed you are right, Lord John, for I do not feel at all like the best man among us at this moment. The death of a world, the suspicion of a gentleman and the slander of a lady all hang upon me. Master Zangpan, you said there remained an action which I could perform for my people. Pray tell of its nature, though I wish so powerfully that I had been able to do something before they died, rather than now, as they lie incinerated among the ashes of their home.'

'Before they died?' said Master Zangpan. 'Forgive me for what may seem an insensitive question, but are you under the impression that the people of Ell Ka-Mar are dead?'

'But of course,' said Challenger. 'You saw the wreckage of their world, or least your proxy, the Mechanical Housewife, did.'

'Challenger, I think you had better pour yourself another glass of whisky! Your people are not dead. Their home has been destroyed, and will never be the same, but they survive! Their masters would not have destroyed such valuable property – they reclaimed it, and took the Ka-Marians back to their home-world!'

'My God!' said Summerlee.

'Can it be true?' said Challenger, his overcast features clearing to let the sun shine through.

'I swear that it is,' said Master Zangpan gravely. 'They live, but they are returned to a state of bondage, treated as little more than cattle. Their culture and their science is ignored as they are sent into dangerous mines or used in grotesque experiments.'

Lord John Roxton got to his feet. 'Challenger, it is your duty to lead us in their rescue!'

Challenger pursed those lamb-chop lips, frowned and then nodded, 'I know my duty better than any of you. When I announced my assumption of the throne to the people of London, they regarded it as at best a joke, at worst the ravings of a deluded madman. Yet to me the matter was never less than serious. And now we have learnt of the part I played in my people's downfall, my actions must lend their support to my good intentions. However, this could be extremely dangerous, a virtual suicide mission, and I cannot ask you to come with me.'

It was bizarre to see Challenger, a man who had always been at odds with everyone and everything

on his home planet, demonstrating such an emotional attachment to an alien people. If he took all his responsibilities so seriously, why did his wife spend so much time with no one but the butler for company? Perhaps in Ell Ka-Mar, for the first time in his life, he felt fully at ease with himself and with others, appreciated for his intelligence, rather than derided for it.

'If you don't ask us to accompany you,' said Lord Roxton to Challenger, 'you should prepare to fight a duel this very instant! Dare you belittle the courage of your comrades by refusing to lead us into a little bit of danger?'

'Quite right,' said Professor Summerlee drily, 'and it's not as if you ever hesitated to land us in trouble before.'

The preparations for the flight went quickly. Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife briefed us on what we could expect to encounter on our journey and upon our arrival. As we were attempting to absorb all that information, Klothe and Melenkius were working night and day on the *Rocket*. They transported her from the surface of the Moon to one of their many gigantic workshops, where they proceeded to strip her down to the bare bones. Challenger expressed a few reservations as they began, but a few choice intimations of the rebuilt ship's abilities were enough to reassure him. Soon the day came for us to leave. Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife would not be accompanying us, due to the danger of messing up the time-stream, and so on the night before there had been much drinking of whisky and singing of songs. Later into the night, the Housewife and I had bid each other many tender farewells. When I awoke she was still there, having spent the night recording my sleep for future recollection.

'Take good care of yourself,' she said as I dressed.

'I've got a good reason to.'

A few minutes later we were with Challenger and the others on the launch-pad. This was a sliver with a firm surface, ideal for landing and taking-off. At one end was a small building, which Klothe explained to contain the apparatus required for getting spacecraft into and out of Zangpan's World. The plan was for us to power up on the launch-pad and get all the systems up and running, before being transported into real space.

'Good luck to you all,' said Master Zangpan. 'You have a dangerous time ahead of you.'

'It's a shame you can't drop us off a little closer to our destination,' I said.

'Agreed,' said Zangpan, 'but our reasons for not

doing so are excellent. At present your enemies know nothing of Zangpan's World, and I don't want that to change, at least for the moment. More important, though, is the question of my role in the cosmos. I'm not a god, I'm a man with some funky powers and a groovy pad, and I don't want to over-reach myself. I have reached a level of cosmic awareness which permits me to realise that although my home gives me virtually infinite power, my wisdom is not far from being finite. I can't just move people around in real space as if they were chess pieces, much less do so in my own historical past.'

'But you did make an exception for us,' said Professor Summerlee. 'You did interfere.'

'Yes,' replied Zangpan. 'Against my own better judgement, I decided to take the risk. As for changing history, well, I learnt at school that the first man on the Moon was an American, Neil Armstrong. Once the Mechanical Housewife found you there, I knew that either the time-stream had changed as a result of somebody else's intervention, or, more likely, that the history I knew was not the full story. I felt that there was an opening for a bit of creative assistance.'

'We're very grateful,' said Challenger. 'The changes you've made to our ship will make our task merely difficult, where before it would have been impossible.'

'Will we ever see you again?' I may have been asking Master Zangpan, but my eyes were on the Mechanical Housewife.

'I dare say you will,' said he. 'She wouldn't forgive me if you didn't. And when you next drop by, bring the Ka-Marians with you. I imagine they'll be needing a place to stay.'

Professor Challenger reached out and shook his hand. 'Your heart is as large as your trousers,' he said solemnly. I don't think he intended to make everybody laugh, but that was the way it worked out.

Challenger led the way into the *Rocket*, which despite all the marvellous modifications we'd heard about, looked pretty similar to the way she had two and a half weeks ago in Challenger's garden. Professor Summerlee and Lord Roxton followed him

inside, bidding farewell to our friends from Zangpan's World. I was the last to get on board, after saying a fond goodbye to the Mechanical Housewife.

Back inside the spaceship all of us save Challenger settled into our comfortable upholstered chairs. Our fearless leader was at the console, waiting for a signal from Klothe and Melenkius.

'It's good to be back,' said Lord Roxton. We all agreed heartily. Though I would miss the Mechanical Housewife, it really was pleasant to return to familiar surroundings. What a contrast to the first time I entered the ship! Zangpan's World had been beautiful, but all that spinning around did make me dizzy at times! (The Mechanical Housewife had told me to stop being silly – did I realise how quickly Great Britain spins around? At a rate of about seventeen hundred kilometres an hour. So it's psychological, I said to her. Point taken – but please take the trouble to inform my stomach next time it tries to do a double flip!)

The signal must have come, because Challenger switched on the engines. He turned to us and asked if we were ready to go.

Confirmation of readiness was given by all. As the portal into normal space began to open up before the spacecraft, I asked Challenger, 'Don't you need to close the viewing window?'

'Previously that would have been the case,' he replied. 'However, you have drawn attention to one of the many improvements made by those master engineers, Klothe and Melenkius, to the ship. The reinforced glass of the window has been replaced with a material concocted in their laboratories which provides us with protection from cosmic rays and the glare of the sun, as well as a beautiful view.'

'So long as we are in a beautiful place,' observed Summerlee.

A few seconds later we were, after Challenger set full steam ahead and took the *Rocket* into the space between the stars. To one side was the Moon, to the other the Earth, and dead ahead was the glittering and treacherous star which honour made our destination.

THEAKER'S

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Editorial

Stephen William Theaker
Editor

This issue concludes the story of *Professor Challenger in Space*, and begins that of *Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!*

Originally, this second novel was to be a more direct sequel to the first, and it would have featured Malone's eyes being stolen by aliens. As a novice novelist, this device appealed to me because describing what each of his eyes saw would allow me an excuse for describing galaxy-wide events in the easy-to-write first person. In the event, I did not rely upon this crutch, but I still like the idea that the first part of the novel would have recounted what the left eye saw, the second part would have told what the right eye saw, and the third part would have been seen through a mechanical eye crafted for Malone by Professor Challenger as they battled to rescue Malone's other eyes and save the universe.

At one point I also considered revealing the Grim Thinker, who will appear in the portion of this story reprinted next issue, to be actually a far-future version of Malone himself – this idea was dropped, as was that in the above paragraph, due to Malone not featuring in the novel.

If he had appeared in it, the following scene would have been used at an early point. It is included here for completeness.

* * *

A few years following the adventure of Rarraak-Ra, Professor Challenger and I were taking a rest in the park. He was sitting beside me on the park bench, as usual, scratching away at the junction of his head and his body.

"Is it still bothering you," I asked.

"What do you think?" he asked, as if I were an idiot asking the way to his own nose... "A severed head is never pleasant."

"I imagine not," I said, taking him not at all seriously. I was not in the mood for one of his tantrums. The sun was shining far too brightly for that! "Especially when soup pours out of the joint, ha ha!"

He clouted me on the back of the head.

"Ow!" I exclaimed.

"How do you like those apples?" he asked.

"I don't like them very well at all," I replied. "Please keep them to yourself in future."

"Ha ha," he laughed.

I decided not to pursue the matter. At least he was smiling.

"Do you see much of the Mechanical Housewife these days?" he enquired, after a few moments' reverie.

The Mechanical Housewife was an extremely delightful creature with whom I had been fortunate enough to forge an acquaintance during our adventure in space. Sadly, the demands of living in different dimensions, and different eras of history, had made it difficult to continue the relationship.

"I'm afraid not, Challenger. How are things going with Anna and yourself?"

"Well, she is pretty busy nowadays," he replied. "She often has universes to save, that kind of thing... She is always back in time to cook Sunday dinner, mind."

"Well, of course," said I. "There are limits, after all..."

"If only there were," said Challenger. "I used to feel one step ahead of things, you know," he said ruefully. "I used to be the man in charge, the fellow making all the running. Look at me now, nothing to do but sit wasting the day away with an idiot like you..."

The Editor

Professor Challenger in Space, Part II

Scenes Relating to an Assault on Planet 93

Lord Roxton and his Wildies led the charge. They hurled themselves at the Raak in the guardhouse, ignoring the panicky firing of the four alien soldiers, dismissive of the imminence of death, determined to get through the gate into the prison compound. Despite the number of tribesmen who died in the process, the guards were soon overpowered. It was savage and brutal, and I turned away in horror as their throats were ripped out by the teeth of the victors.

Professor Summerlee was hot on their heels. Once Roxton and his warriors dragged the reptilian corpses out of the way, he was at the computer pad, trying to get the gate open. Lord Roxton became impatient. He pulled the professor to one side and loosed a few Winchester rounds upon the pad. The gate dropped into the ground.

'Luck!' said Summerlee. 'Totally unscientific!'

The savages of Planet 93 had waited for no instructions before streaming into the compound. As we three travellers left the guardhouse and followed them inside we were greeted by the sight of the carnage they were causing. They went every time for the single weak spot in the carapace of the Raak, ripping at the tender necks with their teeth. The weapons with which we had provided them were being dropped to the ground as they fell into a mad berserker fury. Bloody as the battle was, and even if our allies alarmed us more than our foes, we knew our cause to be righteous.

The compound was open to the blood-red skies, steel cages set back into the walls and arranged

around the edge of the square where the battle was taking place. Opposite the gate, beyond the square, was a squat and ugly building from which were trickling the Raak. Rushing to the nearest of the holding pens, Summerlee, Roxton and I worked to get it open. The Ka-Marians inside were terrified, huddling against the wall furthest from us, their ear tentacles sticking stiffly into the air. They didn't know us, but it was not that which frightened them so. It was the behaviour of their half-insane cousins.

'Come on, get out!' shouted Roxton to the prisoners when we finally broke the lock. 'The Raak will have reinforcements here soon!'

'This is your chance to fight back,' I said to them. 'Take it now!'

Though I expect our accents were not particularly good, it seemed that Challenger's language lessons on the journey out from the Solar System had done the trick. They seemed to understand. One of them shouted at the others, yelling at them to get to their feet. If they felt shame at their previous behaviour, they didn't let it interfere with their subsequent actions. Rushing out of the cage they snatched up weapons dropped by the other combatants and joined the slaughter of the Raak. One or two managed to blow themselves up while learning to use the unfamiliar technology, but the others fired with glee upon their former tormentors.

I watched with mingled horror and admiration as they entered the battle. 'Didn't Challenger say these people were peace-loving?'

'There's no contradiction,' said Roxton as we

moved to the next cage. 'You must love peace with all your heart to be willing to kill for it.' Even if we didn't agree, now was not the time to argue.

'Any sign of Challenger?' asked Summerlee.

'None at all,' said Roxton.

The battle continued to rage around us as off-duty Raak troopers began to wake up and arrive on the scene, their peculiar clothes only half-fastened about their scaly bodies. It was a very unlovely sight, although I tried to tell myself that I should hate them for their deeds, not their appearance. Lord Roxton stood with his back to us as we tried to get the cage open, picking off any villains who came too close.

'Damnation,' said Summerlee angrily. 'This is taking far too long.' He looked around the battlefield, his quick, smart eyes searching for something. Spotting a set of electronic keys on the belt of a nearby Raak corpse, he dashed over to get them.

'This should make it easier,' he said when he returned with the keys in his hand. The other hand was holding his stomach. 'Just a twinge of the old ulcer,' he grimaced. Soon the remaining prisoners were free, and the Raak found themselves fighting a desperate battle for survival. Attempts to surrender and requests for mercy were treated with contempt by former Moon-dwellers and frenzied savages alike.

'The battle goes well,' I observed.

'No reinforcements will arrive in time to save these Raak,' said Summerlee.

'But our time is still limited,' said Lord Roxton, thumping the wall with frustration, 'and it's running out fast. Where the hell is Challenger? And why isn't he among the prisoners?'

'The Raak,' said Professor Summerlee, a few days before, to his mixed audience of Earthmen and Wildies, 'are very similar to what we on Earth would call beetles, with a touch of crocodile and tortoise about the gills.' He pointed at the partially dissected corpse at his feet. 'About six feet long and three feet wide. They have mandibles,' he said, pointing at them, but even if you break them off they will just grow a new pair at their own leisure. They eat here.' Using a crowbar from the ship he levered open the hatch that the creatures used as a mouth. 'Note the difficulty with which I am opening the orifice – the chances of your being able to do that, with the creature actively opposing you, are pretty small.'

One of the tribesmen muttered something under his breath.

Summerlee asked Roxton, 'What did he say?'

'He says they can't be killed, except by extreme measures, by twenty men hitting one of them, or by

dropping a pile of rocks on one. I hope you have something to go on, Professor Summerlee, because my men are feeling somewhat dispirited.'

I said to the two of them, 'I'm in pretty low spirits myself. Can we succeed where Challenger failed?'

'Challenger made mistakes,' said Lord Roxton. 'We have to make sure we are more careful. Come on, Summerlee old chap, did you find anything for us to go on?'

'As a matter of fact,' said the professor of anatomy with a grim nod, 'I found something rather splendid. It's just a question of picking your spot carefully.'

It was clear that if Challenger still lived, he had been held apart from the other prisoners. Summerlee called out to the nearest Ka-Marian, who came over to us. It was a middle-aged male, his hair in transition between a royal blue and a steely grey. Summerlee grasped him by the shoulders and forced out the question between gritted teeth.

'Challenger? Do you know Challenger?'

The man paused a moment before replying, giving his mind a chance to decipher Summerlee's strange accent. 'Challenger? Of course I know him. You mean the King, don't you? Are you his friends, the other Earthmen?'

'Yes,' said Summerlee eagerly, yet still with pain in his voice. I became a little worried that the ulcer he had mentioned had actually burst. Possibly the return to normal ship's food – sandwiches (with which we had been fully restocked by the Mechanical Housewife, though I must confess – without wishing any slight upon my lover – that they were not up to Mrs Challenger's standards) and whisky – had provoked an unpleasant reaction after the gentle and charming meals of grass on Zangpan's World. 'Quick man, where is he?'

The tentacles of the Moon-man drooped somewhat. 'He's in there,' he said sadly, pointing to the squat building.

We were puzzled. 'But there's nothing in there,' said I. 'Isn't it just the mess hall and dormitory for the guards? Are they questioning him?'

'Questioning? Oh no. They couldn't if they wanted to. They may have ruled us for half a millennium, but they never learnt our language. We managed to keep it from them. Sorry but it is worse than that. They converted one room for him. They've never seen an Earthman before, you see.'

'What do you mean?' asked Summerlee, the horror in his voice battling for supremacy with the pain.

'The Raak created a makeshift laboratory. They

have been testing him, doing experiments. I'm afraid it might be too late.'

The professor turned back to us. 'Get to him quickly. I'll wait here.'

But Roxton and I didn't move, our attention transfixed by the spreading patch of blood on Summerlee's shirt.

'What happened?' asked Roxton in horror. Summerlee winced, and put his hand back on the wound.

'The blasted Raak with the keys was lying doggo, and he got a shot in before I finished him off. Listen, I'll be perfectly fine – but the two of you must find Challenger!'

Lord Roxton and I looked at one another. There was a lot of blood on that shirt.

'You stay with him,' I said to Roxton. 'I'll see if I can find Challenger.'

'No!' said Summerlee, lowering himself to the ground. 'Both of you go. I've got my Winchester to protect me. And if this wound is going to kill me, it will kill me regardless of whether Roxton is holding my hand or not!'

'I'll stay here with him,' said the Ka-Marian. He shook our hands, an incongruous yet appreciated action in such difficult circumstances. He must have picked up the habit from Challenger. 'It is what George would have wanted. My name is Aikor.'

'Don't speak of Challenger in the past tense just yet,' I said. 'He's proved himself a dozen times over to be a mighty tough beggar to kill. Hang on a minute,' I said, remembering the tale of Challenger's first visit to the Moon. 'Aikor, the famous scientist?'

He nodded. 'I was a scientist, it is true, before our world fell apart, and a well-respected one. But for the last three weeks I have been nothing but another insect being ground beneath the heel of the Raak Empire.' He addressed himself to Summerlee's wound. 'I have some experience in the healing arts. Our biologies are different, but I may be able to help.'

'That would be most appreciated,' said Professor Summerlee.

Aikor smiled. 'Are all Earthmen so brave?'

'Only the stupid ones,' said Lord John Roxton. 'Come on, Malone, let's find Challenger.'

'Good luck,' I said to Summerlee, before we set off towards the ominous building. 'We'll be back for you.'

'Luck is unscientific,' he called after me. 'But I'll put my faith in friendship.'

'This is your destination,' the Mechanical Housewife

had said to us, back on Zangpan's World. 'Planet 93, one of the weaker outposts of the colossal Raak Empire: original name Ka-Mar. The Kamarian word 'Ell' simply means 'from', or 'child of'. This was their home, people. Take a look at it now.'

It looked pretty bad to all of us. The Raak had completely subjugated the planet more than five centuries ago, and they had been mining it ever since. The oceans had been boiled away to permit easy access to the sea-bed, mountains had been blasted in half to get at the jewels within, the ground had been turned over as you might fork over the earth in your garden. The entire surface was a slag-heap. Nothing would ever live a natural life there again. The Raak had returned the captured slaves there, partly as punishment for the insolent escape of their parents, partly because they still hoped to dig up a few more scraps of precious metals.

'I've only ever seen one thing more repulsive,' said Professor Summerlee. 'Challenger first thing in the morning.'

'Why you,' I said in my best imitation of Challenger's gruff tones, 'I ought to...'

Incredibly, even Challenger was laughing. 'Mrs Challenger counts herself a very lucky woman, I'll have you know!' Since his confrontation with Master Zangpan he seemed to have mellowed. If not a lot, then at least a little was better than nothing.

'Very good,' said the Mechanical Housewife, 'but enough joking already – this is a serious business.'

'We know that,' I replied. 'But we joke with good reason, you know. Laugh today, for tomorrow we may have our tongues cut out by savages or alien abominations!'

'Quite right, my boy,' agreed Lord Roxton. 'Camaraderie and *esprit de corps* can count for a bally lot in a tricky situation. I remember one time during the war, I was placed in command of the sorriest bunch of half-hearted soldiers you could ever imagine. Their previous commanding office had been a fool – naturally he'd been promoted – and as a matter of policy he had always had the first man to question an order shot. He had honestly believed that to be the best way of earning the respect of the enlisted men.'

'Is this going somewhere, Roxton?' asked Challenger with no attempt to mask his impatience.

Professor Summerlee decided to take up the story. 'Challenger, this is the inspirational story of how Lord John Roxton took a mutinous bunch of dispirited soldiers and through brilliant yet firm leadership – tempered with a sense of humour – gave them a sense of self-worth. The feeling of being part of a

team that cared about each other helped them get through the worst times together.'

I looked to Lord Roxton. 'Is that how it was?'

He shook his head. 'The professor tells a pretty story, but I'm afraid he got one part wrong. They all died a month later, the squad sent into an enemy trap by my idiotic predecessor, who was organising the war from the rear. I survived by the skin of my teeth, hiding among their dead bodies as the enemy searched for survivors. I was lucky to escape with a single bayonet wound.'

We all stared at him in amazement.

'The point is this,' he continued. 'They died with self-respect and they died like heroes. No man can ask for more.'

None of us cared to dispute the matter with him. Superficially, Lord Roxton was the most easy-going and carefree of our little group, but from time to time he revealed a glimpse of the horrors through which he had put himself. It was never a pretty sight.

The Mechanical Housewife changed the image on the screen to a tactical view of Planet 93, showing the position of the mining camps. There were several of them dotted all over the planet.

'One hundred years ago,' she said, 'after a century of planning, the Ka-Marians slaughtered every Raak on the planet. Loading captured spacecraft with the equipment they would need to build a new world they set off for the Moon, where they built Ell Ka-Mar. Now recaptured, they have been put to work in the mines.'

'How can we rescue them all?' asked I. 'There are so many bases.'

'There are two things in your favour. The second is that you needn't rescue every one of them. As I said, most of the Ka-Marians are working in the mines, but a select group is kept imprisoned – those considered the greatest threat by the Raak! If you can free them, they will spread rebellion across the world. The Raak, despite their devastating attack on Ell Ka-Mar, do not consider Planet 93 to be of particular importance, and their presence there is not large or well-armed.'

'The attack was simply a punitive example,' said Challenger angrily.

'That's right,' answered the Mechanical Housewife. 'An example which was transmitted live to every planet in the Empire.'

Lord John Roxton had been paying careful attention. 'What was the first thing in our favour?'

'The original evacuation of Planet 93 did not proceed as quickly as the escaping slaves would have hoped. As they prepared to leave they became aware

of approaching Raak reinforcement troop carriers. There was no way they could fight them off, so they created a diversion. Two thousand of their most fierce fighters stayed behind to create that diversion.'

'What bravery,' gaped Lord Roxton.

'As the majority of the Ka-Marians slipped away, those who remained fought and fought before breaking into smaller parties and hiding out in the mine tunnels. Once the Raak realised they had been duped they abandoned Planet 93 altogether, at least for a few decades. There were more valuable planets upon which they wished to concentrate their resources.'

'By scavenging in the mining stations left abandoned by their mortal enemies, the Wildies, as they began to call themselves, were able to survive. It would go without saying, if you gentlemen were not from Earth, that a good proportion of their bravest fighters were female and so the race was able to propagate. In such terrible conditions they could hardly be expected to prosper, but they did survive.'

'Then, as if their lives weren't already bad enough, the Raak returned. Not as miners, but as hunters. Planet 93 soon became one of the most popular tourist worlds of the Raak Empire, as warriors of all ages came to participate in the great hunt. Living in the darkness, avoiding Raak hunting parties, fighting when they had to, the Wildies became little more than beasts. Few kept their sanity living such a nightmarish existence – those that didn't were the lucky ones.'

'So some still live,' said Roxton.

'That's right,' replied the Housewife, nodding. 'Somehow they managed to survive all these years.'

Lord Roxton shook his head. 'There's no mystery there,' he told her. 'Hunting the Wildies to extinction would have meant the end of the hunt. They would always have allowed some to survive. I imagine they even made food available to them at times.'

'Those that survived the hunt were virtually ignored as the Ka-Marians were shipped back in. They watched their cousins being sent into the mines with awe, realising that the stories of their grandparents had been true. They have made a few abortive attempts at rescue, but they simply find the Raak too hard to kill. You must make contact and train them to fight the Raak.'

'So the Wildies are the first thing in our favour,' said Professor Summerlee. 'And the second thing was that we didn't have to rescue *everybody*. It is precious little to be going on. I'm no inter-galactic soldier, you know. I'm all for risking my life in a good cause, but not if there is no chance of success. What can the four of us do against a galaxy-spanning

empire?’

‘Your ship will contain a jamming device which will prevent the Raak on Planet 93 from communicating with their superiors. They will put the problem down to cosmic interference and by the time they realise otherwise, you will have ensured it is too late. Hopefully the rest of the Raak Empire will never know what happened there. I understand your concern,’ the Mechanical Housewife continued, ‘but you could do a lot of good on this mission. I know it sounds forbidding, but if anyone is up to the task it is the four of you!’

Challenger, Roxton and I cheered, lifting our glasses in a toast, but Summerlee was less impressed. However, he pointed out that he was no coward and that if the mission could genuinely save Challenger’s people he would accept it without hesitation. The rest of us cheered again, and Challenger, who had perhaps had a little too much whisky that day, tried to embrace Summerlee. The Professor of Comparative Anatomy gave thanks for the nimble feet that allowed him to dodge the oncoming gorillaman.

‘There is one other aspect to all this,’ said the Mechanical Housewife. ‘The attack on Ell Ka-Mar was triggered by Challenger’s journey in space, something which you would probably rather forget. However, you must remember that the Raak monitored that first trip, even though since then they have probably redeployed their surveillance vehicles. At some point the Raak will decide to investigate your little blue planet, and they’ll be there to ensure the people of Earth never grow strong enough to be their rivals in the galactic arena. If you strike sufficiently hard at them on Planet 93, if you can rescue the Ka-Marians and defeat the garrisoned Raak, there is a chance that this will cause ructions in the Raak Empire. If other worlds revolt against the oppressors, the march of the Raak may be halted, or even reversed, long enough for Earth to prepare for their coming.’

‘That’s quite a responsibility,’ I said. ‘But what a story it will make for old McArdle! I can imagine the headline now: GAZETTE REPORTER SAVES EARTH!’

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Challenger. ‘This story can never be told, except to the highest authorities. Can you imagine the reaction of the people of the world? There would be chaos everywhere, with everyone falling over themselves to no end whatsoever. What’s more, every man-jack of them would be knocking on my door, trying to buy or steal the *Rocket*! No, we shall inform the government and assist them in building escape craft for everyone in secrecy.’

The others seemed to agree with him. I shrugged and placed one hand upon my chest. ‘In that case I shall carry the happy knowledge of my heroism locked within my heart.’

‘It shall also be carried within mine,’ said the Mechanical Housewife, to the good-natured jeers of my companions.

Professor Summerlee watched the glittering object hurtle into the sky above the compound. The fighting stopped for a moment as everyone turned to discover the source of the ear-smashing noise, although Aikor continued to dress the wound in Summerlee’s belly. At first it seemed that a spacecraft was taking off in the distance, perhaps a few Raak desperately escaping to take word back to the Empire, but when Summerlee’s eyes followed the smoke trail to its source it became clear that it was in fact a tiny rocket or missile that had launched from the compound itself, from inside the guards’ building, in fact. As its flight into the sky continued he wondered as to what it might be. Most likely a message rocket, because he couldn’t imagine that it was large enough to carry anyone or anything larger than a football. It was a message, he thought sadly, which might spell the destruction of the Earth.

How the Assault Commenced, and the Terrible Way in Which It Concluded

I pulled off my imitation ear-tentacles and dropped them to the blackened ground. It was a relief to get them off, if for no other reason than that they interfered with my hearing. Often I stumbled, the stars doing little to illuminate the rocky and uneven ground. Planet 93 didn't have a moon, even though its people had had one taken away. The cuts and grazes caused when I tripped hardly showed against the mud, grime and whip marks that covered my body. My arms hung low, weighed down by the manacles I had been unable to remove. I was extremely tired, having worked the whole day in the mine before making the escape attempt. If Summerlee didn't turn up at the agreed rendezvous... well, I tried not to think about that.

Looking at the stars to check my orientation, I staggered through the shattered landscape, forcing myself onward though my every impulse was to give up. But I knew that if I gave in to fatigue and rested, I would soon be asleep and before morning, recaptured.

Eventually, after hours of that mindless trudging, the wasteland began to resolve itself into more familiar shapes. It seemed to be the place. I took off my right shoe and squeezed my second largest toe three times. If things went according to plan, that would bring Summerlee down to meet me.

I stood waiting, staring up into the sky for a sign that he was coming. There was no noise, the *Rocket* now running even more quietly than it had before the refit, but her beautiful silvery sides could not be disguised as she swooped down from the heavens towards me. I finally allowed myself to drop to the ground. I have no memory of Summerlee stepping from the ship with a hearty greeting, before alarmedly lifting me up and carrying me to the

warmth and safety of the *Rocket*'s interior. Given the opportunity, exhaustion immediately propelled me into oblivion, thus depriving me of the chance to witness Summerlee's unusual show of strength.

'I doubt I could do it again,' he said as we drank hot chocolate. 'Seeing you fall like that gave me quite a fright, and I understand many people have been known to show exceptional strength in difficult and extreme circumstances. In my youth, of course, I could have carried three of you!'

'I'm sure you could have,' I smiled from within my blanket. After having had a warm shower I was feeling much more human, although the fact that my hair was still blue might have been thought to indicate otherwise. 'So how did your side of things go?'

'Very well, I believe. I've been spreading the word among the enslaved Ka-Marians about the planned revolt and I managed to avoid any trouble. I hovered above the camps on nights cloudy with the dust that clogs the air. Tying messages to long thin ropes I dangled them by the windows of the slave dormitories. They were snatched by eager hands and I flew away into the night. How about your work?'

'Typical kind of thing you'd expect,' I replied. The chocolate was warming me up nicely and I was beginning to look forward to the next challenge. 'Disguised as a Ka-Marian, I managed to sneak into one of the largest operational mines on the planet. Working on a chain gang I earned the respect of the slaves by standing up to a bullying supervisor and sharing my food with an old man. I then let the other workers into the secret of my true identity and told them of the plan, such as it is, before leading my chain in a successful escape attempt. The ones that got out with me are heading for eight different mines, where they'll prepare the miners for the revolution

and subsequent rescue.'

'Well done,' said Summerlee.

'All in a month's work,' I replied with a wry smile.

Suddenly a light began to flash on the console. Summerlee sprang from his chair and went to examine the readings.

'That's the signal of Lord Roxton,' he told me. 'Looks like he made it too.'

The ship touched down as the first signs of sunlight began to fight their way through the murky atmosphere. Summerlee operated the console switch which opened the door and I stepped out into the early dawn, still swathed in my blanket. At first I saw nothing but the desolate surface of Planet 93, viewed from the bottom of a ravine, a savage wound in the land, but then a row of shaggy-haired heads rose slowly and menacingly above the rocks on the horizon. I retreated into the ship as I realised that each head was accompanied by a grimy hand bearing a vicious-looking spear.

'Summerlee,' I called. 'I think we'd better get out of here.'

He came and joined me at the entrance. 'Nonsense, my boy, these chaps look perfectly friendly to me! And we did receive Lord Roxton's signal, after all.'

'Perhaps they cut off his toe and operated it themselves! I don't see Roxton out there. Maybe they are cannibals! As they ate his toes one of them inadvertently set off the signal!'

'Don't be so foolish, Malone! I do believe your time in the mines has done your nerves no good whatsoever! (And in any case, cannibals eat members of their own race, not alien beings.) Now let's go and meet our new friends without any more ado!' About to step outside, he paused, then turned back to me. 'But perhaps you should try not to smile. They may misinterpret the baring of our teeth.'

Then he led the way out and I had no choice but to follow him. He was probably right about them anyway, I tried to assure myself, despite the fearsome countenances that surrounded us from the minute we left the ship. Grown bolder, the Wildies had crept down into the ravine to examine the strange invading ship.

From somewhere over the horizon we heard the sounds of a struggle. Fearing that our comrade might be in danger, we dashed through the ranks of the Wildies without a care for our own safety. Happily they elected to let us pass. If they had chosen not to do so there would have been little we could do about it, having blithely left our Winchesters aboard the *Rocket*.

Reaching the top of the ravine we were met by the peculiar sight of Lord Roxton buried beneath the bodies of seven or eight of the Wildies and struggling to get out. After we helped him untangle himself he revealed that in the face of danger the first thought of the Wildies was to protect the most important members of the tribe. Usually that would be the women, but as there were none along on this trip, they had tried to protect the chief.

'Very nice of the blighters,' said I. 'Who would have thought the savages to have such decent bones in their body!'

'Watch it, young fellah-my-lad,' said Lord Roxton sternly. 'Just because these people are living in reduced circumstances does not make them any less worthy of your respect. These are strong and intelligent warriors, and our struggle will be aided immeasurably by their support.'

'I agree, Malone,' said Professor Summerlee as we began to walk back to the ship, Roxton's tribe in tow. 'Although we call them savages, that is not necessarily a signifier of their intelligence or their morals. It is in fact a signifier of their environment, of the ends to which they must use their intelligence.'

Although morning had broken, between our situation in the ravine and the poor quality of the light we felt ourselves to be in no immediate danger from the Raak – who after all did not yet know of our presence on the planet. Roxton and his tribe hunkered down outside the *Rocket* – they too had made a long journey – while Summerlee and I cooked up some hot soup for them, which we dished out with huge chunks of bread. The Wildies seemed as glad of the meal as Roxton himself.

After eating, Roxton told us of his adventure. 'It followed the usual pattern,' he said modestly. 'I stumbled across their tribe by accident, battled with their chief and defeating him became chief myself. Standard encounter procedure for tribes of savages.'

'I can hardly believe you're so blasé about it,' I said.

Professor Summerlee answered for him. 'He and Burton used to do that sort of thing all the time.'

Roxton nodded sadly. 'Good old Richard, I miss him one hell of a lot. You know, sometimes I would look to the stars and imagine him out here, exploring the galaxy. He would be so very pleased to know I'd made it out here. We used to say that when he died he would go searching for the source of the great river in the sky – maybe if I stay in space long enough I'll find it myself – and he'll be there waiting for me to catch up!'

The conversation continued to no great purpose,

other than to prevent the chilling silence that blanketed the eerie landscape from penetrating our hearts. Eventually, though, we had to face up to one unsettling fact. Challenger had failed to make the rendezvous. He had not returned from his mission to take our message to the Ka-Marians being held in prison, those considered too dangerous to be sent to the mines and those who we hoped would lead the revolt against the Raak.

We wondered whether he had remained in the prison in order to be able to cause trouble from within when we attacked, but that begged the question of how long he would be able to remain undetected. We had to consider the possibility that he had been captured.

'It changes nothing,' said Roxton. 'Challenger would not want us to abandon the fight because of his death. If he did succumb to the Raak, you can be sure that he died with courage and faith that his friends would finish the battle he began.'

I need hardly say that we were all in agreement, and so the decision was taken to commence the attack without Professor Challenger. Doubtless we would find him within the enemy stronghold, bothering them in much the same manner in which he always bothered us.

'I have another surprise for you,' said Roxton. 'I think you'll appreciate this, Professor Summerlee.' He waved to one of his tribe, uttering a command in the mutated Kamarian dialect the Wildies spoke. The tribesman grinned and got to his feet, running to the top of the ravine. A few moments later his tentacles re-appeared on the horizon, soon followed by both the rest of his body and the body of a Raak.

'He or she stumbled across us one morning,' said Roxton, 'and it soon had reason to regret doing so. We managed to get the better of it by simply clubbing away till it fell, but I had the idea that you might be able to find a more scientific way of killing them.'

'Hmm,' replied the professor, regarding the corpse at his feet with interest. 'Time to practise my trade, I believe.'

Lord Roxton preceded me into the building, carrying a fierce Wildie knife in one hand and an equally fierce pistol in the other. The Winchester he had slung over his shoulder. The interior of the building was gloomy as the exterior, the corridors narrow and the ceilings low. Though slightly larger than humans, the Raak do not share our liking for airy open rooms. They like to feel the dank walls against their sides as they walk through their slimy buildings – a relic of their subterranean origins, perhaps. It was a factor in

our favour as we fought our way through to the laboratory, because they could only attack Roxton one at a time, a situation he met with relish.

'Remind me to thank Summerlee,' he said as he sank his knife into the throat of a fourth Raak trooper. The Professor of Comparative Anatomy's expert dissection and analysis of the Raak physiology had identified the single weakness in their vile bodies.

'The neck,' he had said, pointing to a diagram for the benefit of the tribesmen, 'is the only place where penetration of the Raak is possible.' Roxton had frowned, pointing out that the neck was as heavily protected as the rest of their bodies. 'The thick black shell which covers the rest of their bodies only appears to cover their necks – it is in fact a biological illusion, which they must have evolved in response to the predators they faced upon their home world.'

'Why don't they protect it?' asked Roxton.

Summerlee shrugged. 'Arrogance, perhaps? Pride? I don't know. That's why we call them alien. Discerning the function of this unshielded area is impossible when the subject is dead, so we don't know what it is for, we don't know why it is unprotected, but what we do know is that it will let us kill a Raak in its full battle armour.'

Roxton had just repeated once more the butchering process that our injured friend had outlined back in the wasteland. The killing may have been necessary, but it seemed to me that the joy he took in it was entirely unnecessary.

Before the soldier hit the ground Roxton was kicking open a door which the murder had left at his mercy. Over his shoulder I could see the trappings of an abysmal alien science. This must be the laboratory of which Aikor had spoke, but would we find Challenger within? I fancied that hanging on the wall I could spy a pair of familiar brown shoes of a size which meant they could only belong to one man, but for the moment I quelled my hopes. A pair of shoes cannot vouch for a man's life, and besides, between the shoes and me there stood two of the Raak wearing unholy travesties of laboratory coats and bearing gifts of fire and heat.

'This is it,' said Roxton to me as he charged through the door, looking every inch the chief of the Wildies, despite the lack of ear tentacles and the decidedly red hair. It was a matter of attitude. The blood-curdling shriek he unleashed upon the two Raak within did as much to kill them as the knife which punctured their throats. I hung back as he did the dirty work, then rushed to his side as he strode

past their corpses.

'He's here,' said Lord Roxton, pointing to an ominous tangle of inch-thick cables and half-grown instrumentation at the far end of the room. 'Or at least his legs are.' Our friend was lying on a slab of steel, but we could not see his head or chest at all, that portion of his body being entirely hidden by the hideous and unclean machinery which engulfed him from the waist up. It was a terrifying sight to see the mighty explorer brought low.

'Does he live?'

'He seems to,' said Roxton, testing Challenger's pulse. 'But he isn't conscious. He hasn't spoken.' I touched a hand – it was surprisingly warm and vital. On the whole, the bottom half of his body seemed undamaged, certainly in better condition than my own had been after my spell in the mines. 'How shall we get him out?'

I frowned. 'I don't know. Presumably we could just pull on his legs.'

'Do you think that's safe?'

'How do I know? But we have to try something. This machine could be killing him.'

Roxton shrugged. We really had no other option. 'Well, here goes then.'

He went to the end of the slab and pulled Challenger's legs. There was little resistance, other

than from the natural inertia of the unnaturally-sized body. Slowly the professor was removed from the machine – his magnificent stomach, his exceptional chest and then his – his nothing.

'What the deuce!' said Lord Roxton.

He dropped the legs in horror and I staggered backwards as if hit in the chest by a thunderbolt. All over Planet 93 our plan had come to fruition. Victory was within our grasp. The Ka-Marians, both those from the Moon and their Wildie cousins, those in the mines, those in the prisons and those in the slave-camps, were rising up to kill the Raak oppressors. One by one the hated galactic warlords fell to well-placed daggers, and step by step the people freed themselves. Given time they would have done it without our help, as they had done once before, but we had provided vital organisation at a crucial time and so by the end of that day they would be free.

Despite that great and momentous victory, it was a terrible day in the history of their people, just as it was a terrible day in the history of our people (whether you knew it or not).

Our friend, Professor George Edward Challenger, the most famous explorer and scientist of his time, King of Ell Ka-Mar, the Moon and all related properties, had been decapitated.

‘Bring Me the Head of George Edward Challenger!’

Master Zangpan looked on as the Ka-Marians and the Wildies filed through the portals into his World. ‘We’ll look after them here,’ he said to Professor Summerlee. ‘As long as they don’t play their music too loud.’ He laughed, but Summerlee still felt rather glum and didn’t really feel up to laughing. Intellectually he knew that his body had been fully healed by the quasi-magical medicines of that strange dimension, but emotionally he still felt very fragile and unwilling to test his recovery.

‘I’m not sure I understand,’ he said. ‘Will this not cause any unpleasant ramifications with regard to the time-stream?’

The Mechanical Housewife replied. ‘All we know about Planet 93 is that it was completely destroyed at about this time – or, I should say, at about your time. There are no records of any survivors. As far as we know, our actions already form part of the time-stream. If they do not it is of no consequence because we have not left the Ka-Marians alive in your time, which would have changed your future and Master Zangpan’s past. We have plucked them from the continuum entirely, and different rules apply here altogether.’

‘At some point in the future,’ said Master Zangpan, ‘and by that I mean both the future of Zangpan’s World and the future of the real-space universe, we may discover a point in which it will be safe to drop them back into normal space-time.’

‘I believe I understand,’ said Summerlee thoughtfully. ‘However, what will be the effect upon points in real-space time subsequent to that in which you place them?’

‘Oh, I’m sure that it will have some effect,’ said Zangpan with a shrug. ‘Ripples in a pond and all that, but I make a point of not learning anything about the future. I allow myself to dip into the past from time to time, if you’ll excuse the pun, but otherwise I like to maintain the illusion that I am living in the early twenty-first century. Some might say I fail to take

full advantage of my powers, but it is much safer. If I knew too much of what was supposed to happen in later centuries I might end up paralysed, unable to act for fear of creating a big mess-up.’

‘Take me, for example,’ said the Mechanical Housewife. ‘I’m from a period two hundred years ahead of that wherein Master Zangpan was born, yet he has asked me nothing of events during that time.’

‘You’re from *his* future?’ Summerlee wondered why he was surprised. He knew himself to be a museum piece from Zangpan’s point of view, but to discover that the Housewife originated from so far into futurity was still quite a shock. For all he knew, she might have lived in the twilight of the British Empire! As she nodded, a dozen questions came to mind – then fell away as quickly.

Seeing his face fall, the Mechanical Housewife smiled sympathetically. ‘You understand why the Master never asks me anything?’ He answered in the affirmative.

‘When she arrived here,’ said Master Zangpan, ‘we soon realised the psychological problems such knowledge could cause her, so Klothe and Melenkius helped her to encrypt certain parts of her memory. She can access them, should she desire to, but they do not come to her unbidden.’

‘Do you do that to all who come here from the future?’

‘They are few in number, but the answer is no. We ask them not to talk about it, and on the whole they comply. Remember also that the universe is a very big place – most of the things they know would mean nothing to us anyway.’

‘In my case,’ said the Mechanical Housewife, ‘I asked Klothe and Melenkius to perform the operation because Master Zangpan often sends me into the time-stream to investigate disturbances, or takes me on trips with him into his own time. It would be very difficult for me if my first thought upon meeting a person was to remember the date of their death.’

‘I can imagine... feeling the pain of bereavement before even speaking for the first time. How horrible.’

The discussion continued, but soon they received word from the engineers that the last of the refugees had made it into Zangpan’s World. The portals were shut down, and Zangpan’s people began to educate the newcomers in the ways of their new home. Before long Lord Roxton and I were able to join our friends for some lunch. We had played an important part in persuading the Ka-Marians and the Wildies to step through the strange blue portals. Of course, it had not taken a great deal to persuade them as they had nowhere else to go.

‘Did you do it?’ asked Master Zangpan.

‘I’m afraid we did,’ said Lord John. ‘I don’t feel too good about being the one to blow up a planet.’

Zangpan’s device would burrow down to the core of Planet 93, monitoring the solar system for the approach of Raak battle-cruisers. When it judged them to be within range it would trigger a chain reaction in the core. The planet would be utterly destroyed and the enemy spacecraft would be annihilated. It was a part of our mission which neither of us had relished, but Zangpan had made it clear that it was one of the conditions of his help – the Raak must have no evidence of other-dimensional activities. Lord Roxton had asked whether such an explosion might indicate to the Raak that something unusual had occurred, but Zangpan had said that to the contrary, planet-busting detonations were simply part of everyday business for the war-like Raak.

‘Planet 93 was always a dead world,’ said Master Zangpan. ‘No Ka-Marian had called it by its true name in five centuries, except in stories of the days before the coming of the Raak. You simply put it out of its misery.’

‘It could have lived again,’ I said.

Master Zangpan began to show signs of slight irritation. ‘Such discussion is fruitless, so stop bugging me about it, Mister Malone! To the eyes of the universe, the Ka-Marians chose death and glory over slavery and degradation under the lash of the Raak. Other subjugated worlds will follow their example. Some will fail and die, some will succeed and die, but some will succeed and live! Today we have struck an important blow against the Raak and you should certainly cheer up a bit!’

‘I suppose so,’ I said sadly. It preyed on my mind that it could so easily have been Earth we mourned that day, had the Raak turned right instead of left five centuries ago. ‘How do you feel, Professor Summerlee? Has the wound healed?’

‘Yes, it has,’ he replied, ‘the doctors here are very good, you know. Had me up on my feet in no time at all!’

The Mechanical Housewife spoke up. ‘If not for the quick work of Aikor it is unlikely that you would have survived long enough to receive their attentions, Professor. You owe him your thanks.’

‘You may be sure that I shall not be remiss in proffering them, dear lady.’

‘My cosmic wisdom and astonishing powers of near-infinite reflection tell me that it is Aikor who shall be most profligate with his thanks,’ said Master Zangpan, indicating that we should all take the weight off our feet. We followed him in placing our posteriors upon the gentle ground. The flora and landscape of the sliver from which Summerlee had watched the evacuation was, like the majority of them, not created according to the templates of Earth. The burgundy ground was covered with swaying grass of the deepest blue, the light filtered to create a relaxing and permanent dusk. Whether the sliver had constructed itself in imitation of a far-off planet or whether someone had simply fancied living in a place like that I do not know, but it was a lovely place to sit and talk, to recuperate and make plans. ‘You saved his people, after all. However, despite your mighty deeds of the past you must now turn to the future. Having rescued an entire population, you must now save a single man.’

Lord Roxton, Summerlee and I nodded solemnly. The three of us were fully aware of our responsibilities in that regard.

‘There is no rush to leave Zangpan’s World, of course,’ he continued. ‘When you are ready, we shall drop you back into real-space at the same point in time from which you came here. Then you can chase after him. Before leaving ensure you are refreshed and rested.’

I looked at the others. They indicated that I should speak. ‘We thank you for your advice, but we would really like to go as soon as possible.’

‘I suppose that is understandable,’ said Master Zangpan, ‘if regrettable. Your impatience says much for your friendship, though little for your cosmic awareness. Tomorrow, now, next week, all times of departure in Zangpan’s World are as one with regard to the outside universe. The difference is purely psychological.’

‘We understand that,’ said Professor Summerlee, ‘but the fact that a difference is psychological does not make it unimportant. Logically, we could stay here for the next twenty years if we wished before stowing our walking-sticks in the *Rocket* and going

after Challenger's head – but we will never be more ready than we are at this moment! No, Master Zangpan, we must strike while the iron is hot! This is the day and this is the hour!

'Besides,' commented Lord Roxton, 'we miss the irritating baboon and we want him back in one piece.'

Zangpan saw no reason to dispute the matter with us any further, and so we were soon standing by the *Rocket*, ready to board her once again. It wasn't quite the same without Challenger around. Klothe, Melenkius, Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife were all there to see us off.

'Now remember,' said Klothe to the three of us. 'If anyone asks, you had the refit done by Publasky Porawny on Pelney's Planet.'

'We have replicated his style exactly,' said Melenkius. 'Right down to the over-torquing on the maximising delibrettofier, though it killed me to do so.'

I made a note of the instruction. I knew how important it was to keep the Raak from knowing of Zangpan's World.

'There is one other thing,' said the Mechanical Housewife, walking over to me with her hand held out.

'I know, my love,' said I, holding out my own hand. 'I shall miss you too.'

'It's not that,' she said with a laugh. When our hands met I felt something pressed against my palm. Taking it from her I saw that it was Challenger's ring, the symbol of his kingship. 'I thought he might like to see it. It might help you to bring him back to his

senses or something, should the cold loneliness of space have addled his mind.'

Master Zangpan scowled at her. 'You shouldn't have done that,' he said in an annoyed tone. 'You know my rules about interference.'

She tossed her blond curls over her shoulder. 'You don't hesitate to break the rules when it suits your purposes.'

'That's different – they're my rules!'

My two English friends were as puzzled as I by this exchange. What possible importance could her actions have had? I could not know, but the argument determined me to keep the ring upon my person. Soon Master Zangpan conceded the debate to his robotic servant. She pointed out that the ring would still have been aboard the ship, along with the finger, the hand, and the body she had taken it from, if not for Zangpan's own meddling. She had simply put the natural train of events back on the rails.

'Time for us to go,' said Lord Roxton. Summerlee nodded his agreement and the two of them boarded the ship. 'Hurry up, Malone,' called Roxton from within.

'Farewell,' I said to our world's newest friends. 'If we are successful, can you really do what you say?'

'Bring me the head of George Edward Challenger,' said Master Zangpan, 'and these two will put him back together again.'

Looking at the smiling faces of Klothe and Melenkius I really believed they could. I gave the Mechanical Housewife a peck on the cheek, said goodbye to the others and entered the ship.

How to Get Ahead in Space

Space, thought Professor Challenger, as he rocketed through the void, with a neutron booster blasting away from the point at which his neck used to meet his body, is most definitely the place. So had said a fascinating blue-skinned lady to him back on Zangpan's World, describing her ability to sail between the planets of the solar system. Travelling through space faster than a speeding star-light, he had every reason to agree with her. The universe was beautiful and he felt awe as she showed him her face. He was edging towards the belief that the Raak had done him a favour. Murdering maniacs perhaps, but they had been good enough to provide him with a little jet mounted on the side of the ship (helmet?). Its feeble power levels had no effect upon his trajectory, of course, but it did give him the ability to set the ship spinning from time to time along an axis which speared his head – thus changing the view. Soaring through the heavens, he felt that if he were to meet a Raak a minute from now he would shake it by the hand. That is, if he were able, and besides, resentment towards those who had beheaded him was growing once more in pace with the desire he had for a nose-scratching.

He had never actually lost consciousness during the process of decapitation, which had come as something of a surprise. He had at least anticipated some fainting, if not an oblivion more permanent, but the fact that he had remained alert as the deed was done was a source of some pride to him. One day, he hoped, he would be able to speak of the experience before the Royal Biological Society, if not the Invisible College itself!

Before the blade had been allowed to drop, the scientists of the Raak had hooked his head and body up to various items of machinery which in retrospect he realised to have kept him alive during the operation. The incision of note had then been made, right at the bottom of the neck, leaving Challenger to reflect that the seat of the soul was most certainly in the skull, for although he felt a sense of loss as he watched the body recede into the distance, the head being taken to a different laboratory to prepare for its journey into space, he felt that no diminishment of the essential self had taken place. It was, without doubt, a most interesting experience.

The first step in preparing the Challenger head for

inter-stellar travel had been to make it self-sufficient, and to this end a mechanical cap had been placed over the base of the neck. This piece of alien technology somehow performed such essential bodily functions as the recycling of blood and the processing of air. It enabled him to speak, replacing his lungs in that capacity too. However, that power of speech was only now returning once more – the Raak scientists had temporarily disabled it in the face of his furious invective. He wasn't entirely sure what he had been so angry about. Certainly, he had failed abysmally in his mission to make contact with the Ka-Marian prisoners, being captured before even reaching the prison camp, and of course the chances of Malone and the others rescuing his subjects without his assistance seemed pretty slim. His body had been amputated (and I was quite attached to it, he laughed to himself) and the Earth might well be heading for destruction. But was all that really worth getting worked up about when one felt at peace with the universe? From his position in inter-stellar space, Challenger wondered if he was beginning to develop the cosmic awareness of which he had heard Master Zangpan speak. Planets might live, planets might die – in fact they would all die in the end, no two ways about it, it was a done deal, so why get so worked up about one or another, here or there?

As you can tell, dear reader, Challenger was far from being himself as we threw ourselves into his pursuit. The calculations of Klothe and Melenkius had shown that if Challenger was heading for the Raak home-world, Raraak-Ra, we would overtake him with days to spare. The top speed of a head in a helmet, they told me, is high, but would easily be matched and beaten by the new and improved *Rocket*. You have plenty of time to catch up – the question is, what state will he be in when you find him? I enquired as to their meaning, and Klothe hinted of an affliction by the name of space-happiness. If he goes space-happy, said the engineer, you will have to take great care of him. He may well resent being rescued. Poppycock, I had said. Challenger would never go mad! But Melenkius had pointed out that it wasn't a form of insanity, at least within its normal context – it was an entirely rational and intelligent reaction to the infinities of space. It was the first step to cosmic awareness. In fact, they

told me, checking to see that Master Zangpan wasn't around, that was how all this came about. I didn't understand. Master Zangpan, said Klothe, had originally gone by the name of Chow Mi-Sun, a Japanese astronaut whose orbital laboratory had malfunctioned. Two of the other astronauts had been killed immediately in the accident, while Chow, preparing to leave the air-lock to perform experiments on a space-walk, had found himself out in space with no way of getting back inside. Certain meditations he then performed had opened the doors to Zangpan's World. I informed them that Zangpan had spoken to us of certain tantric rituals. They looked at each other, then smiled. The experiments, they said, had been with regard to zero gravity and zero environment sex. There had been another astronaut with him, by the name of Mai-Lee. Staring death in the face, they had elected to continue with the experiments regardless. This had led to Chow's space-happiness and subsequent enlightenment. I wondered how they had performed such a feat in the cold vacuum of space, but it had all been planned, said Klothe, the spacesuits were of a special Siamese variety. I asked what had become of Mai-Lee, did she have a world of her own too? They frowned and looked rather sad. I'm afraid not, said Melenkius.

Only Master Zangpan made it through. She died long before the Japanese rescue mission was able to reach her. That was when Master Zangpan created his rules regarding the messing-up of time, said Klothe. He takes them very seriously. Investigating the circumstances of his disappearance was a vital step for the Earth people along the road to cosmic consciousness – if Mai-Lee's body had not been found, it would have been assumed that the two of them had simply been swept away into the depths of space and no progress would have been made.

Do I need to describe the exultation on board the *Rocket* when the blip of Challenger's head showed up on the sensors? Those who can imagine it for themselves must bear with me while I describe the scene for those who are, perhaps, reading this account at the end of a long day. Lord Roxton leapt to his feet with a great cheer, dropping his cards all over the floor, and Summerlee followed suit, while I grumbled about having a winning hand.

'He's dead ahead,' said Lord Roxton.

Professor Summerlee looked askance at him. 'I sincerely hope he isn't.'

'I'll get the grabber ready,' said I to the two of them. I was referring to one of the many improvements made to the ship by Klothe and Melenkius.



The grabber was a device which would allow the user to grab (hence the name, naturally) objects from the exterior. If at that time the ship was within a hostile environment, such as undersea or out in space, the object would be brought through an airlock. My task was to use the grabber to pull Challenger's tiny spaceship inside, while Roxton and Summerlee would have to match our velocity with that of our comrade's head.

Meanwhile, Challenger was comparing the experience of travelling through inter-stellar space with certain thought experiments he had performed upon himself while lying in bed as a child. Tucked inside a bundle of warm blankets, insulated from the cold and hidden from the world, he would close his eyes and prepare for sleep. And often, waiting for the Sandman to come and sprinkle dust upon him, he would try to reorientate his perception of the room. He had always found it remarkably easy to convince himself that his bed pointed from east to west, instead of vice versa, or to north or south. In the darkness there was no real sense of direction, and being in space was just like that. Usually he thought of himself as travelling from left to right along a horizontal plane, as would a man in a car, but without gravity to provide a sense of direction there was no reason why he should not consider himself to be rocketing forever upward and away! Often he did, and with equal regularity came the terrifying times when he seemed to be plummeting into an infinite abyss. One sign that he was not himself (he was, after all, less than one fifth in fact of the man he used to be) was that Challenger permitted these periods of terror to continue, rather than struggling to bring them to an end, because he was enjoying the sensation of fear. He felt himself on the verge of a breakthrough. If he could orientate his mind in the right manner, and if he could make himself fall in the right direction, into the right dimension... It was all becoming so clear, the Zang and the Pan... Could there be a *second* Master..?

I have detailed how each of the parties involved arrived at the nexus where our two journeys intersected. Gliding serenely (most of the time) through space, the tiny drive at the back of the modified space helmet pushing him ever onward, never seeing his destination but knowing it nevertheless, Challenger never heard our approach. Apart from the fact that our ship was silent in its running, there is no sound in space – no sound, said Challenger to me later, other than a silence which is so loud it can deafen you. We came up on him suddenly and he spotted us out of the corner of his eye – imagine

trying to see what is under your feet without being able to lower your head. That was Challenger's situation, apart from the fact that he had no feet – or rather, that his feet were currently being cared for in an other-dimensional quasi-space!

If Roxton and Summerlee had not been able to match speeds the operation could not have gone ahead, but thankfully the potential difficulties of the task were eliminated by the sophisticated motion sensors which had been installed by Challenger and upgraded by Zangpan's tame engineers. Mercifully soon, for the tension was gnawing at my stomach like a bad case of Delhi belly, I was given the go-ahead. I began to manipulate the controls which sent the grabber's arm out towards our spinning space-man. Presumably, as we were so close to him now that if he had still been in one piece his monstrous backside would have obscured the view-screen, Challenger now knew it was the *Rocket* that had come to his rescue. Yet to see the frantic gyrations of his little helmet as my grabber approached (there was little else the poor fellow was in a position to do) one would have thought us the Raak or worse. Finally the grabber-hand clamped gently but firmly about the helmet.

'Better check that we have the right head,' said Summerlee to me.

'Okay,' I shrugged. 'I don't suppose that would hurt.' I moved the arm around so that it held the helmet, face forward, in front of our view-screen. At this point the miniature spacecraft's own engine cut out, frustrated as it was in its desire to travel onward.

We all cheered as we recognised the familiar red and simian face and the bristling beard, then peered curiously at the screen as we realised he was trying to yell something at us, his face distorted with anger.

'What do you make of that?' asked Professor Summerlee. 'He seems quite distressed.'

'Perhaps he's been turned into a living bomb,' said Lord Roxton, 'and he's trying to warn us that he'll explode when we bring him inside.'

'What a lively idea,' said the professor. 'However, I am of the opinion that Challenger has probably gone doolally. We were warned this might happen, and, let's face it, he did not have very far to go!'

Lord Roxton pursed his lips pensively. 'What do you think, Malone?'

I looked into Challenger's eyes. I saw nothing to make me feel he was trying to warn us off. Rather, I felt the anger was for himself, that through the barrier of space he was screaming to be left alone. It could only be madness – I could only hope it was of a temporary variety. 'I think there is only one way to

find out what he is saying, and that is to bring him inside.'

Summerlee nodded and Roxton shrugged. 'I will go along with the majority decision,' he said. 'I was just trying to come up with a worst-case scenario, but I do not really expect Challenger to blow up in our faces – other than in a metaphorical sense, that is. Go ahead and bring him in.'

Summerlee twisted the knob on the console which opened the exterior hatch of the air-lock and we heard the whoosh of air being claimed by the void. Under my instruction the grabber tucked Challenger into the air-lock and Summerlee closed the exterior hatch. As I pumped air into the air-lock chamber the waves of sound which emanated from Challenger's ample mouth found a medium via which they could assault our ears. His voice was a bit muffled, but I made out something about some confounded idiots. I could not have guessed who he meant by that.

'I don't suppose you'd like to reconsider,' I said to the others with a grimace. 'We have yet to pass the Rubicon.' But my enquiry was not at all serious. Despite his obnoxious and unmitigatedly bad behaviour, Challenger was our friend and it was our place to assist him, whatever the situation.

Summerlee twisted the knob which opened the interior air-lock hatch. It swung open and there was Challenger sitting in the wall like a turkey in an oven. He lost no time in loosing his invective upon us face to face.

'Get me out of here, you bloody idiots!'

'Hold on, Challenger,' I said. 'We'll have you right as rain in no time. Professor Summerlee, would you like to prepare the robot body?'

Summerlee nodded and moved to unpack a trunk we had brought from Zangpan's World. As he did, I lifted Challenger and his little spacecraft from the cubby-hole. I carried him over to the foldable table which we had erected at the centre of the four comfortable chairs, and set him down upon it. Eventually he stopped swearing long enough for me to ask how to open up the helmet.

'Just press the red button,' he said through gritted teeth.

I did so and the helmet sprang open. I lifted Challenger from it and Roxton put it down beside his chair. Summerlee was still busy off in the corner.

It was a difficult moment. What should one say in such a situation? Whatever one says, one runs the risk of sounding either cruel or ridiculous. I plumped for the ridiculous. 'How are you, Professor Challenger?'

He was silent for a moment, staring at me. Then he

turned, as far as he could without toppling over, to look at Lord Roxton. I moved him a little so that we were both within his field of vision. 'This may well come as something of a surprise to you, Malone, but I am not at my best today. No, do not try to interrupt me with your sympathy or your patronization. I am completely cognizant of my position and I have retained full use of my faculties.'

Roxton and I looked at one another, remembering how Klothe had told us to handle our charge with kid gloves. Lord John spoke first. 'Sorry if we did anything wrong, old boy. Just trying to help out and all that. We have saved you, don't you know?'

Challenger's face reddened like an Englishman in the sun. 'You blasted idiots! Saved me, have you? You damnable bunch of nincompoops! I was but a hair's breadth away from safety before you grabbed me with that stupid extensible arm!'

'Of course you were, Professor Challenger,' I said in a low, gentle voice. 'Space happy,' I whispered to Roxton, before returning to the head on the table. 'But you're safe here, too, with all your friends. Here I am, Edward Malone, the journalist, and I'm sure you can't have forgotten your old friend, Lord John Roxton-'

'Shut up! Lord Roxton, be so good as to give him a clout on the head before he talks us all into an early grave!' Happily Roxton declined and Challenger paused for a moment, visibly trying to calm himself. 'I thank you for your attentions, but we must address ourselves to matters of grave importance. First things first. Did you manage to save the Ka-Marians?'

'We did indeed,' I said quietly, subdued by the violent reaction to my earlier words. 'It was quite an adventure-'

'Not now,' said Challenger in a more mild tone, even though he was still interrupting me. 'You can provide me with the details at a later date. However, I do thank you all most profoundly – from the bottom of my chin, so to speak – for the good you have done. It is good to have friends upon whom one can rely in an emergency.'

'What else are friends for,' said Professor Summerlee over his shoulder, 'if not for evacuating planets from time to time?'

'Unfortunately,' continued Challenger calmly, 'in my present state of incapacity I am forced to rely upon you once again. Malone, when I said that I had almost reached safety you said that I must be space-happy – your words were more apposite than you imagined, applying not only to your own sack-headed interpretation of events but also, in fact, to the actual events themselves. I was, before you

reached me, deeply space-happy and on the brink of a scientific breakthrough in the realm of cosmic awareness. I believe that in a matter of minutes I would have successfully managed to remove myself to Zangpan's World – an ability known to the enlightened as auto-dimensionality. Instead of which, my three good friends dragged me back into imminent danger.'

'I hope that you will not be offended, old man,' said Lord Roxton, 'if I declare that to be the most preposterous tosh I ever heard. However, I accept that the galaxy is a stranger place than I could ever know and so I shall let it slide for now. On the other hand, I am somewhat alarmed by your statement that we snatched you back from safety into imminent danger. As far as I know, you were still two days travel from the planet of Raraak-Ra. We overhauled you long before you reached your destination. So you see that either you are mistaken, or there is an element to this situation of which we are not yet aware.'

'Oh dear,' said Professor Challenger. 'You better get that robot body ready for me sharpish, Summerlee – it is worse than I feared. I assumed that at least you knew what you had got yourselves into! If I was travelling to Raraak-Ra, it would indeed have taken me another two days to get there. However, that was not my destination. I would have arrived today, in about twenty minutes as a matter of fact. Hence my determination to achieve auto-dimensionality.'

'Oh dear,' I said pitifully.

Challenger continued with his lecture. 'The message being sent was simple and required no words – simply a head – to convey it. *Earthmen have left their own system. They have interfered in our affairs and they must now be destroyed!*'

'If not to Raraak-Ra, then where were you heading?' asked Lord Roxton.

'Why,' said Challenger, 'such a communication would only be delivered to the very heart of Raak government! Therefore, until my voyage was so rudely interrupted, I was on my way to the Raak Battlefleet, currently stationed on the edge of Raraak-Ra's solar system and waiting for action!'

'Uh-oh,' said Summerlee, putting down the metal arms and legs he had been working on to respond to some flashing lights on the console. 'I think you gentlemen would be well advised to take a look at this.'

Roxton picked up Challenger and we went over to examine the sensor read-outs.

'These readings demonstrate the veracity of my previous statement,' said Challenger from under Lord John's arm, 'though I dearly wish it did not. Gentlemen, we are now situated squarely in the middle of the Raak Imperial Battlefleet, the deadliest force for destruction in all of creation. There are a thousand ships on every side, each of them packed to the brim with destructive weaponry and ferocious Raak warriors. Please consider that a single ship of this type was enough to destroy the Moon before making suggestions as to the most appropriate course of action.'

Flies in Honey

'We are in a tricky spot, there is no doubting that,' said Professor Summerlee, looking with concern at the view-screen. The Raak armada hung there in the blackness of space with a sublime malevolence. Sheer evil, just waiting for a chance to flex its muscles, looking for a bug to squash. Summerlee felt eminently squashable. He turned to watch Professor Challenger scratching his nose. Challenger stared right back at him.

'This is a seven light year itch, I'll have you know!'

Summerlee's eyebrows rose. 'I'm sure it is. Apart from that, how does the new body feel?'

'Not too bad,' replied Challenger, extending the metallic arms to their full length.

'Four metres,' said Lord Roxton. 'That is quite a reach. You could become a champion of the ring should you so choose!'

Challenger laughed. 'The Queensberry Rules probably prohibit telescopic arms, although I may be wrong!' He wore no clothes upon his body, which was approximately one hundred and eighty centimetres in height – disregarding the head which we had attached to it. Said height could be varied, since in addition to the arms, the legs (and the neck and waist) were adjustable and extensible. His body, as I said, stood naked to the world for a simple reason. Not having long to throw together a suitable prosthetic body, Klothe and Melenkius had not taken the time to create one which possessed the same capacity for certain activities which a human body would have had – therefore there was no need for modesty. Some lady readers may be shocked by this nudity, but consider this: you do not dress a kettle or your pots and pans! When you cloak a teapot in a tea-cosy it is simply to keep the tea within warm, not for the sake of modesty! Cloaking Challenger would have served no purpose. Also, if I may be so bold as to say so, Challenger's new body was rather spectacular and it would have been a shame to conceal it. Silver and bulky like a suit of armour, articulated at the joints and possessed of its own power source, it was a fitting replacement for the original.

Now he had a body with which to do so, Professor Challenger began to take control of the situation. 'The Raak have surrounded us,' he said. 'But as yet I believe them to be ignorant of our presence.

Fortunately our engines were off when they approached. I shall now cut down on other energy use to try and ensure that nothing gives us away.' While saying this he moved to the controls and switched and twiddled virtually every knob. The lights dimmed and the tea-maker installed by the considerate Melenkius ceased its brewing. 'Only life support systems remain in operation,' he said with a nod. 'That should keep us safe for a while.'

'If they are on patrol and they have not seen us,' I said, peering at Challenger through the gloom, 'there is no need for us to act, is there? If we lie doggo long enough they should continue on their own sweet way, leaving us free to travel back to Earth.'

He came back from the console and joined us in the comfortable upholstered chairs before speaking. 'I should be careful not to tear this,' he said ruefully. 'With my copper bottom I might as well be sitting on a rock as on this delightful piece of English furniture.'

'I shall thank you not to speak of your bottom, copper or not,' said Professor Summerlee, to the approval of Lord Roxton and myself. 'Such talk revives memories of our journey to Planet 93 and your unhealthy reaction to the Dra-wak-ooan Metelburbs!'

Professor Challenger laughed at the memory of the nasal agony he had caused us. 'When next I build a space-craft I shall be sure to include in the design air filters adequate to protect the fragile noses of my companions!'

When we stopped laughing Lord Roxton held up a hand to attract Challenger's attention. 'What say, old man, we take the time to have a glass of whisky! I know we are in a rum situation and all, but if the situation is not too urgent I believe a swig or two of the golden stuff would help us all!'

I stuck an elbow into his ribs for his tactlessness. For a second I thought he would break my arm, but then his intellect over-rode his instincts and he took time to consider his previous words. 'Oh, I see,' he said after a pause. 'Sorry, Challenger old chap! In the darkness your predicament sort of slipped my mind. No harm done, eh?'

'None at all, Lord Roxton,' said the unoffended party. 'Though I thank Malone for his concern, I am perfectly able to consume food and drink. The neck

attachment simply breaks it down and uses it for power. As for your suggestion, I agree that though the situation be rum, the drink must be whisky! I'll be hanged if I'll let the blasted beetles stop me enjoying a gentleman's comforts!

He went to the rear of the cabin and poured a glass for each of us, stretching his arm out to hand us the drinks from where he stood. Lord Roxton called it a neat party trick, and Summerlee made mention of fossil-hunting trips in the Andes when such an ability would have been more than useful. Pleasurably soon three of us were relaxing while the golden pools in our bellies warmed our souls. The fourth member of our crew took extra time to relish the taste upon his tongue.

'To return to Malone's earlier suggestion,' said Challenger from the murk. 'It would be lovely if all we had to do was hold out and keep quiet until they went away. Sadly that will not be enough. One objection to this is a matter of political morality, in that such an approach rarely works with aggressors and conquerors, whereas the other is a question of physics. I am afraid that as the fleet passed by – and remember that we are talking about a substantial number of ships with a very substantial sum total of mass – we were swept up in their gravitational pull. Result: we are slap bang in the middle of them with

no way of getting out!

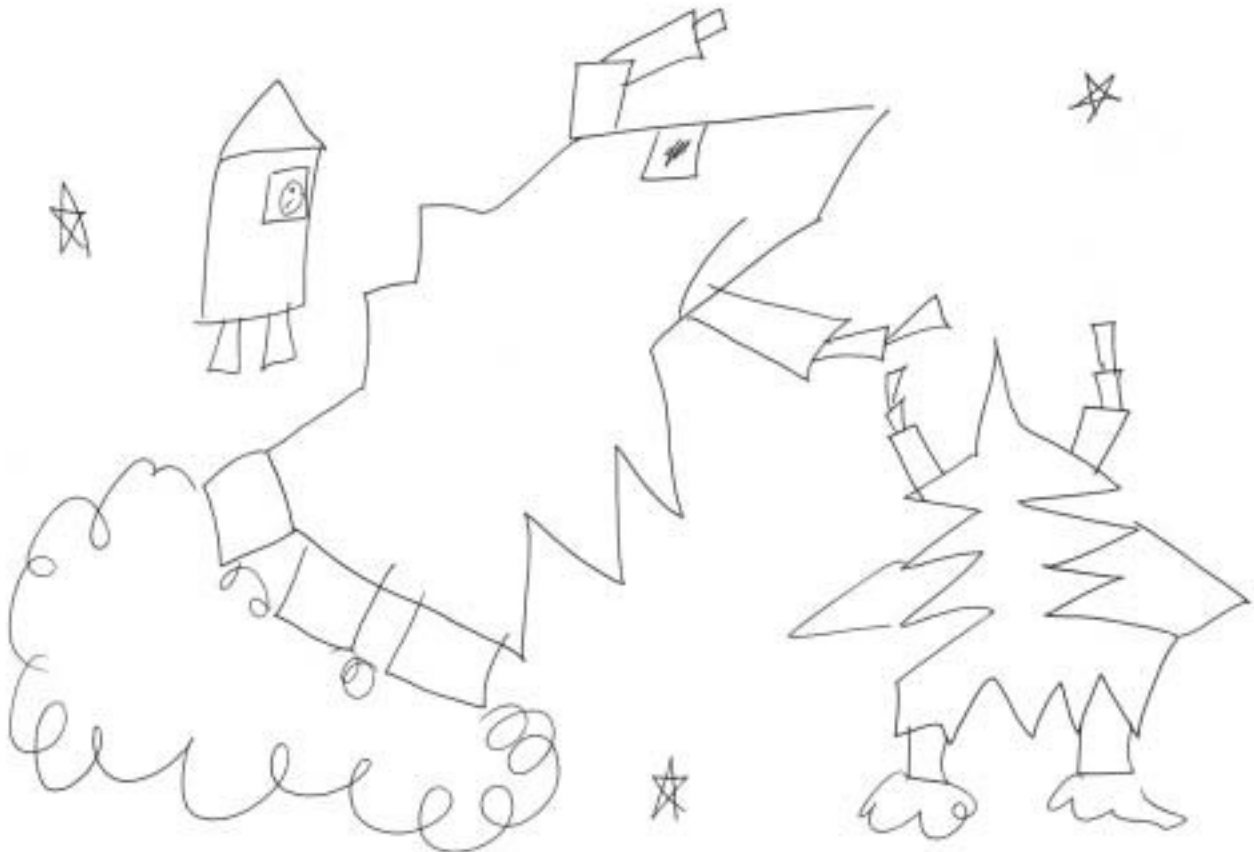
'That does not sound good,' said Professor Summerlee. 'But from the relatively cheery tone of your voice I deduce that our position is not hopeless. I suppose you expect us to beg the mighty Challenger to enlighten us once more. Well, consider the begging done! I am a proud man, but do not confuse the justifiable pride I have in my achievements with the kind of pride that gets men killed because they do not recognise that they are out of their depth.'

'There is, as you have surmised, a spark of hope,' said Challenger. 'If we could create a distraction large enough to interest the Raak, the *Rocket* could sneak away to safety!'

'What a brilliant concept!' said Summerlee. 'The reasons for which they call you a genius are manifest! Now if we can only think of a suitable distraction, stuck here in empty space!'

Though the darkness prevented me from knowing, I imagine that Challenger glowered at Summerlee as he replied. 'Keep your flippancy to yourself, old friend! I have a plan which could save the three of you, and I shall be the one putting my life on the line!'

Professor Summerlee was not cowed. 'What a fine idea. We chase half-way across the galaxy to rescue you and now you are going to sacrifice yourself so



we can get away! I look forward to describing our successful mission to Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife!

Lord Roxton interrupted him with a polite cough. 'The mission will have been a success if the men and women of Earth still wake next week to a sky that is blue, if their choice is not between slavery and death, and if the Raak Empire still believes us to be a bunch of harmless midges not worthy of their attention. What I am trying to say is this: we must escape or die, and those that do not escape must ensure that their death leaves an unrecognisable body.'

'Thank you for explaining things so bluntly and succinctly,' said Challenger. 'You will no doubt be pleased to learn that my plan involves the strapping of explosives to my body.'

'I like it already,' said Professor Summerlee, before Challenger outlined the rest of the plan. None of us were wild about his proposal, but then none of us were able to offer anything better. We agreed to go along with it, though every one of us expressed regret that he could not take the place of brave Professor Challenger.

'That is very courageous of you all,' said our friend. 'Believe me, I would not hesitate in entrusting this part of the plan to any of you – in fact I would be more than happy to do so, my reasons being partly selfish and partly a recognition of the fact that none of you, to the best of my knowledge, has a wife awaiting your return – but unfortunately I am (again, to the best of my knowledge) the only one of us with detachable body parts.'

He began by enlisting the aid of Professor Summerlee in effecting some redesigns upon the space-helmet that had carried him so far into space. Picking it up from beside Roxton's chair he wiped a few drops of whisky off it with distaste.

'I'm sorry, Challenger,' said Lord Roxton. 'It must have happened when you told us about the plan. The part about blowing up the Queen-Ship startled me.'

'I do not mean to be over-fussy,' said Challenger in return. 'But you should bear in mind that if by chance I do not make it back to the ship, this helmet could be my home for a considerable period of time.'

The next step was to disconnect his head from his new body. As the joint was a push-fit connection this did not prove problematic. Returned to his position on the table Challenger continued to instruct us, while sucking whisky through a straw. A condemned man's hearty breakfast, he said with grim humour.

We then proceeded to throw Challenger's body out of the ship. One by one his limbs were placed in the air-lock's cubbyhole before being ejected into

space, and then his torso, heavy with bombs and explosives, took the same route. Caught up in the same gravity trap as the *Rocket*, all of the mechanical attachments kept pace alongside us. A peculiar aspect of the slightly gruesome situation – it felt oddly like we were disposing of a corpse – was that the motion of the prostheses and our ship was not immediately visible to our eyes. It seemed as if we were at rest in the void with Challenger's body parts floating beside us. This effect was produced by the speed of the *Rocket* being identical to that of the prostheses and, indeed, to the objects in space which provided our frame of reference: the battleships of the malignant fleet. It was only when one looked beyond the ships that crowded the view-screen that one saw how the stars were gently turning to the right. The Raak were apparently patrolling a simple circle with the sun of Raraak-Ra at its distant centre.

Once all the other bits and pieces had been ejected, it was time for the head to follow. First we replaced him in the helmet, the drive of which had now been shifted so that it protruded from the back of the head, rather than the bottom. This would allow Challenger to use the airtight helmet and its neutron booster while still hooked up to his new body. The mechanism which had carried the memory of the miniature spaceship's original destination had been shorted out, and so Challenger would now be able to control the drive himself via the controls mounted on the front of the helmet.

Finally the time had come for Challenger to go.

Professor Summerlee lifted the helmet and placed it in the cubbyhole, asking him, 'Are you ready?'

To which Challenger replied, 'There is no preparing oneself for such an experience. My chances of survival are low, yet in the worst eventuality, if I do not make it to the rendezvous, be aware of the possibility that I have arrived at Zangpan's World before you.'

'If you manage to achieve auto-dimensionality; I know,' said Summerlee. 'But it would take us three or four weeks to get back to Zangpan's meeting-point on the Moon – that is a long time to worry about the fate of a comrade. Do your best to get back to us in one piece.'

'I shall try,' said Challenger before the hatch swung shut, 'though you should make allowances for the fact that being already in seven or eight pieces I begin the mission at a disadvantage.'

The three of us looked sadly at each other once he was out in space. We held out little hope for his survival. Trying to put such thoughts aside I addressed myself to the grabber, with which I put Challenger

back together again. That we had to operate at the lowest possible power levels made it a painfully slow process, as did the fact that I was learning for the first time how to handle objects in zero gravity, but perseverance told in the end. Challenger scooted round to the front of the ship and gave us a cheerful wave through the view-screen – we waved back, even

though the composition of the window prevented him from being able to see the symbol of our good wishes. We knew that the blackness of the screen from his position would not prevent him from knowing that we waved – and that was not a matter of cosmic awareness, but of simple friendship.

Then off he flew into the night.

The Interstellar Battleships

‘I don’t know about you,’ said Lord Roxton to the two of us, ‘but I could really use a shot of whisky right now.’ He went off to the rear of the cabin before we had even had a chance to reply. It seemed that Lord John was developing a fondness with the spirit of the north that stretched perhaps to over-familiarity.

‘Do you think that is particularly wise?’ asked Summerlee with more than a hint of concern. ‘What if Challenger sends the signal and we are all asleep in our cups?’

Lord Roxton shrugged and said, ‘It will be all right, professor. Don’t worry so much. Sometimes a man gets something of a thirst and I’ve got one right now.’

Professor Summerlee was not in the mood to back away from an argument – in any case there was little else for us to do while Challenger was off on his mission. ‘Lord Roxton, tell me, do you know the meaning of the word *alcoholic*?’

‘I think I do,’ said Roxton as he returned to his chair with a full glass of whisky in his hand. ‘It is a word which indicates whether a drink is worth the effort it takes to drink it, old chap.’ With that he gulped down half the contents of the glass.

‘In your case,’ replied Summerlee, raising his voice, ‘it describes a man who is unusually dependent upon the consumption of alcohol. Someone who finds it hard to face a crisis without a drink in his hand! Lord Roxton, I believe you are very near to alcoholism!’

‘Steady on, Summerlee,’ I said, trying to defuse the argument. ‘All of us have drunk our share of whisky on this trip, yourself included. Nothing sinister about that!’

‘On the contrary,’ said Professor Summerlee, ‘I am beginning to suspect there is something very sin-

ister about this indeed! You saw the secretive conversations between Roxton and Mrs Challenger back on Earth.’ There was obviously more to his words than he was willing to say explicitly, and I thought he was about to continue. However, thinking better of it he pressed his lips together and said nothing.

‘That,’ said Lord Roxton darkly, ‘is a place you do not want to go.’

‘It isn’t?’ answered Summerlee sharply, his anger reaching its peak. Whereas the temper of Professor Challenger was akin to a volcano, a violent explosion which might or might not be preceded by warning rumblings from the deep, Summerlee’s ire was more like a man climbing a mountain, with a steady progression from the base to the summit. Having reached the upper limit, his anger now fell away. ‘No, I suppose you are right. You may be drinking too much of the whisky, but we are still comrades and it is not befitting that I should impugn your honour.’

‘That is more like it,’ I said. My journalistic instincts screamed at me to encourage their bickering – there were secrets here simply begging to be unearthed – but my *better* instincts told me that they might well be secrets I would rather not know. ‘Let’s not forget that we are all friends here.’

‘However,’ resumed Summerlee, doing his best to stare Roxton in the eye despite the darkness in the cabin, ‘should I learn at a later date that your honour was not worthy of my trust, I shall demand satisfaction.’

‘And you shall receive it, my fellow, one way or another,’ said Roxton bleakly.

Challenger, while all that was taking place, was enjoying his jaunt through space. The sensations were much the same as they had been during the flight from Planet 93, though they would probably

have differed had he been sporting his original body. The temporary mechanism provided by Klothe and Melenkius was wonderful in many marvellous ways, but without Challenger's head actually being present during its construction they had been unable to calibrate it fully. It monitored his brain-waves to discover his intentions, translating them into actions with a speed which made his old body of flesh and blood seem positively sluggish, but it was unable to transmit in turn its own sense impressions to his mind. The result of this was that in space his only awareness of the body came as a result of the drag created by its trailing behind the helmet, unless he actually looked down at himself.

In the cabin he had found himself forced to conduct himself in the manner of a leper – constantly keeping watch on his extremities for fear of them hitting something and causing damage. Of course, where a leper would damage his own nerve-damaged body tissue, Challenger's steel hands could have broken or injured the cabin's contents; the instruments, the furniture or the people.

Out in space he was free from that constant worry, and if he did not start to throw his extensible arms and legs about like a screwball cross between a acrobat and an octopus, that was only because it might have alerted the Raak to his presence. He glided smoothly through the proverbial emptiness of space (which from his position, he reflected, amongst the ten thousand ships of the Raak Battlefleet, was not half as empty as he would have wished), giving every ship the widest possible berth, but heading inexorably toward the rear of the armada.

As he moved away from the centre of the gravity trap a modification of his method of travel became necessary. When he had first been re-assembled outside the *Rocket* his velocity and direction had been determined by the velocity and direction of the fleet. At that point he had been able to regard the fleet and himself as at rest, the gravity trap holding their relative positions constant – other than when he made use of the helmet's drive. However, towards the rear of the fleet the effect of the gravity trap was lessened and he had also to use the drive to keep up. Gradually the situation changed so that instead of being a bird flying among very ominous clouds, he became a cowboy racing after a speeding train. The chances of detection increased in direct proportion to the additional power being used.

The one way in which that last simile was not accurate is that Challenger was already ahead of the train. He now had to slow down so that it drew level

with him, though every ounce of his brain screamed the message, 'Leave! Leave!' Unfortunately, he told himself, there are times when a hero must do things such as this, like it or not. Some people would find no solace in the fact that though they died, their name would live on. Challenger was not to be numbered among that breed of snivelling cowards and selfish buffoons (though I must confess that I, personally, am). He knew that if the very worst eventuality became actuality, I would record his story in writing for the people of Zangpan's World. My readers may be confused by this: that while they have heard of Challenger's injunction against Earthly publication, they do in fact hold a copy of that very same story in their hands. I assure you that this matter shall be resolved.

Coming ever closer to the dread battle cruiser that brought up the rear, Challenger bid farewell to the stars as, one by one, they were blotted out of existence. Whatever the faults of the Raak, he thought, they certainly know how to build bloody big space-ships. To say that the size of the ship dwarfed him would be an understatement. It reduced him to the size of a pea, then a pinhead, then an atom. Approaching it inspired him with awe, but also with disgust, that such evident scientific and technical ability as the Raak obviously possessed was being perverted to such disgraceful ends.

Although the ship was large and impressive, do not be deluded into thinking that it was beautiful. Big is not always beautiful, in my humble opinion, and, in fact, large is often grotesque. For every pyramid of the pharaohs there is an Eiffel Tower! I believe my assertion is also supported by the example of Challenger himself, a far from handsome specimen, but one of indubitable size. The Raak battleship was designed in a manner intended to cast fear into their enemies, similar in many aspects to the horrifying appearance of their individual selves. Challenger said to me at a later date – but what is that plaintive noise I hear from beyond the pages of my account? You are unhappy, my faithful reader? As an author I do try to be responsive to the sentiments of my audience, and I am always delighted to hear your comments. You say that you are disappointed by the accidental and altogether casual revelation of Challenger's survival? Come now, you should have guessed that it would take more than fighting the most destructive force in the universe to send Professor Challenger to the funeral parlour! (Perhaps I should say the *second* most destructive force in the universe, having been one of the unfortunate few to have shared an enclosed space with the professor

after a meal of sausage, egg and beans.)

To continue with my tale: at a later date Challenger told me that in his opinion the battleships of the Raak resembled nothing so much as a pair of the beetle warriors themselves engaging in, ahem, *intimate* relations. (Though my plain-speaking friend used more colourful phraseology!) From the distance at which we stood from them no details were visible. Silhouetted against a backdrop of stars they looked like shiny black rugby balls, bristling with spikes like a porcupine. Each enormous spike was a horrendous gun, each of a differently awful breed, any one of which had the ability to incinerate London. All too soon I would have the unwished-for opportunity to examine the largest of the ships at close quarters for myself.

One hand operating the controls upon his chin, the other removing an explosive device from one of the many straps around his body, Challenger negotiated his way between the spines to reach the outer hull of the ship and land on it with a clang which he hoped had not carried into the atmosphere inside the enemy ship. The sound made his ears ring painfully, being conducted along the length of his metal body and passed into the atmosphere within his helmet, but that would be the least of his worries should the Raak detect him. He judged himself to be close enough to the back end of the ship to suit the purposes of the plan, and so, activating magnetic elements in the base of his mechanical feet to hold him fast and steady, he switched off the helmet drive. The most difficult part was over – at least with regard to this ship.

He literally bent to his task, fixing the explosive – one of Klothe and Melenkius's patented planet-busters – securely to the hull. He armed it and instructed it to explode two hours later, synchronising his pocket watch with the bomb's timer. (The pocket watch was an interesting item, brought from Earth by Challenger and discovered upon his body as Melenkius took measurements for the robotic replacement. After a certain amount of prodding from Melenkius, Klothe had built a compartment for it into the chest of the new body. Melenkius had rejigged the insides of the watch, providing it with a variety of new functions – although he neglected to provide Challenger with a manual to explain their use – and a energy battery to power it which would outlive us all, and making it space-proof. One would almost have thought, from such details as the watch and the copious amounts of explosives stowed aboard the ship, that Zangpan and his friends had been expecting us to come up with a plan like this.)

Happy with his work, he disengaged himself from the hull and blasted over to another ship.

Working in this way along the length of the rear of the fleet, randomly choosing which Raak would live and which would die, he used up the majority of his explosives, all of them programmed to go off within five seconds, plus or minus, of the first he had set. He was lucky enough to escape trouble, except for a minor skirmish with an engineer working to re-align one of the big guns. A foot telescoped out in a flash and the poor creature's head was knocked into space before he had a chance to bring the fury of the fleet to bear upon Challenger.

When bombs and time began to run low he started to head back toward the centre of the fleet, casually dropping off the odd explosive here and there. These were programmed to go off a little later than the others, the delay period progressively rising as he headed for the Queen-Ship, the most massive and horrible of them all. As he touched down on that alien vessel he checked his watch. Ten minutes before the explosions would begin. He rubbed his metal hands with glee and placed the final three planet-busters on the Queen-Ship's dark exterior and set them to go off in seventeen minutes time. After standing back up he twisted off one of his fingers. Pressing hard on the knuckle, he then released it and watched it fly away (in our direction).

'I think I had best be leaving,' he said to no one in particular before taking flight himself. In accordance with our plan he headed in the direction of Sirius. The theory was that travelling in the same direction we would soon be able to find each other. Of course, we were not relying on making visual contact – Challenger's new body contained a more powerful version of the transmitters which we had carried in our toes during the Planet 93 mission.

When the finger knocked upon the view-screen of the *Rocket* the scene within turned from one of tired and angry silence to one of eager energy and life. The three of us sprang from our chairs like gazelles – it is unlikely that in the long and winding history of mankind three men have ever shown more haste to remove themselves from such comfortable arm-chairs.

'There's the signal! Roxton, make ready with the power,' I said, taking control and giving the orders for once, seeing as they were hardly talking to each other. We all knew our parts perfectly, so of course there was no real need for anyone to give any orders. However, during our many adventures we had come to the conclusion that it was often morale-boosting to have someone take charge – especially for the person

giving the orders. In this case, though, it was the crewmen who needed to be pepped up.

'Summerlee, keep your hands on those controls! Prepare yourselves for action!'

Suddenly a shudder ran through the ship, all the lights came on and the engine started to turn over. My heart filled with horror, I saw every city-sized battleship on the view-screen turn in our direction. A million guns pointed at a single point in space – the one we occupied. If all had fired at once it would probably have been enough to blast a hole in the very fabric of the universe.

I looked at Summerlee and Roxton. 'Which of you did that?' There was no expression in my voice, events had moved beyond the need for displays of emotion.

'Don't look at me,' said Summerlee, turning off the engines. Trying to use them now would be suicide. 'It must have been Roxton. What was it, John? Your hands shaking from the way you drowned your brain in whisky?'

'No,' said Lord Roxton. 'It wasn't that. But I know what it was. And I am to blame.'

'You can't have-' I did not complete the sentence. I could not suspect him of treachery.

'Come to the back of the cabin,' said our aristocratic colleague. As no other potential actions of interest presented themselves, Summerlee and I did as he requested. Halfway across the deck the *Rocket* began to shake again. This time it did not stop and the silhouette of the Queen-Ship began to grow larger on the screen. Roxton shrugged, commenting that being captured was better than being annihilated. 'If levels of Raak alertness follow a normal distribu-



tion, and I imagine that they do, we should have at least one chance of escape before being executed.'

'That's a relief,' I observed. 'So what gave us away, Lord John?'

He pointed at the whisky dispenser.

I didn't understand what he meant, but Summerlee did. 'Oh my word!'

'You remember how proud Challenger was with regard to his whisky during our first stay on Zangpan's World?' I nodded. Challenger had steadfastly refused to accept that any whisky could be finer than that produced by his own distillery, despite all evidence to the contrary provided by Master Zangpan. Suddenly the source of our predicament became clear.

'Klothe and Melenkius refitted the whole ship, but they didn't touch the distillery. They didn't want to affect its authentic flavour. It's still rigged up to its original power source, isn't it?'

'That's about the long and the tall of it,' said Roxton. 'All the whisky I drank left the dispenser empty and it cranked up the mobile distillery. Hey presto, young fella-my-lad, one carefully laid plan ruined by too much drinking. Not an unusual occurrence in my life, you know.'

'I must say that I would rather not bring this up,' I said to them as we dropped ourselves back into the armchairs, possibly for the final time. 'But didn't you say something, Lord Roxton, about those who failed to escape having to die by their own hands?'

Roxton pushed his bottom lip hard against the upper and frowned. 'I suppose I did, young Malone.' He looked at Professor Summerlee, who looked the other way. 'I'd had a few shots of the old whisky back then, and I wasn't quite myself.'

'But you said that allowing the Raak to take us alive would place the Earth in terrible danger!'

'So it would, so it would. On the other hand, if none of us lives to warn our fellow Earthmen of the danger posed by the Raak Empire, they'll die anyway in the end. Let's just hang on for a moment. Where there's life, there's hope. Challenger is still out there, after all. He's our ace in the hole, so to speak.'

The *Rocket* was now so close to the Queen-Ship that little else was visible. The mouth of the gargantuan beast gaped like the gateway to the inferno. I compelled myself to bravery and did not scream, though I gripped the arm of the chair so tightly it splintered. Just before we fell between the mandibles (or loading cranes?) Professor Summerlee got up from his chair and walked to the console, where he consulted the ship's chronometer.

‘They may have come too late to save us,’ he said over his shoulder, ‘but I suppose that we should still watch the fireworks Challenger set up for us, don’t you think? Things should begin to happen within the next twenty seconds.’

Lord Roxton and I got back up from our chairs and went over to stand by the view-screen. Because the Queen-Ship greedily dominated the view, we were forced to virtually press our noses up against the glass to see anything else. It was worth it, though, as when the chronometer ticked off the sixteenth second since Summerlee had spoke there was a flash of light (which would blinded us save for the protection of the new and improved screen, which darkened in response to the flare) and an almighty explosion at the rear of the fleet. Then came another, and another, all quickly following in succession. They were pretty large bombs we had been using and they had quite an effect, blowing the ships chosen by Challenger into a billion flaming pieces. Then ships closer to us began to explode and others began to spin around to chase the attackers. The last thing we saw before being swallowed by the battleship was that our attempt to simulate a surprise attack upon the rear of the fleet had worked. The ships scattered, trying to escape the strafing runs and raking guns of imaginary foes.

Challenger had obviously not been able to plant bombs on every ship in the fleet, but it was clear that he had done a darn sight more in two hours than I would ever have considered possible. What’s more, he had concentrated his efforts upon the largest of the ships, and as these now careened and careered all over the place they created more chaos than any man could imagine ere entering the realm of Beelzebub.

Everything had gone according to plan. The fleet was in chaos and no Raak would be looking out for a ship the size of the *Rocket*. They would assume that only a truly mighty power would dare to attack them so forcefully. In all the confusion it would have been so easy to slip away into the depths of space. We would have been home and dry.

If only the mobile distillery had not switched itself on.

Instead, within five minutes we had been dragged from the cabin of our cosy little space-craft and taken to the bridge of the Queen-Ship. We watched the Raak with interest and amusement as they tried to locate the invisible assault upon their rear, but wondered to ourselves how many of the seven minutes were left before the planet-busters attached to *this* ship would explode.

Mrs Challenger to the Rescue

There are doubtless among my readers many who, seeing the title of this chapter upon the page of contents, surmised it to concern that happy moment following our return to Earth when Mrs Challenger would save us from the twin dangers of hunger and thirst with roast beef dinners and mugs of tea all round! I offer no criticism of those readers, as perhaps they have seen little in the story so far to indicate that she would have any other role, but nevertheless, they should prepare themselves for a shock or two.

Standing on the bridge of the Queen-Ship, waiting for the bomb to blow us to atoms, I realised why Roxton had previously prevaricated on the subject of suicide. We would soon be destroyed, long before the Raak had the time to make the connection between their three captive Earthmen and the surprise attack currently devastating their fleet. In all probability, there would not even be time for them to identify us as Earthmen. For some reason at once incomprehensible and essential to the human spirit, understanding that Lord Roxton was not a coward made me feel slightly better about my imminent death.

The interior of the ship was architecturally similar to the Raak base on Planet 93 which Roxton and I had invaded – dank, dismal and highly conducive to claustrophobia. A strange construction which I had taken at first to be some kind of aquarium for monstrous alien fish revealed itself to be a tactical three-dimensional map of the ‘battle’, computer-generated models swimming in the tank representing the panicky state of the Raak fleet. As far as I could tell the ships of the armada had completely switched direction, having wheeled about to pursue the enemies which they imagined to have struck and then fled. Our beetle-like captors scuttled around the map with frantic haste, often dropping to all-sixes to move more rapidly, while we Earthmen three, tied up together to one side and guarded by Raak that were ugly even by their standards, struggled to maintain our stiff upper lips. (It has to be said that Lord John was quite magnificent in this regard, years in the British Army having given him plenty of practice in stoical reserve.) There could not be more than a

minute to go, I told myself, until the moment of my death.

The explosion came. I braced myself against its fiery touch, then wondered where I had found the time to do so. By rights I should have been dead before having the chance to notice the explosion. The room filled with billowing smoke, obscuring our view of the affected area, but from what I could perceive the damage caused by the blast seemed quite minimal.

I turned to ask the others, raising my voice above the noise of the alarmed chitterings of the Raak, ‘What do you make of it?’ I felt quite jubilant at having escaped death’s grasping hands, even though the logic of the situation, had I time to think it through, still dictated that my end must still come soon, one way or another.

Lord Roxton speculated that one of the planet-busters might have malfunctioned, while Professor Summerlee wondered why the atmosphere in the bridge was not being sucked into space. Such an explosion must surely have created a hole in the hull.

Our rapid discussion was brought to a rapid end as action overtook the bridge. Suddenly the fish-tank began to display the lights of shoals of new arrivals in the vicinity, coming up from the direction in which the fleet had previously been travelling. It was clear that a new player had entered the game. Needless to say, this threw the control room into confusion – the explosion they had virtually taken in their stride, believing themselves to have caught a hit from one of the invisible attackers. Now they found themselves under attack, or so they thought, on two sides. To be trapped in a vice was an unusual and shocking experience for these conquerors of the galaxy, but they had not reached their dominant position through being cowardly or weak-willed. The confusion would have lasted but a moment, as they pulled themselves together and began to issue orders to the other members of the fleet, but for a new and shocking event.

At first I thought Challenger had come to our rescue, but it was not he. From out of the smoke of the explosion strode a man; the kind of man, let me

say, who would always be described as having strode, or swaggered, never as having just walked and most certainly never as having ambled. Though I desire to convey the impression that he was an imposing figure, do not assume that therefore he was a tall man, for he was not, being no more than five feet in height (or so he would claim – independent analysis had indicated that the true figure might be closer to four feet eleven and a half). Nevertheless he had a presence and a charisma that would have been the envy of many of Earth's very tallest men. Of course, the fact that he had just stepped from the void of space onto the bridge of the Raak Queen-Ship did much to enhance our opinion of him. Frankly, though, he did not resemble a man who gave much for the opinions of others. He looked reasonably human, though for some reason I doubted he originated from Earth. Oddly enough, for a man in his position, he carried no weapons, and wore only a red suit – that is, red trousers, a red shirt, a red jacket and a red tie – over his doughy body. He was almost completely bald, save for a smartly cropped strip of black hair around the base of the skull, and his eyebrows were thin and lacquered, extending an inch beyond the sides of his head.

As one might expect, when the Raak became aware of the intruder on the bridge they sprung to attack him. Paying little heed to them, he strode over to our side. We watched in amazement as the belligerence of the Raak seemed to carry them to within two metres of the newcomer, and no further. At that point they seemed to meet an invisible barrier which proved impervious to their assaults.

'Hello,' he said, untying us. 'Just made it. Bomb to explode, three seconds, mark!'

I began to ask the obvious question, in view of two salient facts of which I was in possession – one, that the bomb had already exploded (I later realised that the earlier detonation had been created by our rescuer to allow him ingress to the bridge), and two, that if the bomb was about to explode, I was about to die. 'What do you me-'

I was interrupted by the explosion of the three planet-busters. Using three bombs, each of which was powerful enough to destroy an entire planet, to destroy a single spaceship might have been considered overkill on Challenger's part, but it certainly made for an impressive explosion. Protected by the force-field of Milo the Assassin, I was able to watch the fireworks from the very centre of the conflagration. Most of it happened too quickly to register, but there was an impression of a massive flash, the hull crumpling inwards and the Raak being crushed. For

a fleeting second we found ourselves within a two-metre sphere, the walls of which were formed of squashed beetle and mangled machinery, before it all flew apart to leave us standing, upon a section of floor which, like us, had been protected from the blast, in space, surrounded by tumbling debris.

The vast distances involved in space combat meant that we were unable to see much of the battle with our naked eyes, but the day clearly belonged to the newcomers. The question was, who were they? To whom did we owe our miraculous survival? A number of moments passed before Professor Summerlee, Lord Roxton or I found our tongues. Astounded by the nature of our rescue, somewhat dismayed by the destruction of the Raak (though it was by our own hands, we would not have chosen to experience it at such close quarters), none of us felt ready to speak, while Milo the Assassin was busily tapping away at a mechanism strapped to his wrist. The three of us regarded each other, not yet quite ready to believe what had happened, and tried not to think about the way in which we were hanging in space, apparently exposed to the vacuum.

In the end it was our rescuer who spoke next, in the same brusque manner he had previously used. 'You wonder who I am. Milo the Assassin, sent to save you. Used force-field, only one of its kind. Unique. You should be glad.'

We expressed our gratitude, before Professor Summerlee asked, 'Who sent you? And who is attacking the Raak?'

'The Challenger sent me, of course. I thought you'd have known. The Challenger leads pan-galactic alliance against Raak. Looks like victory, thanks to you.'

'You didn't do such a shabby job yourself,' said Lord Roxton. 'So Challenger sent you, eh? But where did the old goat find the time to rustle up a pan-galactic alliance?'

Milo seemed to stop breathing for a moment while he looked at Roxton. His stance changed from that of a man who had completed his mission to that of a man who was all set to go to work. Upon Roxton. 'Shouldn't call the Challenger old goat, if I were you. Not advisable. Will cause upset and hurt. Upset to me. Hurt to you.'

Lord Roxton was hardly flustered, but he was a little surprised. 'Hey, settle down, old chap! No need to get one's knickers in a twist, what! We are Challenger's oldest friends, you know. It's just friendly banter – helps the action go down smoothly, you know!'

Milo seemed hardly mollified, so I tried to change

the course of the conversation. I said to Milo, 'Where is Professor Challenger, Milo? How did he manage to arrange an alliance?'

Milo looked surprised. 'He? You mean George Challenger?'

Summerlee and I laughed, while Roxton began to look decidedly uncomfortable. I said to Milo, 'Well, of course George! How many Challengers are out here in space?'

'George Challenger is half-way to the Dog Star by now. I'm here under auspices of the Macabre and Ibis.'

'You mean,' said Lord Roxton who seemed, despite the bafflement of Professor Summerlee and I, to at least half-understand what Milo was talking about, 'that Mrs Challenger sent you!'

Summerlee and I exclaimed in unison, 'What!'

'You a member too?' said Milo to Roxton, holding out a hand. The English Lord took it and they shook. 'Always nice to meet fellow agents.'

'Likewise,' said Roxton, although he was obviously still rather shaken.

Professor Summerlee interrupted their greeting. 'Hang on a minute, you two. How about providing Malone and I with a modicum of information? Would that be too much to ask? What's this nonsense about Mrs Challenger leading the attack on the Raak?'

The Assassin indicated that Roxton should speak first. 'It is rather hard to explain. I should say first that I had no idea Mrs Challenger was operating in space – that is as new to me as it is to you. Do you remember how Anna and I spent time talking together when I returned from Africa?'

We both nodded, Summerlee saying what I could not. 'We suspected the two of you of conducting a love affair.'

Roxton showed no reaction. 'I suppose we should have been more sensitive to the impression we created. Well, chaps, the fact is that my work in Africa, dealing with a few rather unpleasant big game hunters, was done on the orders of Mrs Challenger. You saw me delivering my report. She is the head of Ibis, an organisation dedicated to the fighting of evil all over the world. She recruited me after the episode of the Poison Belt. Ibis is an acronym, the letters standing for the International Bureau of Investigation and Skulduggery.'

'Um,' said Milo the Assassin, 'that's the *Interstellar* Bureau of Investigation and Skulduggery.'

'Ah yes,' said Lord Roxton. 'I suppose it is.'

I finally found my voice to ask, 'What is the

Macabre? If that doesn't sound too foolish.'

This time Milo answered. 'Mrs Anna Challenger's Association for the Bringing-together of Rogues and Eccentrics. If *that* does not sound foolish.'

'That is also what I thought,' said Lord Roxton, 'although I did not know that any of my fellow members were of the alien persuasion!'

'Quite possibly they were not,' said Milo. 'I do not know the extent of the Challenger's organisation on your planet.'

Now more curious than shaken, Lord Roxton asked, 'Is she human? Only Challenger thought he was the first man on the moon, and he would be terribly disappointed to find his wife had beaten him to it!' Professor Summerlee and I laughed rather nervously – we were still finding it hard to adjust to this new perspective on events.

'I am unsure how much to disclose,' said the red-suited agent, 'but I suppose no damage will be done by informing you that Mrs Challenger is indeed human. In fact, to my knowledge this is the first time she has left planet Earth. From what I understand – and you should understand that I may be as wrong in this belief as you were in yours – she had set up the Macabre as an agency on Earth whereby she could bring together certain men and women who she would employ upon various tasks. The previous head of Ibis, the great Hallius Dohander, badly wounded in an encounter with the Raak, was slowly dying and he knew it. As the seconds of his life slipped away, Ibis agents brought word of the organisation they had discovered on Earth – the Macabre – and the genius woman who ran it. Hallius, in his wisdom, commanded his lieutenants to take him to meet her. Before dying he passed on the torch of leadership, entrusting her with his communications equipment and the keys to his spaceship. However, she chose to stay at home in London, where she juggled the twin tasks of housewifery and organising the galactic resistance. She changed the two organisations radically. The existing Macabre group was reformatted as a branch of Ibis, with agents given training appropriate to their activities on Earth. It was the Challenger's decision to keep her agents on Earth ignorant of the big picture, and they never knew that the people training them originated from another planet.' Lord Roxton seemed particularly surprised by this. 'On the other hand, seeing the value of its informal and friendly structure, she expanded a new Macabre outwards into the galaxy, setting up safe houses and meeting places, becoming the means by which agents became friends. She used her organisation there as a template for improving our communi-

cation skills throughout the galaxy. She had managed to run an incredibly efficient bureau of investigation and general skulduggery on a world where, if you'll excuse me saying so, the natives were barely out of the iron age. She had a lot to teach us. At her base on Earth she prepared everything, meeting ambassadors from allied worlds, negotiating for ships and troops, and preparing a strategic plan. When the day of the climactic battle came – today – she got in her spaceship and rushed to lead us. We followed the signal sent by the ring in your pocket.'

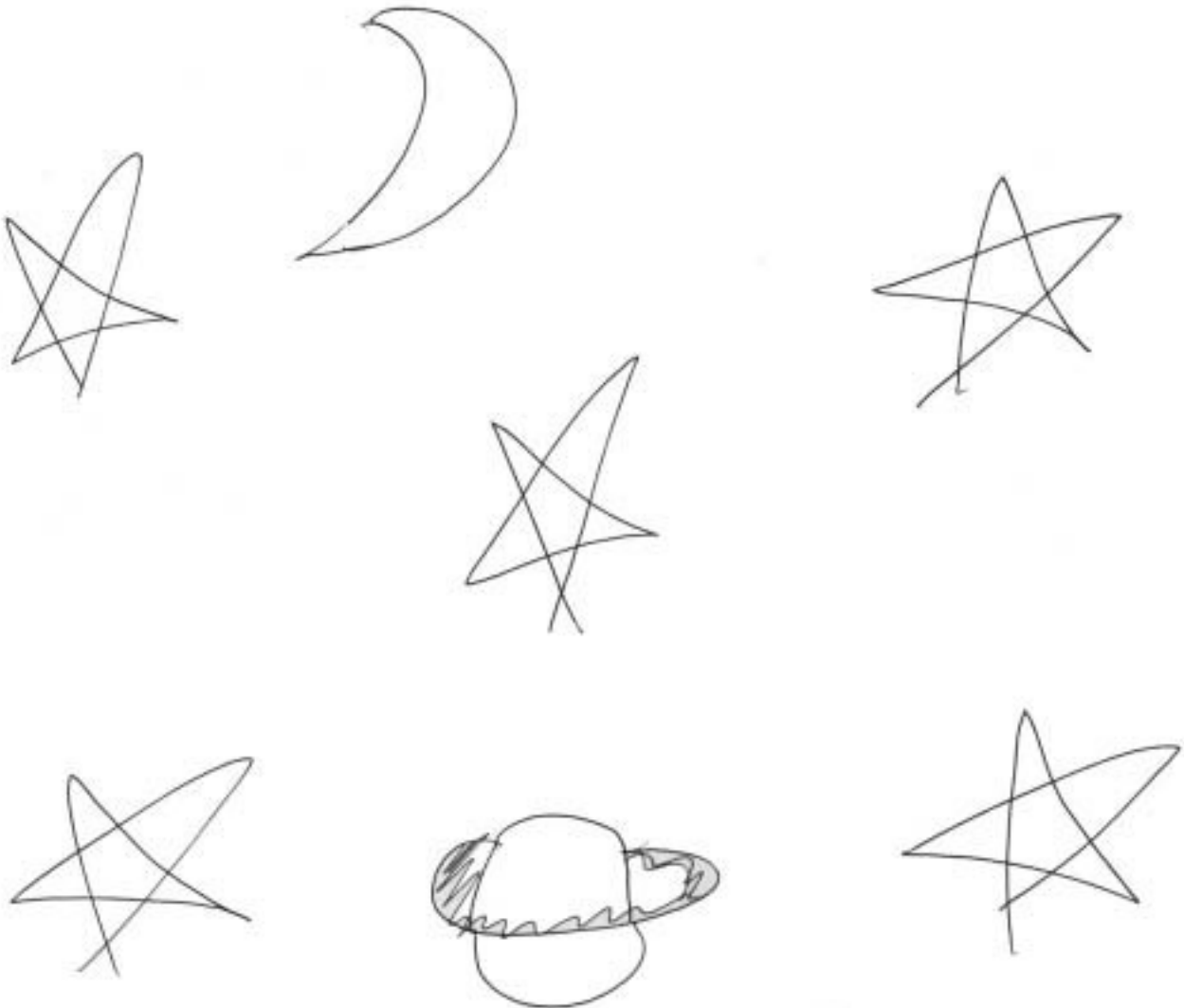
I'd forgotten all about the ring since the Mechanical Housewife told me to take it. I made a mental note to thank her – but for the way in which

she had bent the rules, I would have been incinerated in the very hour of our final victory.

'You can certainly be loquacious when it suits you,' said Professor Summerlee to Milo.

The Ibis agent looked at the machine on his wrist. 'Battle is won. Professor Challenger has been picked up. They'll be here soon.'

'Jolly good,' I said with a happiness that was very nearly boundless. 'This has been a very tiring day and I would really like to settle down with a steaming mug of hot chocolate. I wonder if Mrs Challenger can take time off from saving the universe to cook us all dinner!'



A Slap-Up Meal for Ten!

I stopped Professor Quigg as he exited from Challenger's bedroom, asking, 'How is he, sir? Did you find anything amiss?' As I spoke I noticed that the brain specialist was rather red in the face and that he did not look at all happy.

He harrumphed a couple of times before drawing himself to his full height and saying, 'That is the most outrageous and obnoxious man that it has ever been my displeasure to treat!'

I smiled, thinking that in that case Challenger could not be far from his usual self.

'But how is his health?'

'I wish it were worse,' he said, calming down. Removing themselves from Challenger's presence seemed to have that effect upon people. 'His reflexes seem to be fine, and I can discern no mental slowness – quite the opposite, in fact, to an exasperating degree. I find it difficult to understand why you saw fit to require my services, because he seems perfectly healthy, although a phrenological study indicated that he should have been either a madman, a criminal or a simpleton!'

'Interesting,' I replied. 'Perhaps he was just lucky.'

'Possibly. I must confess that phrenology is beginning to seem a little foolish to me – although I stress that Challenger did not have to point out its failings quite so rudely.'

'It's the only way he knows how.'

'Anyway, as I said, his mental faculties seem unimpaired by whatever problems led you to call upon my services. I presume it was something related to your excellent, if rather incredible, article in the *Gazette* this morning?' He began to button up his coat as he spoke. He was referring, of course, to the truncated account of our adventure of which I have already made mention.

'Let's just say that he lost his head in a crisis, and he wanted to make sure that there were no after-effects. As for my article, I shall tell you in confidence that I left out ninety-nine per cent of the most incredible events.' He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

'Perhaps you will share those events with the world sometime?'

'Possibly, possibly, if the time is right. Are you sure that you would not like to stay for dinner? I

assure you that you would find the company most stimulating.'

'Maybe some other time. It's a very kind invitation, Mr Malone, and I have heard tell far and wide of the meals created by the marvellous Mrs Challenger, but I am afraid that tonight the no less marvellous Mrs Quigg awaits my return.'

'I understand completely, professor. Let me show you to the door.'

He thanked me, and I led the way down the stairs to the peculiar lobby of the Challenger home. He put on his hat, taking it from the top of the totem pole, and picked up his umbrella from where it rested (within an urn which had once contained the ashes of a Teutonic Knight), before saying, 'There was one other thing, Malone, if I may beg your indulgence?'

'Certainly, sir.' It was a pleasure to meet an academic who was so polite! What a contrast to the irascibility and sarcasm of Challenger and Summerlee! Perhaps on our next adventure I would contrive to bring Professor Quigg along, just to have someone around who would make pleasant conversation from time to time! What with Challenger's suspicion of the Mechanical Housewife, Summerlee's needling of Challenger and Roxton, and Lord Roxton's alcohol problems, I was beginning to feel it would be nice to have a new face around!

'For the life of me I cannot imagine why Challenger is wearing that metal band around his neck. I tried to ask him, but... well, you know him better than I.'

'Indeed I do, Professor Quigg. I can imagine his reaction. If anyone asks, he is wearing it in sympathy for the downtrodden peoples of the world. Between you and me, he had a serious accident. It is a revolutionary type of brace to support the neck.'

'I see,' he said, nodding. Assuming a brisker tone, he said, 'Must be off then! Keep in touch – who knows, perhaps one of these days I shall have a story or two for you!'

I bid him goodbye and let him out. He hailed a hansom cab and was driven off into the night. I closed the door and turned to see Challenger glowering at me. Smiling, I asked him, 'How does it feel to have your old body back?'

He peered at me suspiciously. 'Do I have any reason to be angry at you?'

‘Do you need one?’

‘The body feels fine, but the metal one had its uses.’

‘Then I expect that you are glad to be able to keep it.’

‘I am,’ said Challenger, standing down now he realised I was not in the mood for a fight. ‘One thing about this body, though, Malone. It makes me feel terribly belligerent all the time.’

What could one say in the face of such self-knowledge? I opted to say nothing.

‘It may be a chemical thing,’ he speculated. ‘Shall we join the others for the meal? Even though my head no longer needs food, the body does. It was good of Klothe and Melenkius to re-arrange the access and everything.’ Before re-connecting his head to his body, the two engineers had used a molecular displacer to open a gap in the cap on his neck to allow food and drink to pass into his body. It also allowed him to use his own lungs for speaking again. However, his head was still detachable.

‘I wonder how they are enjoying the food,’ I said as we walked through the study in the direction of the dining room.

‘My patience,’ said Challenger with half a smile (which was fifty per cent of a smile more than he usually displayed), ‘would be sorely tried if they did anything but love it. However, that is not to say that I believe they should pretend to enjoy it just because she saved the universe. Far from it. Her food should be enjoyed on its own merits.’

‘And you really didn’t know about her activities?’ I chose that moment to ask as he seemed a little gentler than usual – more likely to respond with something other than a punch in the face. ‘You had never heard of the Macabre or Ibis?’

Challenger replied ruefully, ‘I knew not a jot. Amazing, really, but I suppose that I have neglected her somewhat. I suppose she had to occupy herself during my long journeys around the world. A man should pay an interest in the hobbies of his wife. In any case, there are worse things a wife can get up to in a husband’s absence than saving the universe!’

‘So you are not bitter?’

‘Oh no. Far from it, Malone. It has simply gone to demonstrate the wisdom I showed in choosing such a fine wife! Now let us make the most of one of her many talents!’ But before entering the dining room he stooped to pick up a medium-sized package from where it had sat beneath our four comfortable chairs, now returned to their place in the study.

London has often been said to be a cosmopolitan city, but I doubt that it has ever played host to a more

varied range of guests than it did upon that day. Seated around the Challenger dining table were, as one might expect, Professor Summerlee and Lord Roxton, with places set for myself, Mr George and Mrs Anna Challenger. Less expectedly, at least to a casual observer, would be the other guests who were in attendance. Master Zangpan was there, in his silver shirt and a pair of purple pantaloons, levitating pieces of roast chicken into his mouth. The Mechanical Housewife was there too, seated between the moustachioed mystic and myself. Dressed in elegant black velvet and her head a bare silver, the blonde curls left on Zangpan’s World, she looked more beautiful than ever. She sipped a glass of oil, glancing at me as we entered, but otherwise paying me no special attention. Klothe and Melenkius sat side by side, as ever, apparently engaged in a race to consume the larger proportion of the food. Milo the Assassin had declined to attend, his day job apparently requiring a journey to the far side of the galaxy, but Aikor had accepted the invitation with joy, having never before been permitted to visit Earth, despite its proximity to Ell Ka-Mar. He was dipping a large chunk of bread into some thick Scotch broth, excitedly telling Lord Roxton of his imminent marriage to the handmaiden Jula.

As Challenger entered, everyone there present, myself included, let out a mighty roar, clapped their hands and shouted hurrahs! ‘Hip hip,’ said Lord Roxton, to which came the inevitable reply, ‘Hooray!’ The two of us took our seats to the strains of ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow!’, and Challenger accepted the celebration with good grace.

‘Thank you all,’ he said with a happy smile, and after placing the string-tied parcel beneath his chair, he held out his hands to indicate us all, ‘and you should all thank yourselves, because success would have been unattainable had any single one of you been absent!’

And because quite a bit of wine had been drunk (except by Lord Roxton, who had decided to see if the world seemed different when not seen through an alcoholic haze – and in any case, now that he was no longer keeping secrets from his closest friends he did not feel the same degree of motivation, or compulsion, to hit the bottle) we all began to shake hands and clap each other on the back. We may have acted foolishly, but we had the right to do so after the pressure that had been upon us in the previous weeks and months. Reader, you know by now that the dark secret of which I previously spoke was the possibility of an attack on Earth by the Raak. Although we had scored a decisive victory against them and

shaken the very foundations of their Empire, there remained as yet the chance that a single Raak cruiser might survive the Battle of the Invisible Fleet and make its way to Earth. Hence, I did not publish the full tale until now, when we are certain that no such threat remains. Hence also the fact that we were almost desperate in our merry-making that night, for we knew that on the morrow we must once more be vigilant.

'As vital as all of you were,' said Challenger, raising his voice above the general hubbub, 'I think we are all agreed that one other played the most vital role in this escapade.' He waited for a moment before continuing, as he was drowned out by the cries of 'Hear, hear!' from around the table. 'Not only did she provide the sandwiches which fuelled our initial expeditions to the Moon, she also worked tirelessly and selflessly here in London over a number of years to put together the mighty fighting force which annihilated the Raak! And if I am not mistaken, here she comes now with a trolley full of food! Ladies and gentlemen, I give you – Mrs Challenger!'

The commander-in-chief of Ibis came through the door to such acclaim that one would have thought us a bunch of starving street urchins eager for a good square meal. Her achievements were in no doubt – she had done what not even her illustrious predecessor had managed. She had scored a victory against the Raak which would safeguard the galaxy for the next century! Additionally, the food on the trolley was so aromatic and mouth-watering that not even noticing that Zangpan had brought one of his speaking trolleys could detract from my appreciation.

The evening progressed as one would expect, with much celebration and jubilation, and a lot of singing and joking. At one point Challenger had to be dissuaded from dancing on the table, on the double grounds that he was too heavy and that we were all still eating. I found time to speak to the Mechanical Housewife about our relationship, and although she pointed out that there were difficulties to be considered, she agreed to spend some time in London with me while we made our decisions. Mrs Challenger was the centre of attention, every guest was interested in her covert activities and they all vied to tell her all about themselves – although Challenger had sketched out his adventures to her during the return from the Raraak-Ra system. She was fascinated to learn about Zangpan's World, something of which her organisation had no information.

'The nature of Zangpan's World,' she said, during one of the more serious moments of the party – for such moments always come (usually about an hour

after the alcohol has run out, although not in this case), 'solves a mystery which had both puzzled and distressed me greatly. When the tracking device I installed in the ring stopped transmitting after your landing on the Moon, I had assumed the four of you dead, destroyed by something or other. I knew the Raak had been there, although I had known nothing about the city of Ell Ka-Mar.' Professor Challenger tried not to meet her eye, thinking of how easily we could have dropped in on her before travelling to Planet 93. 'By the way, Aikor, I so greatly regret not having visited your world. I wish this had all happened soon enough to save the place you called home.'

'That is all right,' replied Aikor, displaying no ill feeling. 'Ell Ka-Mar will live forever in our memories, our poetry and our art. And we have you to thank for hearing how our original home, the ravaged and scarred Planet 93, took a score of the abominable Raak battlecruisers with her when she finally died. There is sadness for the past, but that does not cloud our joy for the future. Our new home is a wonderful place. Perhaps you will visit us there sometime.'

Before Mrs Challenger was able to reply, her unruly spouse was getting to his feet, tapping a wine glass with a spoon. We all laughed after he hit it too hard and caused it to crack.

'You have our attention,' said Lord Roxton. 'No need to break anything else.'

Challenger pushed out his chest and grasped his lapels with his hands. It was his dreaded speech-making position. 'Some time ago, Master Zangpan was kind enough to take four weary travellers into his home. I responded with suspicion and violence, making him unhappy. This has preyed upon my mind, and so, upon our return to London last night, when Malone went to drop his report off at the newspaper, I gave him a substantial sum of money and bid him visit a tailor's shop. As I requested, he hammered upon the door and cast stones at the bedrooms on the upper floor until the proprietor opened up for him. Offering the man an outrageous amount of money, Malone handed over some plans I had drawn up during our return from the Battle of the Invisible Fleet. That tailor worked throughout the night and for all of today until the item was ready. Shortly after the government came to collect the *Rocket* (thanks to Klothe and Melenkius for removing all working parts before they did so), and shortly before the visit of Professor Quigg, I took myself down to the tailor's and collected the finished garment. I have the parcel which contains it beneath my chair at this very moment.' He bent down and picked it up, before

walking around the table to where Master Zangpan sat. He handed over the parcel. 'I hope that you will accept this token of the sincerity of my apologies and regret.'

'I do not know what to say, Master George,' said Master Zangpan, clearly pleased with the parcel. We all cried, 'Open it!' as he was showing no signs of doing so under his own steam. 'Okay then,' he said, 'I will! No problem!'

He carefully removed the string and unwrapped the paper to reveal the spectacular jacket that Challenger had bought for him. He stood up so that

he could let the jacket open out to its full length. It was a delicious burgundy and velvet smoking jacket, sewn with golden thread and having golden buttons. Zangpan's favourite symbol, the yin and yang, the two halves that were one, were embroidered upon the cuffs and around the edge of the collar and lapels. It was the finest piece of clothing any of us had ever seen, and more than one of the people at that table wept a tear as Master Zangpan put it on.

'Now,' said Professor Challenger to no one in particular. 'Bring out the cigars!'

THE
END

Quiet, the Tin Can Brains are Hunting! Part I

The Message Brought by Nanotus the Giant

Nanotus the Giant stood panting in Mrs Challenger's kitchen, the huge gusts of his breath quite blowing her hair out of its bun.

"Calm down, dear Nanotus," she said. "You have done exceedingly well to make it this far."

The giant, while not yet being able to catch his breath enough to speak, screwed his face up in a gesture of thanks. She went to a cupboard and took out some sachets of herbal tea. By the time she had filled the kettle and laid out some cups and saucers on the table, Nanotus was almost ready to speak.

"Here, take a seat," she implored. He made a move for one, but a tiny hand on his hip steered him away from his original choice. "Take the chair George usually sits in. It already has a measure of reinforcement."

The wooden chair creaked ominously, but held.

"I had to run here," said the giant, "because the thing I've learnt is so important." Though Mrs Challenger had no difficulty in focusing on his words, a small river of sweat pouring from his brow and pooling in the shirt he wore did its best to distract her. If she were not so foolishly faithful to George, she considered, this job might be even more fun than it already was!

Nanotus seemed to be waiting for her to respond. In fact, he seemed to have been waiting for a few seconds. Perhaps she had been distracted after all... This would never do! Mentally, she slapped herself

around the face, took a cold bath and retied her bun, twice as tight as before.

"Important enough to run, you say!"

"That's right," answered the giant. "I ran all the way from Andromeda. News this important couldn't wait. The news I bring could have dire consequences for every living being in the universe!"

"So," Mrs Challenger said dryly, "we have established its importance. There is one danger, though, which does not seem to threaten."

"What do you mean, Mrs Challenger?"

"I mean that there seems little danger of you actually getting to the point and telling me what the danger is!"

The hangdog expression she received in response turned her sarcasm to guilt.

"Oh, I am sorry, Nanotus," she said at once. "I'm used to dealing with such brutes, you would not imagine! Here, drink some tea, take all the time you need!" She made haste to pour water into the kettle, and then tea into his cup. Not wishing to risk the delicate china handle of the cup between his gigantic fingers, he lifted the whole apparatus, saucer and all, to his lips, before continuing.

"That's all right, Mrs Challenger. I suppose I might have been milking the moment a bit. I don't know how much you know about me, but I haven't had a pretty life. I've been a bad person. And this has been my first chance to be a hero."

That is quite the understatement, thought Mrs Challenger. If she recalled the contents of her files on him correctly, Nanotus had for many years been renowned as one of the most depraved reprobates in the galaxy, living a life of crime and debauchery that left him a wanted man in five galaxies and a father on one hundred and thirty-seven planets. A stray wicked thought enquired whether she might not wish to make the figure one hundred and thirty-eight, but she swatted it away like an impertinent wasp, despite the delectable way in which the sweat stained the shirt on his back.

“I assume Milon sent you?”

“Yes. He wanted me to get a message to you, whatever happened to him.”

Mrs Challenger began to pace the room hurriedly, straightening crockery on the shelves as she went. Nanotus gave up on the cup and saucer, and took his second drink directly from the teapot.

“And what has happened to him? To the best of your knowledge?”

Nanotus put the teapot back down and shook his mighty head sadly. “I wish I knew. When last I saw him he was in the clutches of the tin can brains—”

“The tin can brains!” exclaimed Mrs Challenger. She ran round the table to face Nanotus full on. “Are you sure? We thought it would be centuries before they posed any kind of serious threat!”

“There is no doubt,” replied the giant, deep regret in his voice. “And there is no hope.” He bowed his head. Tears dropped from his eyes, hitting the carpet and splashing Mrs Challenger’s skirts.

“Now then, Nanotus,” said the lady as sternly as she could manage. “Chin up! There’s a brave giant! There is always hope! After all, that is why I am here. Hope is my job! Now why don’t you tell me exactly what happened?”

“Well,” said Nanotus, “it began like this. Milon the Assassin had been recuperating on his home planet of Golgokkamok following the Battle of the Invisible Fleet. Suddenly he received a message, and was summoned to the local Ibis base. I was there to toast his departure; in those days, he was quite the hero. Unfortunately, his idiotic sidekick, Zaaloon the Robotoface—”

“Oh no,” said Mrs Challenger, “he isn’t still operational, is he?”

“I’m afraid so,” replied Nanotus.

“That pile of junk has done more damage to the galaxy than all the tin can brains put together!”

“Hardly true,” said Nanotus.

“What do you know?” said Mrs Challenger angrily. “Have you ever tried to cook with him in the

kitchen?”

“Well, aside from that,” said Nanotus. “Anyway, as I was saying, Zaaloon had left the mega-wave on after cooking Milon’s farewell dinner. Somehow the automatic cut-off failed and the mega-wave’s core went critical, causing an explosion which devastated half the planet.”

“And I thought he damaged *my* kitchen,” said Mrs Challenger.

“By that time Milon and Zaaloon were far away of course. I woke from the concussion that had felled me to find myself buried under tons of rubble. Fortunately I am entirely impervious to radiation, so that wasn’t an issue, but upon working my way up through the ruins of my home, I found that the other inhabitants of Golgokkamok, or at least the inhabitants on the continent on which I lived, had been transformed into hungry flesh-eating zombies. As you can imagine, they were pleased to see a big fellow like me, and as I stood among my incinerated possessions fighting them off, I vowed to have my revenge upon Milon the Assassin.”

“Do you think,” began Mrs Challenger airily, “that they would have grilled your flesh, or parboiled it?”

Ignoring her, Nanotus continued. “To cut a long story short, I chased Milon through the galaxy, hoping to end his life before someone beat me to it. But at the last, I realised the importance of his mission, and tried to assist, rather than kill, him. Brave to the very end, in the very clutches of the tin can brains, he had thought of nothing but sending me here to your aid, with the message I have brought.”

“Well, Nanotus,” said Mrs Challenger, stroking her chin, “it is marvellous, really, really marvellous that you made it. I think I have the gist of what happened here. There is one thing – did you have any physical contact with Milon the Assassin before leaving him to an agonising but courageous death?”

“I did, in fact,” replied Nanotus, rather surprised. “He slapped me on the back, rather too firmly, I felt. I still have the bruise.”

“As I thought,” said Mrs Challenger, raising an eyebrow. “Milon, you old hound,” she laughed. “I might have known you would have been a step ahead of them all!”

Nanotus was completely baffled.

Mrs Challenger put the empty cup to one side and asked Nanotus to hold the saucer. “Just wait there a moment,” she said. “All will be revealed.” She rolled up her sleeves and leant in to grab a double handful of the giant’s shirt.

“Hey there,” he said, “Mrs Challenger, I must protest! Your actions may put my life at risk, and

hence I must complain most stridently!"

She laughed. "So the reputation of my husband has even reached the Andromedan galaxy? As I said, wait a moment." She began to squeeze the shirt, tighter and tighter, until the saucer was filled with a puddle of the giant's sweat. Carefully taking it from his hands, Mrs Challenger laid the saucer on the table before going swiftly to scrub from her fingernails to her elbow joints.

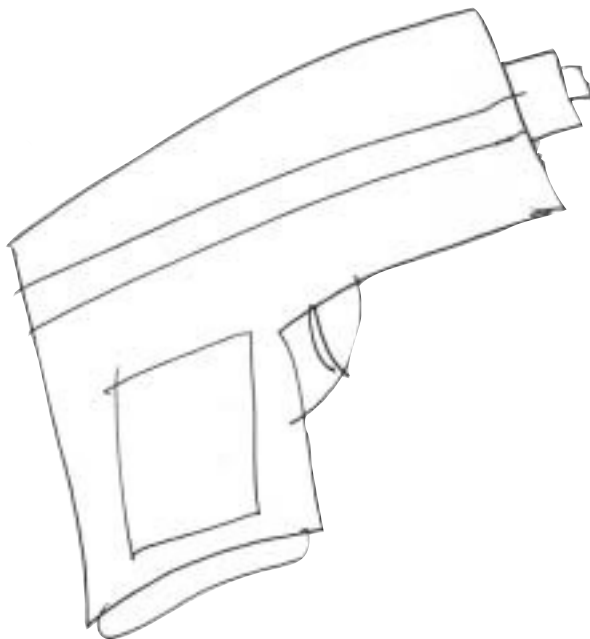
"Nanotus," she said, rubbing soap over her exquisite forearms, "since you arrived, something has been bothering me. Your sweat. I could not stop myself from thinking about it."

Nanotus got to his feet in a hurry, but realised that there was nowhere else to go – if this woman could not help, then the universe was lost – and so sat back down, despondently. Mrs Challenger did not notice, and moved onto her nails.

"At first I thought it a mere girlish infatuation, which would hardly have been that unusual, with such a big strong hero as yourself being concerned. But then I have never been one to let myself get carried away like that. Even in the first flush of my love for George" – she stretched out her fingers and admired them; not too long, she thought, just perfectly in proportion with the size of her wrist and her dainty palm; she wore the nails short, because she was often, as today, up to her elbows in dirty work – "I kept a cool and steady head." She span round to grab a towel, flourishing it like a captured ensign. "It had to be something else!"

"Mrs Challenger, you lost me at the sweat," shrugged Nanotus.

She wagged one of those perfectly proportioned



fingers in his face. "Then you must find your own way, Sir Giant! This train of thought does not stop for stragglers!"

Her hands dried, she sat back down at the table, and pulled the saucer across to her. "As yet this liquid is inactive. We must stimulate it into activity."

Leaping back to her feet, she indicated a newly fitted electric lamp upon the wall. "Would you do the honours, Nanotus? Please rip this lamp from the wall, but ensure the cable connecting to it is not severed."

"Yes, Mrs Challenger."

"Thank you. Now, if I remove this wire from here, and dip it in here..."

"Astonishing!"

"I bet you never suspected you had it in you!"

The most incredible thing had happened – the face of Milon the Assassin, complete with lacquered eyebrows, had appeared in the saucer, and appeared to be mouthing words.

"What is it?" asked Nanotus.

Mrs Challenger tapped the side of her nose meaningfully. "The very latest and most secret development in Ibis technology, intelligent information carrying microbes... they are carried under a fingernail. The agent activates them, and records a message. Injected into a suitable host, the microbes multiply, then begin to make their way through the epidermis."

"So he stabbed me with his fingernail?" said Nanotus, rubbing his back, rather put out.

"I am afraid so," smiled Mrs Challenger. "But it was in a good cause!" She peered into the saucer. "To get the full message I shall have to feed this sweat through my Ibis computing machine." Turning back to Nanotus, she finished her explanation. "Those of us in the organisation for whom messages may be destined have been treated with complementary microbes which react, as you have seen, to the presence of the message-carriers."

"I have strode across the stars," said Nanotus, "but I am still amazed."

* * * * *

Mrs Challenger thought about what she had learnt from the message from Milon the Assassin. Clearly this was a case in which she would have been well-advised to involve her very top operatives. Unfortunately the very best, the cream of the cream, were already out in the field, that is to say, her husband and his friends. Some of those currently available to her she was far from sure about. On the other hand, there were some very promising prospects who were fresh out of her training

academy. She switched off the Ibis computing machine and called the butler (one newly employed, and not yet scared off by the tantrums of her fearsome husband), asking him to prepare the carriage. The dreadful thing was that whoever she sent to rescue Milon the Assassin faced almost certain death. This was something about which she felt terribly sad, but then she had always accepted that saving the universe on a regular basis, as head of the Interstellar Bureau of Investigation and Skulduggery, would never be an easy job. After all, she had only been entrusted with the job as a result of tending her predecessor, Hallius Dohander, through his own death pains.

* * * * *

Professor Samson Quigg, the noted brain specialist, was at that moment relaxing in his study, pouring whisky down his throat with little or no regard for the stupendous fate which was at that moment hurtling across London in his direction. (If he had known anything of it, the whisky would surely have been poured twice as quickly!) He had a thick, leather-bound volume in his lap, a volume that looked like it should have been extremely dusty, but which in fact had obviously been pored over to such an extent that dust was deprived its natural home.

"It is impossible," he cried aloud. "This book is nothing but the purest bunkum! Father, you lied! Grandfather, you lied! Oh, that I had been stifled at birth!" From beside the skirting board on the other side of the room a tortoise, comfortably ensconced in a box lined with hay, watched him impassively. "Damn you!" he raved at the reptile.

He flung the book into the roaring fire with an incoherent shout. He watched as the flames tickled its corners, then threw himself from the chair and dragged the book to safety. He pulled the sleeves of his jacket over his hands and frantically patted out the sparks of fire.

Disgusted with himself, he kicked the book under a couch and retreated to his favourite chair, his hands to his face to cover his shame. There was no way for him to find happiness, he felt it more strongly now than ever. He could never hope to complete the researches of his father; he had even begun to lose faith in the very *possibility* of success. As his head sank into his hands, the tips of his fingers struggled to find his receding hairline, the constant evidence of his lifelong failure.

"Samson, can I come in?"

It was Mrs Quigg at the door. Calm, patient and faithful as she was to a fault, he would never let her

see his weakness. Indeed, he kept his true researches, and hence his failure, an absolute secret from her. He got to his feet and composed himself as best as he could.

"Come in, darling," he called.

The door opened, and in she came, a sweet and homely woman, as yet unbowed by the evidences of her husband's disaffection that were discovered to her every day of her life.

"How are you, sweetheart?" she asked.

"I'm fine, Lottie, don't bother yourself with a silly old fool like me." He pushed her hand to one side and pushed past her into the hallway. She followed him, obedient as a village idiot following a peddler to the town limits. "I just dozed off, and woke to find the newspaper slipping into the hearth... half-asleep as I was, it gave me quite a fright. I think I dreamt of the inferno..."

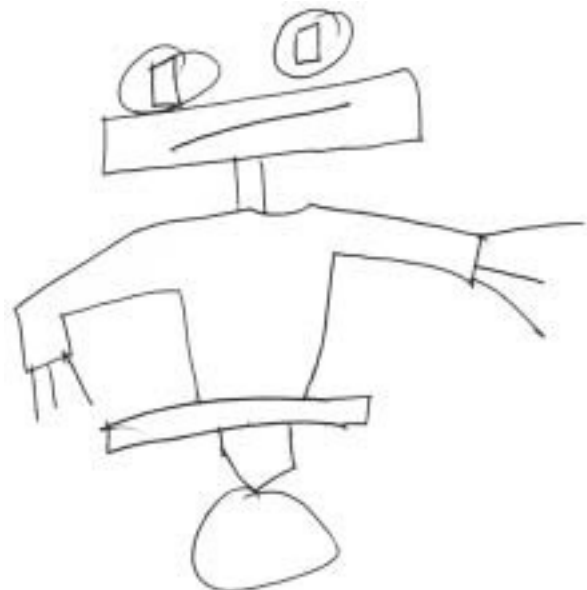
Once in the drawing room, he headed for the drinks cabinet, and poured himself a glass of brandy. Lottie was soon at his side, looking up at his tired face with imprecating eyes.

"Are you sure this is good for your health, dear? The way you shut yourself up in there every evening..."

"I need time to think," he said angrily, sweeping past her to the other side of the room. She gave up her pursuit and sank onto a divan.

"You know best, Samson," she said, blinking slowly.

With a gulp of brandy came a surge of conscience. Did he have the right to make her so miserable? She might thank him in the end, when his research was complete, and he was able to tell her everything,



show her everything, share everything... Till then, though the silence between them must persist, must the pain?

He took another swallow of brandy, but rather than refill it, he went to his wife's side. He knelt by the divan and took her hand. He kissed it gently, allowing the warmth of his breath to play over her knuckles.

"I am sorry, darling, you know I am," she said. "I don't mean to be so demanding of you."

"The only fault is mine," he told her. "I'm driven, Lottie, you can never know how much." He held her hand against his cheek. She began to chuckle; his whiskers tickled. He came to a sudden resolution. "Let's go away!"

She laughed; perhaps, she thought, for the first time that year. His preoccupation had quickly come to over-determine her life, though she endured yet.

"Darling Lottie, I mean it. Let's go away together, to Brighton or Yarmouth, as we did twenty years ago."

"Before our parents knew..."

"Yes," he said, a cloud spinning briefly across his brow, "before our parents knew."

"Oh, Samson, it is a glorious idea. Do you think

we could fix things? Could we? It's nothing that cannot be fixed, is it?"

"Of course not, Lottie. Of course not. I'll fix it. Why don't you go and pack? We could leave in an hour."

She hopped from one foot to the other, just as she had at the age of 18, when he had proposed a similar trip, though with less honourable intentions... She clapped her hands together. "Let's not even tell the help, Samson! They'll be so amazed!"

As she ran up the stairs to prepare, Professor Quigg reflected that he did actually feel a bit better for the effort. Was love, once released from repression and expressed, its own benefit? Or did feigned love have the same beneficial effect?

He pushed the thought aside. Did it matter? He felt almost happy for once and decided to make the effort to appreciate it. Even if it was just the brandy, by God they had brandy in Brighton. Whole bottles of it!

This tawdry epiphany achieved, he did not hear the ring of the doorbell, and so was quite surprised when Mrs Challenger was shown into the drawing room. He quickly poured himself another glass of brandy.

Quigg Time!

This is terrific, thought Professor Quigg to himself. Absolutely terrific. How did it go so very wrong? Could it possibly be any worse? Upon reflection, it could have been. If the keen ears of Nanotus had not, almost subliminally, picked up the tiny whirring and cranking noises made by the tin can brains as they waited in ambush in a typically foggy London alley, things might have been a good deal worse. As it was, they had dashed into a riverside warehouse, one of those that lined the Thames, and were now stuck behind a dozen packing crates hastily piled up by the giant as a makeshift bunker wall. As it was, things were bad. If they had fallen into the hands of the enemy, they would have been so very much worse as to fall into the category of downright inconvenient. And Professor Quigg hated nothing so much as inconvenience.

The deadly laser guns of the tin can brains blasted and splintered the cases more and more with every second that passed. He estimated that there were as many as five of the silver-black psychotics left out there, although Nanotus was doing his darndest to reduce their numbers, despite the difficulty of having had no weapons with him – they had far from expected such an a peremptory attack from the tin can brains, who had up until now been biding their time for centuries.

Having worked a hole in the back of one of the crates, Nanotus had been intrigued to discover the contents to be small glass balls, which Quigg told him (after several attempts to make himself heard above the screaming sound of the laser blasts) were marbles, beloved of schoolboys everywhere.

“They raise ‘em mean on this planet,” snarled the giant as he grabbed a handful and flung it at the most exposed of the attacking tin can brains. The first shot had been unreasonably successful, completely smashing the eye-pieces of the metal monster. It retreated from the warehouse, leaving the others to continue their attacks from a safe distance.

Safe for them, thought Nanotus. His tireless enemies saw no point in taking unnecessary risks; they could wait till the turn of the next century for the humans to fail; their damnable ball bearings would still be running freely and well-oiled. They would keep clear of his marbles, and move in for the kill when they chose.

“Professor,” he shouted above the din. “We have to get out!”

Even if the giant had not had such a deafening voice, Quigg would still have been able to take a good guess at the direction of his thoughts.

The pressure was upon him now. Nanotus pointed out one of the tin can brains, hooking itself upon a chain dangling from a pulley, a mechanism intended for lifting heavy crates, and helping men to avoid breaking their backs, but, it seemed, with an irony too awful to savour, destined to assist in the destruction of every man in the universe and quite possibly the universe along with them! From what he had learned in his briefing from Mrs Challenger, he knew that the dreadful ambition of the tin can brains would never be satisfied until it had brought about its own annihilation! One of its comrades made haste to crank the chain. Already blasts from the others were cracking the brickwork of the wall behind them. Chips blew into their faces, causing tiny scratches.

Damn, damn and dagnammit!, thought Nanotus to himself. If they didn’t do something soon, the tin can brain would be hoisted up and swung above them, able to pick them off at his pleasure (if those things felt pleasure). He was doing his utmost to be understanding, since he knew that Professor Quigg was fresh out of the Ibis academy, but really, this performance was putting his life at risk! And the mission had barely begun! Not for the first time that evening, Nanotus wondered how Milton the Assassin had come to fall in with these amateurs.

He barely knew why he was here himself, but he knew it had something to do with Mrs Challenger’s charming personality, and something to do with rescuing Milton. They had been on their way to recruit the third member of their team when the tin can brain ambush had begun.

“Think, Quigg, think!”

Nanotus shouted it, but Quigg was thinking the same thing. Honestly, he thought at the same time, thought on a different level, perhaps if the beastly giant thought for itself for a minute instead of waiting for him to pull a rabbit out of the hat... But the other line of thought came to a conclusion first, and so this one was forgotten as quickly as a conversation with Mrs Quigg.

Despite throwing himself into action, he found

mental time to berate himself for being so mean-spirited with regard to his own wife... but then if anyone was mean-spirited, was it not she? Was it his fault if Mrs Challenger sparkled so as to push her own friend into the shadows whenever she entered a room?

Though pulling a miniature chemistry set (product of Ibis) from an inner pocket of his jacket, he allowed his brain to tick over the Brighton question... why could Lottie not see how important this mission was? Or that in comparison Brighton, the holiday, the marriage, even Lottie herself, were all less than nothing, mere sparks quickly fading as an inferno raged all around? Mrs Challenger, he felt sure, would understand. Mrs Challenger, he thought, might even have helped with his desperate researches, rather than have been the unwitting block to all his ambitions that Lottie had become.

Quickly he mixed together a few particular chemicals in a tiny plastic test tube, before jamming it through the hole in the crate of marbles as far as his arm would reach. Nanotus looked at him quizzically, one eyebrow leaping into the air like a frisky dolphin asking a question which Quigg answered with a quick movement of his hands. Nanotus nodded, and the eyebrow fell back, though luckily no eyes were hurt in the process.

"Lead the way!" shouted Quigg, pointing to the brick wall at their backs.

Nanotus winced, then put his shoulder to the wall at a spot where the brickwork had taken a particularly brutal blast. He winced some more as the wall began to give, and even groaned as the wall gave way and a couple of bricks tried to fall into the gap, heading for the ground by way of the top of his head.

Quigg dashed through the gap into the night. "Quick," he called back over his shoulder as he ran, "there's no time to dawdle, Nanotus!"

With a scowl, unseen by anyone save your ever-present narrator, Nanotus sprang from the hole in the wall, letting the remaining bricks fall as they might. Though his great legs ate up the distance as quickly as you might have expected, one of the tin can brains managed to reach the gap in the wall, and let the giant have it as best he could in the darkness. Winged, Nanotus fell to the ground, to Quigg's frustration and, no doubt, his own consternation. Quigg, after a quick glance back and a shrug of the shoulders, continued to run. Nanotus fully expected the tin can brains to advance across the scruffy, half-bare muddy land and finish him off, using their lasers to slice him up like an extra-juicy joint of ham...

But happily time did not allow him the pleasure of dwelling on that image, as the tin can brain at the

hole in the wall shattered in an explosion of a thousand marbles, the chemicals left by Professor Quigg in the case unleashing their pent-up fury to devastating effect. The robotic monster screamed in mechanical agony before falling to the floor, lifeless. Before the scream had quite died away it was echoed by the howls of its comrades... Sounds like we got 'em all, thought Nanotus happily, before passing out.

* * * * *

"So," said Professor Quigg, "that's just about where we're up to. Mrs Challenger picked me to lead this mission, but she thinks you are essential to the team if we hope to succeed. Admittedly, we have already successfully destroyed a hunting party of murderous tin can brains, but it was tight, and with you at our side, I think we would really have given those tinpot fools what for!"

Nanotus smiled in what he hoped was a supportive and encouraging manner. The scabs that littered his face might well have rendered this a less than pleasant sight to the intended recruit, had he not seen much worse things in the course of a long career fighting crime in the back alleys of London (and Istanbul, Karachi, and Chicago, to name just a few).

"Great!" said Detective Jim Grimm. "I'm ready to go right now! Things have been quiet down at the Yard since I put away Professor Helium and his Noble Gases... did you hear about that case?"

Professor Quigg had. He regarded Professor Helium as a contemporary, a deluded and psychotic contemporary, of course, but a man sharing at least some of the same ideals and values.

"He could have been a great man," he said rather sadly.

"I'll say," said Grimm. "He could have been the greatest scientist of our time, but for his insane desire for power..."

"Well, maybe not the greatest..." responded Quigg.

"Of course you're right," said Grimm to a smile from Quigg. "I was forgetting the marvellous Professor Challenger! Who could ever hope to match his magnificent achievements!"

Nanotus tried and failed to hide a smirk, but then a smirk that big would really have taken some hiding, and the living room of Detective Jim offered little cover. There was just enough furniture to get by, a few chairs, a writing table and a padlocked weapons cabinet being the sum total of Grimm's necessities. None of the chairs looking strong enough to hold him – giants being, after all, few and far between in 19th century London, and far from ubiq-

uitous in the early 20th – Nanotus had settled for sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor. One of his ears was still ringing slightly, but apart from that the explosion had left him reasonably hale and hearty. None of the cuts to his face had been too serious, most of them scabbing over as they continued the journey along the riverside to Grimmatt’s residence.

“And then there was Mr Nemor,” continued Grimmatt. “He too was a genius of no little repute!”

“Yes, yes,” said Quigg. “So will you be able to join us on this mission? I would so hate to have to start off without you if you are too busy.”

Nanotus could only admire Grimmatt’s imperviousness to Quigg’s sarcasm. “It was the darndest thing with Nemor, though... just disappeared into thin air... doubtless one of his experiments backfired... That was one case I just had to leave in the bottom drawer of the cabinet...”

“Fascinating,” said Quigg unconvincingly.

“You know, I only finished the training a few months ago. To be picked for such a blamed important mission is a real thrill for the old pipes! In this day and age, it’s all too easy for the quality of effort I bring to a case to go to waste. Point me at the worst of the villains and let me rip!”

Nanotus clenched a fist and punched the air, shouting “Well done that man!” Luckily, as I pointed out earlier, he was sitting on the floor, and so the ornamented ceiling escaped unharmed.

“Shhhh,” said Grimmatt, putting a finger to his lips. “We wouldn’t want to wake the housekeeper. She turned in early today.”

* * * * *

This is probably a good time to tell you about Detective Jim Grimmatt, because there is hardly enough space to tell the whole tale, and there may well not be room to tell his story later. Born forty-four years and one hundred and seventeen days before his first appearance in this novel, Detective Jim Grimmatt had known right from the off that he would be an officer of the law. The gossip at Scotland Yard had it that on being born he rounded up the doctors, nurses and Mr and Mrs Grimmatt and demanded the identity of the perpetrator... Of course, he wasn’t called Detective Jim Grimmatt then. That didn’t come for a few years, when as a toddler he made his first citizen’s arrest (and *this* story is documented fact, as researched by your author in the annals of Fleet Street). A vicious miscreant, having so far been successful in robbing a bank, made the mistake of making his getaway along a route too close to that of the young hero’s peram-

bulator. One well-placed teddy bear later (young Jimmy had begun to think he might be growing out of it anyway) and the budding detective’s first apprehension, the first of so many hundreds to come, was accomplished (with the help of a paving stone and at the cost to the villain of a severely cracked head). From then on he was known to the whole nation as Detective Jim Grimmatt, even, oddly enough, for the few weeks after joining the force that his official rank was just constable. (Foiling an attempt by the infamous Manx Dan to steal the crown jewels quickly led the superintendents of Scotland Yard to correct the oversight.)

* * * * *

The case of the tin can brains, of course, was of such urgent importance that Detective Grimmatt would have had no difficulty in securing a secondment to the forces of Ibis for the duration of the crisis. However, Mrs Challenger had, via Professor Quigg, sent her advice that it would be better to take a leave of absence. Dire as the danger was to the people of Earth, she saw little point in panicking them over something nobody could do absolutely anything about. Nobody, that is, except the three stalwarts she had selected for the mission.

The detective quickly wrote his superiors a message to the effect that he had been offered a sudden and unmissable opportunity to travel, and that he would be grateful if they would excuse the lateness of his notice. Given his track record, he felt sure he would not return to face censure. And if he did, it would take nothing but a quick call from Mrs Challenger to the Prime Minister to fix the situation.

The message handed to the housekeeper to be sent post haste, the three fellows set off. The first order of business was to arrange suitable apparel for Nanotus the Giant, whose clothes, never the height of fashion, had fared badly during the destruction of his planet, and the pursuit across the galaxy of Milon the Assassin, not to mention his return to Earth and the subsequent attack of the tin can brains. Mrs Challenger had provided them with a well-filled purse, so London was at his mercy.

A brisk walk, a quick and cramped trip on the underground, and a second walk later, the three had reached New Oxford Street, and were shown into Professor Quigg’s favourite tailors, Pollopp & Son. Given the size of the task and the money available, Mr Pollopp himself came out to meet the customers. He was a short thin man, the bald roof of his head tickled at the sides by tufts of hair curling up from behind his ears. He wore no spectacles, but gave the

impression of having accidentally left a pair at home.

"My friend here is a little on the large side," Quigg informed Mr Pollopp, quite unnecessarily.

Mr Pollopp clapped his hands together eagerly. "A challenge! How one loves a challenge!"

"How one does," said Quigg. "Mr Nanotus requires some sensible and hard-wearing travelling clothes; we are about to embark on a long and quite possibly hazardous voyage."

"Oh my," said Mr Pollopp, "how interesting. Somewhere exciting, eh?"

Grimmett coughed. "I hope not," he said emphatically.

While Mr Pollopp got on with making the clothes, Nanotus, Grimmett and Quigg went to have a spot of lunch in a nearby public house, the Crouching Hound. It mainly catered for working-men taking their lunches – the three travellers selecting it for the publican's obvious lack of concern as to the niceness of its patrons' garments.

"Are you both ready for this mission?" asked Grimmett as they waited for pies and steaks to be brought to their table. He took a gulp of his beer as Nanotus and Quigg looked at each other. It tasted pretty good. He was far from sure about his colleagues. Quigg seemed rather flaky, and Nanotus... well, Nanotus he had some ideas about. He had a shiftiness about him that Grimmett had seen before, on a thousand different faces.

Nanotus was the first to reply. "I realise you have your doubts about me, Detective Grimmett. You know enough about my background to know that I haven't always fought on the side of the angels. But on the planet of the tin can brains I had an epiphany of sorts... seeing my friend and enemy Milon the Assassin sacrifice himself like that made me realise what it was all about. I think you need me on this mission. And even if I have doubts about myself, I trust Mrs Challenger's judgement of me."

"That's good enough for me," said Grimmett. "What about you, Quigg?"

"I don't have to justify my place on this mission to you," said Quigg, as the barmaids brought over their meals. He began to pick at the food, examining it like an entomologist would his samples.

"Quite right, you don't," said Grimmett. "But there'll come a point in the next few weeks when my life will depend on you, or where your life might depend on me, and we'll both be a whole lot more comfortable in that situation if we are comfortable with each other."

"Don't worry about me," said Quigg without looking up. "I've been waiting for this opportunity all my life."

Nanotus and Grimmett shared a quick glance and shrugged, before starting work on their pies.

Travelling Through the Space-Time Continuum

Do you remember how Nanotus the Giant said that he had run all the way from the Andromeda galaxy to reach Mrs Challenger's kitchen? Perhaps you didn't take him literally, but perhaps you stopped a moment to wonder what he meant. This chapter is dedicated to those who did.

Sitting in the middle of Hyde Park, children laughing nearby, parents doing their best to stop worrying, young lovers doing their best to pretend they were alone, Detective Grimmert found it hard to believe that he was about to leave the planet for the first time. He found it just as difficult to understand how he was able to contemplate the possibility of doing so without going stark raving mad.

Mrs Challenger would have been able to explain his calmness – the Ibis training which he had undergone had included a course of hypnosis sessions, though he had not realised it. Months before introducing each student to the more bizarre aspects of their work – aliens, time travel, space travel – the notions were implanted at a sub-conscious level of the student's brain. So when the time came for the conscious brain to be told, for example, of the existence of aliens living, not just on other planets but also on our own, there had already been ample time for the sub-conscious to safely deal with it.

It was now the turn of Nanotus to ask if his comrades-in-arms were ready. Nicely turned out in a dark green suit of thick cotton, he was looking particularly dashing and heroic, and neither felt it necessary to question his taking the lead at this point.

"This is going to be very difficult at first," he warned them. "It will be extremely disorientating until you get the hang of it."

"Fine," said Quigg.

"Let's go," said Grimmert.

"Right," said Nanotus.

He opened his bag, a leather satchel made for him by Pollopp & Son, into which he had transferred the contents of the pockets of his discarded clothes. One of the items he now took from inside, after a quick look round to make sure no-one was watching. He showed it to Grimmert and Quigg. It was a small metal device, with a big red button in the middle.

"This is the dimensional opener," he explained. "I press this button once and the way opens. We get in, we run, when we get to where we want to be, I press the button again and the way pushes us out."

"That sounds simple enough," said Grimmert. "Is it going to be that straightforward?"

"It's difficult to say. The way is like any road on any planet; it depends when you catch it. On my way here to Earth it was pretty quiet. I ran all the way through without any trouble. But other times... catch it on the wrong day and you'll struggle."

"If we run into anyone," asked Quigg, leaning forward and peering at Nanotus over the rim of his spectacles, "who is it likely to be? Miscreants? Ruffians? Tin can brains?"

"All are possible, I'm afraid," replied Nanotus apologetically. "My people didn't create this technology, we discovered it buried deep within one of the six moons that orbit our planet. At first the authorities tried to restrict its use, and our scientists never developed the ability to replicate the machines, but it was inevitable that something so useful would find its way into the hands of the underworld."

"Hence your possession of one," said Quigg.

"Actually, no," said Nanotus. "I inherited it from my father, who was bequeathed it by his own father, who had been among those to discover the cache on the sixth moon. But I certainly found more creative uses for it than had my father... I think he would be happy that I'm putting it to *good* use now, though. Everyone to their feet, then."

They all got up, each picking up his leather satchel and hooking it over his arms and onto his back. That of Nanotus has already been mentioned; those of Quigg and Grimmert contained a mixture of provisions and Ibis gadgets, prepared in accordance with Mrs Challenger's instructions and left at a secret London location for the agents to collect.

Suddenly there was a scream from one small copse of trees, and the agents turned to see a pair of children rush out to the arms of their anxious parents. Tears rushed down the faces of the youngsters as they pointed back in the direction from which they had come. The agents tensed as the sound of crack-

ing branches reached their ears.

"Tin can brains," said Nanotus immediately, dropping into a fighting stance. The others weren't so sure, so quickly, but as the leaves parted to reveal the black steel of a robotic monster Grimmatt began to reach for his gun.

"Don't bother," said Quigg, putting his hand on Grimmatt's arm. "They are only here for us. If we go, they will too. We would only be putting these people in danger."

"We can't afford to," said Nanotus. "If we set off and they see us, the tin can brains will know too much, about how we are travelling, about how long it'll take us to get there. We need to destroy them, however many of them there are. Then we go."

Grimmatt looked pained. "For once I was ready to go with Quigg."

He took his pistol from the holster, hidden within his jacket. To all appearances it was a standard issue, British army model. But it was not. The appearance was mere camouflage – the gun had been rebuilt from the inside out, designed to handle specially-coated bullets that were guaranteed to go through anything, particularly the shells of tin-plated murderers.

By this time two of the tin can brains had emerged from the trees and were heading towards the agents. At this range their movement was almost silent; had it not been for their accidental discovery by the children, this second ambush might have been successful. As screaming people scattered in every direction, the silence of the intruders became ever more eerie.

"They aren't going to fire," said Quigg. "We must be within range already." The pair of tin can brains were less than 20 metres away by then. Their optical receptors, he knew, were staring right into his eyes.

"Give me the dimensional opener," said Grimmatt quickly, without turning his head.

Nanotus hesitated. Using the opener was a serious business.

"I've got an idea," said Grimmatt. "Give it to me now, quickly and quietly."

Nanotus passed it to him, just as the twin can brains arrived. Grimmatt concealed it in one hand, his thumb on the red button. He kept his pistol in the other hand. Quigg stepped forward.

"What do you want?" he demanded of the tin can brains.

"You must surrender," answered one of the creatures. "Surrender or die. Join us or be eliminated." It was the first time Quigg and Grimmatt had heard one of them speak. The voice was, as they would have expected, cold and mechanical, but, unless it was

their imagination, there was also a touch of almost neurotic intensity.

"I don't like the sound of elimination," said Grimmatt. "What are the benefits of joining up?"

"You will live forever," it announced, shrilly. "Until the end of time. *Until the end of the universe.*" It seemed to be getting rather excited. As was the other tin can brain, which was rocking back and forth on its gyroscope.

"And when have you scheduled that for?" demanded Quigg. "Next Tuesday?"

Before the creature could reply, Grimmatt thumbed the red button.

It began at his eyes. They squeezed tightly shut against the sudden brightness of the light, but that did nothing to prevent the skin of the eyelids being peeled back, as if by an inexorable torturer, who didn't stop there, but proceeded to peel back the skin from every part of his face... the excruciating agony ripped Grimmatt's soul apart, shredding his consciousness; he would have screamed but his tongue had dissolved into a hundred thousand scarlet threads... Every muscle in his body pulled in a different direction, trying to rip themselves free from the tendons anchoring them to the cracking bones of his skeleton...

But he could still feel the dimensional opener in his hand. Reaching back through an eternity of pain to remember the warning of Nanotus, Grimmatt forced himself to open his eyes.

He was still in Hyde Park, but it was as if he was seeing it through a veil. Quickly coming back to his senses, he remembered his plan and strode quickly towards the tin can brains.

There was an instant of incredible blurring, an impression of immense speed, and when it ended, his surroundings had completely changed.

He was floating in the air above the sea. Just as in Hyde Park, everything was faded, almost as if it was not fully switched on, like a motion picture might if the projector was running with too few bulbs.

There were no boats in sight, but squinting his eyes he fancied he could see, in the distance, a range of white cliffs rising from the sea.

"My goodness," he said to himself. "Dover! A single step has carried me over two hundred miles! But then, it only makes sense. If this device enables people to cross the enormous distance that separates one galaxy from another, then each single step must count for hundreds of miles! I should count myself lucky I didn't end up on Mars!"

He took a single step back, carefully judging the distance so as to travel as far back as he had forward.

Again there was the blur, and he turned to get his bearings. He was on a road in the countryside, but he could see the edges of London in the distance. He shimmied forward slightly, to find himself above the Thames, in sight of Big Ben. Re-orientating himself, he inched forward, to find himself back in Hyde Park, a Hyde Park now empty of every soul except his two colleagues and the two tin can brains confronting them. His journey into this travelling dimension and then to Dover and back had evidently taken less time than he might have guessed, as the tin can brains had yet to make a move against Nanotus and Quigg.

Grimmett leant forward a little and pressed the button once more. This time the pain was merely a flicker. While Quigg reacted with surprise and Nanotus with relief to his sudden re-appearance, Grimmett brought up his pistol and blasted first one, then the other, tin can brain to bits.

“Well done!” said Nanotus heartily. “I didn’t think you had a chance!”

Quigg looked at the giant sourly, “I just assumed he’d abandoned us.”

Grimmett smiled at them both, without apparent irony. “I don’t know which of your sentiments touches me most. With allies like you two, I can see this mission will be a great success.”

Quigg just scowled, but Nanotus actually seemed to be a bit hurt.

“Shall we set off?” asked Quigg.

“Yes, let’s,” answered Grimmett, slyly winking at Nanotus. “You know, I really hope, Professor Quigg, that you enjoy the trip as much as I did.”

Quigg did not know what to make of his words, so he kept his peace.

“Right,” said Nanotus, taking the dimensional opener back from the detective. “Please link arms with me, and we’ll be on our way.”

This time Grimmett didn’t feel a thing, but he was able to fully enjoy the agony that Professor Quigg went through...

* * * * *

Skating through the spaceways, the three of them did not talk much. Professor Quigg was in a mood with the other two, and had an amazing ability to bring their conversations to a grinding halt, even when they tried to talk around him. One time Quigg lagged a little behind, and Grimmett expressed surprise at the professor’s surliness. Nanotus agreed.

“Mrs Challenger mentioned to me that he could be a little obsessive and driven, but she had thought that would probably be a good quality in an Ibis agent...

it seems she first met him when he was treating her husband, checking him over after the famous Battle of the Invisible Fleet.”

“Really?” said Grimmett. “Were you there?”

“I’m afraid not. I was unfairly incarcerated at the time; an unfortunate affair with the daughter of a Azzuzzian potentate’s jewels. But my friend, Milon the Assassin, played a major role. Although for some reason he had dropped the ‘n’ from his name at that time and was calling himself Milo.”

“Why was that?” asked Grimmett. It was turning out to be quite a long journey, and he was eager to chat while they had the chance, regardless of the conversation’s inconsequentiality, just for the sake of something to do. Having said that, there is no reason why I should inflict such a dull conversation upon my readers, so I shall not. Suffice it to say, Quigg soon caught up and threw another crowbar into the spokes of the conversation’s wheels, and being already a rather shaky vehicle, it veered off the road and crashed, wrecked beyond repair.

But don’t think the journey was dull, for all that.

The three of them were travelling from one galaxy to another on the opposite side of the universe and the things they saw along the way were quite incredible: pulsars, quasars, black holes, white holes, supernovae, nebulae; they saw everything there was to see, slowing down for some of the more stunning sights, as most things went by in a blur.

Soon they were approaching their destination: the home solar system of the tin can brains. The devastation the deadly beings had wreaked in their neighbourhood was plain to see along the way. The gutted swirling remains of suns that had been ruthlessly mined for precious elements. The frozen civilisations on planets orbiting those suns. Worlds where the inhabitants slaved in chains. Others where they simply laid down on the ground to die from despair.

“This is terrible,” said Quigg to Nanotus. “Is there nothing we can do?”

“Yes,” echoed Grimmett, “could we not pop in on a couple of these places, blast the hell out of the occupying troops, and set the planet free?”

Nanotus shook his head as they skated on. “Of course I’ve thought about it, on the way back to give Milon’s message to Mrs Challenger, and then when I was talking to her in her kitchen, but it would be madness. Before we got anywhere, the word would be out, and they’d be waiting for us on the next planet... imagine if the tin can brains had possession of this technology.”

“How *do* they get around?” asked Quigg. “They seemed to catch up with us quite easily in London.”

"As far as I know, they just have normal faster-than-light ships." He thought for a moment. "In London, they must have traced us by my radioactivity." He laughed as Grimmatt raised an eyebrow and edged slightly away. "Although the level of radioactivity in my body is safe to those around me, it would still be significantly higher than normal levels present in early 20th century London, thanks to the destruction caused by Milon on Golgokkamok..."

On they skated, until the planet of the tin can brains was almost reached, and right up until the last minute, fortune was with them, they met no resistance, no bandits and no ambushes. Right up until the last minute. As they skated down toward the surface, Grimmatt realised that they were not alone.

"What's that?" he called to Nanotus. "Can you see it?"

Approaching them through the darkness of space were a thousand black shapes; they would have been completely imperceptible if it were not for the fact that they were really, truly black, whereas space itself, viewed from the travelling dimension, was merely a very dark shade of grey.

"Bloody hell, what are they?" yelled Quigg in terror, the panic in his voice diverting Grimmatt for a moment from the approaching horde.

Nanotus shrugged. "I don't know, but they can't be good news. Let's get to the surface as quickly as we can, and hope they're not void-wraiths."

He led the way, but before the three travellers even reached the stratosphere the assailants were upon them. And they *were* void-wraiths, ghostly beings, tentacular and skeletal, with a freezing touch and an empty gaze, mindless creatures forever existing and

dormant in the eternal emptiness of the travelling dimension, awakened only when that eternity is broken by the passage of living beings.

Grimmett and Quigg took out their pistols, and began firing upon the assailants. Though they had a little success in forcing the void-wraiths to move away, none were injured, and soon fluttered back in attack, ghostly arms reaching out, solidifying into hard tentacles that tried to grab the humans and the giant by their extremities. Nanotus was kicking and swinging those extremities around for all he was worth, with not much more success than the others, but the void-wraiths seemed to have identified him as the biggest threat to them, or perhaps he was just a more promising source of food, as they concentrated their attacks upon him. Soon he was covered in the creatures, wrapped from head to toe in leathery black tentacles, but his face and hands were still just free, and he called to Grimmatt and Quigg.

"There's nothing we can do to stop them! The only chance is for you to escape and rescue Milon. The information he has gathered since his capture may be vital to Mrs Challenger's efforts to defeat the tin can brains! Take the dimensional opener, take it to the surface and use it. These creatures won't be able to follow you." He threw the opener to Grimmatt, who caught it in his left hand. "Quickly, go, while I distract them!"

Quigg turned to go, but Grimmatt called back to Nanotus, "We can't leave you! You'll be trapped here in the travelling dimension forever!"

One fist of the giant remained free, and he shook it at Grimmatt, "Go now! The future of the universe depends on you!"

THEAKER'S

QUARTERLY FICTION

Autumn

Issue Three

2004

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Editorial

Stephen William Theaker

Editor

This issue, with the second instalment of *Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!*, brings to an end our three retrospectively-created issues of reprints. I hope you have enjoyed them. From this point on, this publication will provide all-new material (unless the deadline is crashing over my head). We shall see how it goes.

In theory, this is the Autumn issue of *TQF*, and I am in fact writing this at the end of September, so for once my editorial is contemporaneous with our supposed date of publication. No need to falsely cast a scrying eye into the future – I can just throw it out of the window to see brown leaves, grimy skies and drizzling rain. It doesn't look kind out there, reader, so stay inside and snuggle up with *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction!* This issue, as will many in the future, ends with a traditional slap-up dinner, so you are guaranteed a warm feeling in your tummy when you get to the end. To get the most from this issue, I

recommend that you take it to a nice place to eat, perhaps your favourite pub on a Sunday afternoon, and ask your friends to meet you there, perhaps friends that you have not seen for a few months, who have travelled just to see you, and when everyone is sitting comfortably, having filled their bellies to the utmost extent, get to your feet and read a few chapters out loud. I recommend that it be read in a pseudo-declamatory style, with a touch of pomposity and self-importance. If other diners can hear you, take a moment to gauge their mood. If they appear receptive, kind, open-hearted, sweet-natured and intelligent, read a little louder, and when you are done, accept their plaudits and tell them where to purchase a subscription. If, on the contrary, they seem pugnacious, unpleasant and uneducated, walk over to their table and raise your voice even more; it will do them good.

The Editor

Quiet, the Tin Can Brains are Hunting! Part II

In the Halls of the Tin Can Brains

Grimmett struggled to catch his breath. The desperate flight from the void-wraiths had left him tired and vulnerable to the rigours of the transition from the travelling dimension, and it had taken a lot out of him. He had barely been able to stand long enough to check that the immediate surroundings were safe before dropping to his knees. The opener was still gripped tightly in one hand. The gun had quietly slipped from the other. He looked up at Quigg, who was in no better state.

“Could we have done anything more for him?” the detective asked.

Quigg shook his head firmly. His spectacles were misting from the heat of his skin. He took them off, and pulled his shirt from his waistband to wipe them as he spoke. “You know we did the right thing.”

There was silence for a few moments as the two men struggled with their thoughts. Though Professor Quigg was nominally the leader of the mission, Grimmett could not help feeling responsible. As an officer of the law, he saw his role naturally as that of protector; to have sacrificed the life of one of his comrades did not sit easily with that, even if it was for the sake of the mission. He wished there could have been another way. But at core, beneath the magma of emotion that boiled beneath the grizzled crust, he was pragmatic, and there was little point in wasting his comrade’s sacrifice. There had been a case a few years ago, the case of the grizzled yarn

they had called it in Scotland Yard, with their customary wit.

A police constable had discovered a consignment of stolen clothes in a shop along the Tottenham Court Road, and under interrogation the owner had admitted that the items had been supplied by a certain underworld figure in whom the Yard were very, very interested. But the owner had not known the location of the master villain’s base of operations, and, despite their very best efforts, the officers in charge of the case were unable to persuade him otherwise. Finally, they had requested the assistance of Detective Grimmett, who had begun by examining the clothes themselves.

“Do you see this?” he asked PC Jenkins, the young fellow who had discovered the stolen clothes. Though of course since Scotland Yard had become involved he had been kept at a safe distance from the case, Grimmett had thought the young man might prove useful.

“I’m afraid I don’t, sir,” replied PC Jenkins, though he took a good look at the jacket in question before answering.

“What about now?” asked the detective, before turning the jacket round.

“Turn it back again, sir.” Grimmett did so. “It’s faded on this side, isn’t it?”

“Well done, Jenkins. Now feel it as well. This jacket is faded on one side, but the cloth is ever so

slightly grizzled on this other side. In this shop the items were stored in a windowless storeroom, and there is no heat source which could have caused this damage to the clothes. These clothes were stored in a room or warehouse with windows facing the sun, and what's more, I would bet, with a bakery of some kind next door."

"Sir, I congratulate you! Master Saxon is as good as behind bars!"

"Hold your horses, youngster," admonished Grimmett. "He'll still take some catching. Save the congratulations for the minute he actually is behind those bars – I assure you they will be warmly received."

In the event, the apprehension of Master Saxon had almost gone according to plan. The warehouses of London were searched by the capital's finest officers, Grimmett and Jenkins co-ordinating the efforts. A likely location for the criminal mastermind's efforts was discovered, a building near Euston Road with, as Grimmett had predicted, a successful baker's shop next door. For a day and a night the premises were under constant surveillance, and, the moment Master Saxon's presence was confirmed, the police stormed the building in force. It had gone well, almost every member of the gang being overwhelmed and arrested before having had a chance to lay their hands on a weapon. Just one managed to. Master Saxon, at work in his office on the mezzanine, saw the swarm of blue suits sweep through the building below him. He quickly grabbed a pistol and headed for the rear entrance, only to find Grimmett and Jenkins waiting for him there, pistols drawn. Without a second thought he gunned down Jenkins and charged Grimmett, who let him by in the shock of the moment. As the young officer, whose life had been filled with so much promise, lay dying at his feet, Grimmett made the decision in an instant to go after the cur responsible. A short chase later, he had Master Saxon subdued, and brought him back to the villains' hide-out, only to find the other officers gathered round the dying young man.

So Grimmett had been there before. But it hurt just as much the second time.

As for Quigg, his thoughts were complex and at variance with one another. On one hand he regretted the loss of a useful comrade. On the other, that comrade had already served his primary purpose in transporting them safely to the planet of the tin can brains. And in the long term, he could easily have seen Nanotus becoming a positive impediment to his plans.

He got to his feet and took a look around. There

was no doubt they were on the planet of the tin can brains, a clear artistic signature being imprinted powerfully upon the apparently deserted architecture all around them. Steel spires rose intimidatingly from the ground itself, twisting the line of the eye around their rigid curlicues, the pale sun having just enough strength to burn the eye when caught in those mirrored traps. Other buildings were short and squat, almost deliberately unappealing, while huge hangars raised above the skyline on every side. (Quigg surmised them to contain the vicious fruits of the tin can labours, and resolved to investigate at the first opportunity.)

Grimmett had finally got back to his feet, scooping his gun back up as he did, putting it back into its holster. He shrugged off his satchel and grabbed himself something to eat; a solid and dry, but filling, biscuit. He offered Quigg a bite.

"Thanks, but no," said Quigg. He waved at their surroundings. "Pretty unappealing, mmm?"

Grimmett unhurriedly chewed his mouthful of biscuit and carefully swallowed before replying. "It's very utilitarian. Very nasty."

"I suppose it is utilitarian," said Quigg thoughtfully, "though probably not in the way that you mean. For us, utilitarian has come to mean merely functional; it is used to describe products with no value whatsoever beyond their basic usefulness. Yet this is not the true meaning of the word; at its best, utilitarian encompasses every possible benefit a product could offer society, or to be more accurate, the people who make up that society: whether it be the way it cuts cloth, the way it pleases the eye, the way it sits in the hand, or even the noise it makes when you tap the tabletop with it."

Grimmett, who had learnt in the course of a long career fighting crime that it never hurt to understand the opponent, gave serious consideration to Quigg's words. "And you don't think this place is utilitarian in the first sense?"

"Not when you consider the people who live here – the tin can brains. The nastiness of this place is deliberate, carefully judged to work them into just the right frame of mind to go out and slaughter the universe."

"And that's exactly the frame of mind they judge most desirable..."

"Exactly," said Quigg, going so far to give Grimmett a comradely pat on the back. "The question is, where are they all? Why are things so quiet?"

Grimmett had no suggestion, and took another bite of his biscuit.

Quigg took off his own satchel and pulled out a

tracking device, which had been prepared by Mrs Challenger. Primed with biological samples taken from Ibis records, it would scan the air for traces of Milon the Assassin: dead skin cells on the breeze, pheromones released in sweat, even, once they were close enough, the distinctive rhythm of his heartbeat. Both reslung their satchels over their shoulders and they began to walk in the direction the tracer indicated.

“The only thing I can think of,” suggested Quigg, “is that they are all now out conquering. Perhaps at some point in the past they faced opposition on their very home planet, and were forced to reproduce and fortify here to an extent no longer necessary.”

The way was not difficult, the tin can brains having produced smooth runways and gently inclining ramps suitable for negotiation at high speed by their spinning gyroscopes. The two humans were able to make their way along easily, although there was quite a distance to walk. After a couple of hours Quigg came up with the idea of trying a little triangulation. They walked for five minutes at a right angle to their previous course, then took another reading. Calculations roughed out on a notebook from Quigg’s satchel indicated they still had something like five hours walking to go. The dim sun was still high in the sky; in fact it had shown little or no inclination to sink in any direction. Quigg concluded that they must be near one of the poles of the planet, probably in the midst of a long, long midsummer’s day. It could be weeks before the sun set; it made sense, he told Grimmatt, that the tin can brains had originally bases themselves here. The weeks of daylight, properly processed and stored, would have provided fearsome amounts of power to the nascent monsters. During the months of night that followed they would probably have hibernated, their gains protected and consolidated by automated weapons, before the brains awoke in summer to launch new offensives. “Of course,” he said, “they would no longer take the trouble to do that. With no aggressors on their home planet there would be no reason for them to hoard their energy so carefully. That may well be another reason why this area is now so deserted.” They still had yet to see a single tin can brain on the planet – surprisingly, after the number they had encountered on Earth!

Grimmett laughed. “They’re probably all burnishing their shells on the equator...” He was pleased to see Quigg smile, however wearily. The trek had done something to build a camaraderie between them. Neither wished to bear the weight of the mission alone, he thought.

After a further couple of hours’ walking, Professor Quigg realised their route would soon bring them near one of the immense warehouses, and he said as much to Detective Grimmatt. “Think of the possible benefits if we could get inside one of those things! The secrets we could discover!”

Grimmett pondered for a moment, but could see no reason to refuse. If the worst came to the worst, and they were unsuccessful in rescuing Milon the Assassin, any other information they picked up along the way might well prove vital. “All right, Quigg, but let’s be careful. Remember, there are at least enough tin can brains around here to keep Milon the Assassin locked up, and from what I understand of him, that’s no mean feat. Even the instructors at Mrs Challenger’s academy spoke of him in hushed voices.”

Professor Quigg promised to be cautious, and they took the slight detour that would bring them to the immense doors of the hangar. There was still no sign of the tin can brains, which, if he was honest, was worrying Detective Grimmatt more and more with each passing moment. He would have felt much happier dodging patrols, hiding under walkways, and crawling through tunnels. Something was definitely up. But, he reflected, even if this was a trap, every step the tin can brains let him get closer to Milon was a step closer to freeing him. Quite possibly the tin can brains did not realise how easily the humans would be able to effect their escape once they reached the captive assassin. He had kept the dimensional opener in an inner jacket pocket, ready for emergency use. He knew that returning to the travelling dimension would present a risk, but there was a hope, however small, that they would be able to evade the void-wraiths long enough to escape back to Earth. There was even a tiny hope, right at the back of his mind, that they might find Nanotus there, waiting for them, somehow having escaped the clutches of the void-wraiths himself, but that hope was one Grimmatt did not even acknowledge. It was so unfortunate, he reflected, that the attack of the void-wraiths had come when it had. A little more time would have allowed the travellers to safely reach Milon’s side before leaving the travelling dimension, thus helping the rescue effort immensely. As it was, they could not even take the risk of reactivating it now for just a few brief seconds to speed up the hunt. That might just be enough to keep the void-wraiths’ attention focussed upon this spot.

The doors to the hangar, close up, were truly gigantic, even set against the scale of the elaborate architectural monstrosities that surrounded the build-

ing. They extended up into the sky beyond the ability of the humans to discern their tops. From one side to the other, the front of the hangar extended for a good twenty minutes' walk.

"There's no way we can move these," noted Grimmatt.

"Of course not," replied Quigg snappily. "These would obviously only be opened when whatever was inside was ready to be let out."

"A ship of some kind?"

"Definitely. A ship of the most incredible kind. We must get inside at once!" He was fired with enthusiasm, though Grimmatt was still lukewarm.

"But is it still in there, do you think?"

"I doubt it," said Quigg. "Or else there would still be tin can brain activity here. But though the bird has flown the coop, there may still be some fascinating feathers in the nest!"

"I think there's a small entrance over there," said Grimmatt, having spotted a break in the smooth lines of the hangar doors. "Remember our priorities, though, we have to get to Milon quickly. Every minute that goes by could mean his death."

"You don't need to tell me that," Quigg retorted. "Death at the hands of the tin can torturers, or by the long arm of the Ibis failsafe. If the torturers come within reaching distance of information that could compromise Ibis, Milon's entire personality will be erased."

"It's a terrible fate," said Grimmatt, feeling for a way to open the smaller door. He found a recess, and, using both hands, he was able to pull the way open for Professor Quigg.

"But one we all agreed to," said Quigg sternly as he entered the hangar. But the tenor of his voice changed almost immediately. "My goodness! Quickly, come in here, detective."

Grimmatt followed him in. Impressed by the size of the hangar, as seen from the inside – there were tiny traces of clouds against the far-off ceiling – he was otherwise slightly underwhelmed. Almost entirely empty, save for racks of tools and pieces of discarded machinery around the periphery of the space, it was not a million miles away from the technician's workshop in any London factory, though on a different scale, of course. Quigg, on the other hand, was dazzled, and dashed from junkpile to junkpile.

"This is stunning," he called out.

"Keep it down," warned Grimmatt. "We've just

assumed this place is deserted. It might not be. Someone might have forgot his lunchbox."

"Don't be such a hang-dog," laughed the professor, dancing about just as his wife had been known to do when happy. "If you had the wits to understand the level of scientific achievement involved here, you'd be just as excited!"

Grimmatt was becoming annoyed. "If you had the wits to understand the situation we're in, you'd get a grip on yourself and lead us out of here." He turned on his heel, stamped his feet a couple of times in frustration, then, having mastered his anger, turned back to address Quigg again, who had, in the meantime, buried himself to the waist in a dump-bin of discarded circuits and wires. "I know that this is your Christmas, and I'm willing to wager your parents weren't big on Christmas, but we really have to go. I have a very, very bad feeling about this. It's just been too easy, and we have to make every bit of progress we can before it gets very, very hard."

Resentful as a naughty child, Quigg snorted an agreement. Filling his pockets and his satchel with as many bits and pieces as he possibly could, he led the way out of the hangar. "Do you realise how much we've left behind?" he demanded of Grimmatt over his shoulder.

"I know," said Grimmatt, thinking of Nanotus, stuck in the ghostly travelling dimension, cloaked in soul-sucking void-wraiths. But he let Quigg take the words however he would, for the sake of peace, quiet, and a quick departure.

There was just an hour's walk to go, by their reckoning, and soon, sooner than Grimmatt might really have liked, with Professor Quigg still rather twitchy and spiky, they were crouched half-way up one of the spires, scouting out the lay of the land. Now, for the first time, they saw signs of movement. Black ants scurried around the entrance of a certain building, one grey and bland, of disturbingly distorted lines. Other buildings all about still seemed deserted. The answer seemed to be on the large open space that gaped behind the occupied building – a ship, disgorging steely workers by the dozen that poured into Milon's prison with the eagerness of dogs to a bone, and swallowing up others heading in the opposite direction.

"Great," said Grimmatt, ever undaunted. "We've found him!"

The Tin Can Base

“Yes,” said Quigg, “we’ve found him. But what can we possibly do about it?”

“Brave heart, professor!” replied Grimmatt, giving his colleague a gentle punch on the shoulder. “We’ll be able to get in there, Quigg. Don’t worry!”

“That is all too easy to say from up here. It’ll be a quite different matter when we are down there, surrounded by vicious tin can brains and their deadly murder-droids...” The professor shook his head and clenched a fist so tightly his knuckles went white.

Grimmatt turned to take a good look at his wavering comrade. He had heard words like those many times before. The funny thing was, Quigg did not show the usual signs of fear. He did not seem to be sweating; his gaze was remarkably steady, intense even.

“Quigg,” said the detective brusquely, “I know that Mrs Challenger wouldn’t have chosen you for this mission if you weren’t up to it, so enough of this ballyhoo... let’s get down there and rescue Milon post haste!”

The climb down through the tower took a few dozen minutes, long enough for Detective Grimmatt to consider the options. Though Quigg had been appointed leader of the mission, this was the kind of thing for which Grimmatt had been put on the team; it was his speciality. By the time they got to the bottom of the almost endlessly spiralling ramp, he had a plan up his sleeve. Literally, in fact!

“This is what we shall do,” he informed Professor Quigg as they strolled down the ramp, doing their best not to succumb to dizziness. “As you noted, there is no way on Earth, no way on *any* planet, that we would be able to fight, or even sneak, our way into that base. But we know that Milon is in there.”

“Definitely,” confirmed Quigg. “The readings are unmistakable.”

“To rescue him, we have to get to him, and the only way I can see us doing that is to let the tin can brains capture us.”

Professor Quigg winced, but he didn’t seem surprised. “Somehow I guessed it would come to this.”

“Sorry not to disappoint you! The idea of using the dimensional opener to rush in there, grab him, then get out the same way, is appealing, but we would run a very strong risk of having the void-wraiths waiting for us when we tried to leave, summoned by our first

passing through the travelling dimension.”

“We cannot take that chance,” said Quigg.

“If we allow the tin can brains to capture us, we wait till they take us to their jail, where I hope we will find Milon, and from where we shall burst back into the travelling dimension.”

“And then we’ll be half-way back to Earth before the void-wraiths even notice us.”

“That’s the hope.”

Grimmatt ripped a little at the lining of his coat sleeve, creating a gap just big enough to let him push the dimensional opener inside. “That should do it. Let’s just hope the blasted robots don’t search me too carefully. With a bit of luck, they won’t think I’m worth the effort.”

Professor Quigg gave no hint as to his feelings about the plan, but showed no reluctance to go along with it. The two of them strode out of the tower in the direction of the tin can base as if they were on a promenade along the Strand.

“Dashed terrible weather we’re having, sir, don’t you think?” asked Detective Grimmatt.

“No doubt about it,” replied Quigg in kind. “It is positively pallid.”

They looked at each other and the professor took a deep breath.

“Hey,” he shouted. “Hey, you brains over there! Come and capture us. We are your mortal foes!”

The tin can brains broke off from their hithering and thithering and raced over to capture the intrepid agents of Ibis.

“I hope we have made the right decision,” said Quigg quietly to Grimmatt.

Grimmatt shrugged. “If we haven’t, we won’t have long to regret it.”

* * * * *

The interior of the tin can base was beautiful, even to Grimmatt’s human eyes. Held in mid-air between two of the tin can brains as they raced through its corridors, unable to move much more than his head, he was able to take the time to enjoy the sights (although those sights did not include Professor Quigg, being borne along by his captors a few metres behind Grimmatt, the detective could hear his occasional gasps of excitement). Glistening floors, polished and shining walls, ceilings intricately deco-

rated with wave forms picked out in tiny slivers of magnetised steel that swung to follow the tin can brains as they passed, all flew by before Grimmatt could really appreciate them, but he saw enough to realise, even given his limited experience of the arts back in London, that the tin can brains themselves, despite their use of murder-droids for their dirty work, were far from being mere robots themselves. The brains, after all, were organic, gestated in metal wombs, and transferred into the tin can bodies so that they could live forever. Although no-one had records of the tin can brains from the days before the move to the tin cans, analysis of the remains of their occasional dead suggested that they might have had a original form not far dissimilar from that of the human norm. It would go without saying that living forever in a tin can would affect a person's tastes, thought Grimmatt – hence the stark and cruel architecture of this, their home planet – but it was important to remember that it *was* a matter of taste, and not one of programming. It would be a grave error to think of them just as simple, single-minded, predictable pre-programmed robots. In his experience of the criminals of the London underworld, most of them *were* single-minded and predictable; the key was to anticipate the times when they would come up with a surprise.

Soon they arrived at, and were thrown into, a cell. Their satchels were taken, and a single guard-droid left to keep watch. There was no sign of Milon the Assassin.

It was a new experience for both Grimmatt and Quigg – after all, despite their impressive credentials, they were still just recent graduates of Mrs Challenger's school for the training of Ibis agents. A few years in the service, and the inside of a cell would have lost all novelty for them.

This cell was pretty bare, as you might expect in a cell created by tin can brains. There was no toilet and no water, but after a complaint by Quigg, a pair of buckets were brought; one full of water, the other full of water before long. Though never previously imprisoned himself, Grimmatt had thrown more than a few other people into cells, and to his eye it did not look like this small room had always been a cell, and there were signs it had only recently been converted to this purpose. Most of the things he had seen on this planet had been created with a unity of design, objects and mechanisms had flowed together, sharing parts and purpose. But the generator that created the force field barring their exit had been bolted roughly to the wall (on the other side of the field to the prisoners, of course). It seemed likely to

him that this building, like all the others, had either been abandoned before being put to this use, or, possibly, that it being a convenient location in which to concentrate their final efforts here, the building, and this room, had been quickly re-jigged to suit. The question remained: where had all the other tin can brains gone? Perhaps Milon the Assassin knew. That was why they had to find him.

There was no bench to sit or lie on, so after testing out the force field – he found it was possible to poke his index finger through up to the first joint before resistance hardened and flung him back against the far wall – Grimmatt lay on the ground, resting, while Quigg paced back and forth. They tried not to meet one another's eye.

For something like an hour the agents waited, but nothing happened.

"They don't seem very interested in us," said Grimmatt.

"Unless they are playing a waiting game," replied Quigg.

"Or perhaps they just don't care?"

To the detective, it seemed Quigg was grinding his teeth in frustration. "Then we shall have to make them care, detective! We must make the long-lived scoundrels sit up and take notice of us!"

"It's certain that we're doing no good here." The detective sat up. "I'm interested – how shall we get them to take notice?"

"Remember our training! The endless nights of memorising different plans for getting out of a trap like this? Surely one of them must apply!"

"Perhaps with a little tweaking, eh? Let's give it a try. First, I believe I need to use the lavatory." He gave Quigg a wink, who nodded slowly and pursed his lips.

The guard-droid on watch outside their cell, a slender cylinder of burnished black steel, balanced on the usual gyroscope, but with, apart from a big gun sticking out of one side, no other feature to distinguish it from a sliced-off section of lamppost, had not appeared to pay any attention to their conversation so far, reacting only when directly addressed by Quigg as to the need for refreshment, at which it must have silently summoned the services of a tin can butler... Even if the tin can brains had no particular use for the agents, they seemed to want to keep them alive – perhaps because of their potential usefulness as bargaining chips. The tin can brains really did not know Mrs Challenger – if the fate was the universe was at stake, she would throw away her own life without hesitation, if that was what the situation required, and she would never have admitted

anyone to Ibis who did not accept that at some point she might have to throw away *their* lives. (In her defence, if anyone is starting to think of her as cold-hearted or ruthless, she went to exceptional lengths to ensure that the universe never got into such a bad state that the lives of her agents had to be lost to put it right.)

Though the guard-droid seemed to be ignoring them, Grimmiett felt sure that every one of their words was being monitored, so he called out to it.

“Hey, droid, there!”

It turned to face him. He had picked up one full bucket; Quigg, rather gingerly, had picked up the other.

“Both our buckets are full! And we’re bursting to go again!”

The guard-droid moved closer to check the contents of the buckets. Sensors indicated that the buckets were, in fact, full of urine, just as the humans claimed. Logic circuits made the decision to request assistance. At that moment, Grimmiett let out a yell.

“Now, Quigg, now!”

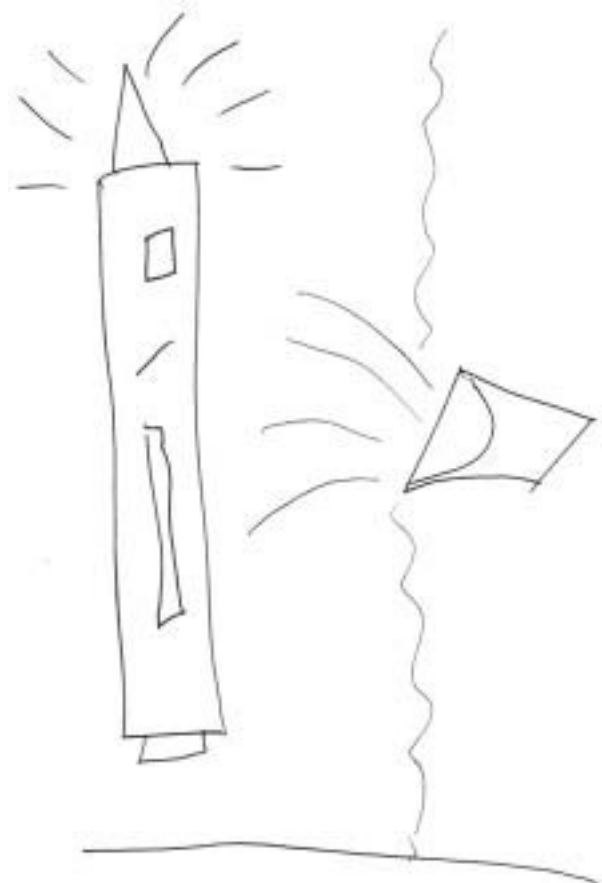
The two of them rushed to the front of the cell and with all their strength tried to fling the contents of the buckets through the force field. Naturally, the power of the field prevented more than a couple of centimetres of the tops of the buckets getting through, but that was enough to briefly open up two holes in the barrier, through which flew two fountains of liquid, even as Quigg and Grimmiett were slammed, buckets and all, against the wall of the cell.

Dazed, they got to their feet, to find the attempt had been a success, both having found their targets – Quigg had soaked the generator, Grimmiett the guard-droid, and both mechanisms now sizzled and burned, short-circuited and ruined. The force field dissolved, and the guard-droid fell to the ground with a clank. The two men thought about shaking hands or slapping each other on the back in celebration, had second thoughts, and set off out of the cell with no self-congratulation other than a pair of happy grins.

No longer having the tracing device to help them locate Milton – it was taken with their satchels – the two agents had to rely on instinct this time. Though they had been fortunate in that the corridor outside their cell had been unoccupied when they left it, they soon found that working their way through this single building would be much more dangerous than the trek across the city. The base was crawling with tin can brains and their servants, the guard-droids, murder-droids, and, doubtlessly, to Grimmiett’s mind, torture-droids and just plain out-to-do-evil-droids. But, there being no other way, the two agents slowly

inched their way into the heart of the building, the direction of which, painfully enough, they could only judge by the concentration of tin can brains... The one thing that helped them was the speed at which the tin can brains and the droids flew around the building. More than once Grimmiett and Quigg were caught in the open, only to flatten themselves against the walls as a droid sped past, half-way down the corridor before its sensors had had a chance to notice the intruders.

Eventually they came to be crouched in a short, thin tunnel that linked two other main corridors without leading anywhere in particular itself. Quigg suggested it was just a maintenance tunnel, giving access to systems that might need repairing from time to time; for the moment, they were fairly safe, especially as it didn’t seem that anyone was particularly searching for them, though the numbers of droids and tin can brains streaking across the junction ahead of them made it hard to see how they might progress. At the same time, the numbers of enemies ahead made it clear that that was just where they had to go! Grimmiett thought hard, while Quigg stared at the junction ahead. As had often happened on this mission, the detective found Quigg’s intensity rather distracting; he much preferred to work with



people who kept their heads clear in a tricky spot. Nevertheless, he was going to have to rely on him to complete the mission.

"Listen," said Grimmatt as quietly as he could, "I can only see one way out of this. We are going to need a distraction, to draw the tin can brains away from where Milon is, then one of us can get in there, grab him, and get him back to Mrs Challenger for debriefing."

Professor Quigg spun to face him. "You mean me?" he demanded in a violent whisper. "You want me to sacrifice myself so you can escape?"

"Oh no," said Detective Grimmatt, shocked at his colleague's vehemence. "I meant myself, of course; in the long run, a scientist of your calibre will be of much more use to Ibis than an old cop approaching the arse-end of his career..."

"Well," said Quigg, backing down a little, though his fist was still clenched tightly. "There is that."

Grimmatt waited a moment, trying to assess the mood of the scientist. Before the moment was up, though, Quigg spoke again.

"No, you are right, it must be me."

"Honestly," said Grimmatt, holding out his hands, "I didn't mean that!"

Quigg gripped the detective by the sleeve. "No! It must be me!"

Grimmatt looked nervously over his shoulder. Luckily Quigg was still speaking in a whisper, though a harsh, rasping one, but how could the tin can brains avoid noticing this performance?

"Calm down," said Grimmatt. "It's not a race." After a second so intense that the detective thought he felt his eyelashes burning, Quigg let go of his sleeve and let himself sag onto the floor. "Why do you think you should create the diversion? The tin can brains took all your explosives when they took your satchel."

"That's irrelevant," said the scientist. "I can run out in the opposite direction and make a hullabaloo as well as you can. Whereas you have a much better chance of being able to get to Milon and free him. Then there are the void-wraiths; I would be of no use whatsoever were they to attack again."

Grimmatt didn't know what to make of this new self-sacrificing Professor Quigg. Was he just scared? "Milon would be able to do the fighting for you. He's legendary for it."

"After days of being tortured? He could be seriously weakened. Would I have the strength to carry him back to Earth?"

Professor Quigg did have a point, reflected Grimmatt. The chances of the mission having a suc-

cessful outcome would be higher if he was the one freeing Milon.

"All right," Grimmatt whispered. "You've convinced me. But if I use the dimensional opener and there are no void-wraiths about, I'll try and find you before leaving."

"It's a deal," said Quigg with a smile, grasping Grimmatt's hand in both of his and shaking it vigorously.

Maybe, thought Grimmatt, I had Quigg all wrong. Maybe he's not such a bad egg after all. Did Mrs Challenger *ever* make mistakes? I suppose, in the end, everyone wants to be the hero of their own life story.

"Are you ready?" asked Grimmatt.

Quigg nodded. "Good luck. I hope you make it."

Grimmatt smiled back. "I hope you do too."

"Let's not set our sights too high, eh, detective? We have to be realistic! Well, here goes."

He let go of Grimmatt's hand, stood up, and turned in the direction of the junction from which they had just come into the service tunnel. Half-way along he noticed a loose metal tile on the wall and pulled it off. When he reached the end of the tunnel, he gave the detective a wave, leaped into the main corridor, and ran off, banging his tile against the walls, shouting at the top of the voice, and generally inviting every metal man on the planet to take a pot-shot at him.

Grimmatt tried to put the fate of Quigg out of his mind, and focused on the junction ahead. As the racket started up behind him there was a sudden flurry of droids and tin can brains heading at speed in a single direction, probably to head off the noise-making professor. The detective crossed his fingers in hope that none would think of using this tunnel as a short cut.

Luckily, none did, probably thanks to the speed at which the professor had run off in the opposite direction.

After that first sudden rush, there was something of a lull. Grimmatt knew there was no time to make sure that the way was safe; by the time he was sure, the opportunity would be gone; so he leapt to his feet and set off.

The way was clear.

He decided to head left, that being from where most of the droids had headed after Quigg. He ran as quickly as his feet would take him to the end of the corridor, where a sliding door whizzed to one side to let him in, whether he was ready or not.

Two tin can brains, moving towards him.

Three guard-droids, turning to bring their guns to

bear.

Milon the Assassin, strapped to a surgical table, blood streaming from a dozen wounds to his face, but with eyes that suddenly lit up with hope.

There wasn't even time to breath.

Grimmett ran through the opening, dodging the grasping arms of the tin can brains, ducking to avoid the blasts of the droids, virtually leaping from one side of the room to the other, finding himself by

Milon's side more quickly than he could have hoped. He slid an arm under the assassin's back – there was no time to free him, but hopefully the restraints would not come with them to the travelling dimension – and reached to his sleeve for the dimensional opener.

It was not there. The sleeve was empty.

The tin can brains moved in.

The door slid shut.

The Call of the Orbiting Princess

Nanotus the Giant watched in horror as the tin can brains subdued Grimmett. He slid to his friend's side, and then looked into the eyes of Milon the Assassin as the hope in his eyes died. It was almost too much for Nanotus to bear – every muscle in his body was in spasm, every sinew demanding that he take action to help his friends. But there wasn't a thing he could do, trapped as he was in the travelling dimension. Without a dimensional opener to let him get back into the real world, he was stuck, powerless. His hope had been to rejoin the other Ibis agents when they made the leap into the travelling dimension, but that was no longer an option. He stayed long enough to make sure Grimmett was restrained, not killed – though of course he could not have done a thing to stop the tin can brains from killing the detective if that was what they had decided to do – then he slid away into the greyness of space to consider his options.

His new friend Pan-Pan flew up to chat.

“What happened?” asked the void-wraith. “Didn't they make it through?”

“No they didn't,” replied Nanotus. “They're still stuck on the planet of the tin can brains.”

“Oh dear,” said Pan-Pan with a shiver. “That's pretty grim situation to be in. Can't we help? We really feel bad about separating you from your friends.”

Nanotus shrugged.

“I'm not sure. If there was no other option, I would just head back to my home planet, and hitch a

ride with the first person heading in or out of the travelling dimension from there. The problem with that would be my reputation. Plus any outstanding warrants for my arrest. There would be nothing I could do to help the mission if I were locked up in prison.”

Pan-Pan laughed. “They would lock up the Peacebringer! Are they crazy on your planet? Just tell them about the prophecy! You're the chosen one, sent to bring us to our senses! Tell them how you brought peace to an entire dimension!”

Nanotus smiled wryly. “You're being too kind – it was just one corner of an entire dimension! And I'm afraid they wouldn't see it that way; they don't often give pardons on my world, even for saviours!”

“Pshaw!” said Pan-Pan. “What a terrible place you must live in, Nanotus.”

“Well, yes,” he replied. “It was not nice. And they didn't have the excuses you fellows did.”

Pan-Pan agreed heartily: “When you live in an infinite void, it's easy to get stuck in a rut. But that's no excuse for having terrorised poor travellers all this time.”

“What's done is done,” said Nanotus. “You really did just need to have your heads knocked together. And seeing as it was in the prophecy, it would have been thoroughly uncivilised of me not to.” He shook his head. “But if only there was something I could do to help save Milon. If I could contact Mrs Challenger; surely she would be able to send another agent or something.”

"There might be a way," began Pan-Pan thoughtfully. "But it would be difficult..."

"Go on!" yelled Nanotus. "What is it?"

"It's only been done a few times before... You see, the travelling dimension, as you call it, is not entirely separate from your dimension. After all, light travels from there to here, else you wouldn't be able to see where you are travelling to. We don't know why it is that light reaches here safely, but not other forms of energy – it has been suggested that if the travelling dimension was actually built by somebody, they built it this way on purpose."

"But I know we can see Mrs Challenger – the problem is that we can't touch her!" He frowned. "I mean, that we can't touch anything to give her a message."

"It's not that you can't touch anything. It's that the touch is so tentative as to be completely imperceptible. We have found that massive amounts of force in this dimension can have an effect over there. In fact, we think that force constantly leaks out of here, at an infinite number of points."

"I see – otherwise the kinetic energy of those travelling through here at high speeds would accumulate until the whole dimension exploded!"

"Exactly," said the void-wraith.

"So if we gather together enough of your people, we might be able to contact her. Would you be able to get them together?"

"I am afraid I could not," said Pan-Pan, making the face of Nanotus fall faster than a goose shot out of the air. "But you could."

Nanotus slammed one fist into the palm of the other hand, his face lit up once more.

"Of course I could, Pan-Pan!"

"Yes, you could, Peacebringer!"

* * * * *

At that moment Mrs Anna Challenger was taking a well-earned rest, her feet tucked up underneath her bottom, sitting in one of George's big armchairs in the living room. It had been a difficult day. There had still been no word of the team sent on the mission to rescue Milton, George was still away, Mrs Quigg had been knocking on the door after her husband every five minutes, the universe was still in danger, and the price of bread had risen by five pence!

But right now, there were two huge chunks of wood on the fire, both of them just starting to properly catch light. The room was feeling very cosy, and she was holding a mug of hot chocolate in both hands. Outside, night was falling. In some ways, she

felt, it was nice to have the house to herself from time to time, which she often did now, with the butler having taken his own lodgings nearby, coming to work only during the day. She could hardly blame him, George at night being twice as cantankerous as George during the day.

On a little round occasional table that she had pulled up beside the armchair lay a pile of notes and reports, which she simply had to finish reading before going to sleep, but she already felt herself to be in imminent danger of dropping off. Never mind, she thought drowsily, if I fall asleep now I shall wake earlier in the morning, and I shall be that much more fresh and alert. The one necessary thing, she sternly thought to herself, is to make sure I put this hot chocolate down before I doze off and spill it all over myself.

Perhaps it is already too late, she began to think, watching as glowing embers floated out from the fireplace and began to dance around her head. They looked ever so pretty, but she was quite sure it was not their usual behaviour. Was it the heat from the chocolate, she considered, creating a convection current above her head? Or were they fairies? asked a younger, yet much older, part of her.

She decided to play things safe, and put the hot chocolate down on the occasional table. If she was not yet dreaming, it was best to put it down before she was. (If she was dreaming, then it wouldn't make much of a difference.)

Oddly, now that she had noticed them, the embers began to fall the ground, almost like parachutists would, she imagined, each ember choosing its place on the ground and falling to it. She uncurled her legs and got to her feet.

One by one the embers dropped, and once they fell, others flew out of the fireplace to take their turn in the air, spinning, then falling. Mrs Challenger was quite sure now that she was not dreaming, however bizarre things seemed.

Realising she was obstructing the path of some of the embers, she moved off to one side, then looked back at the growing lines of ashes on the carpet (this was going to take some cleaning, she thought at one level of her mind, making a mental note to deal with it herself rather than leave it to the expertise of the maid). From this angle they seemed to make some kind of sense, though she could not quite grasp it yet. A few minutes more, though, and it began to become clear.

She said it out loud, just for the record.

"Mission failure. G captured. N trapped in TD. Q..." She frowned at the ashes still floating around

her. “Well, what about Q? I can’t make it out.” But at that point, the ashes gave up and dropped to the ground, Nanotus and his allies having utterly exhausted their strength.

“My goodness,” said Mrs Challenger. “This is not good... the mission a total failure.”

She stamped about the room (taking special care not to stamp through any ashes) as she tried to think of an alternative method of rescuing Milon. For the moment, despite his bravery, Nanotus would have to fend for himself.

Finally she sat back down and thought hard. Some people have good ideas without working at them; some people have to think hard and think methodically before the idea comes to them. The luckiest people are those who can get both types of good ideas; the unluckiest those who cannot get either. (Although in my opinion there are too many people who do not even bother to try for the second type, being content to stick with the bad ideas that come to mind quickly, no effort required or made.)

Searching through the information stored in her mind, allowing herself to free-associate in order to keep away from the most well-worn tracks, she came up with, in this order, an excellent new method of tanning leather, a radical new design for a child’s perambulator, and a more efficient way of arranging her morning *toilette*. Having noted each of these down on the little ideas pad she always kept about her person, she finally got to the idea she needed.

She seemed to remember that back when she had first took over the post of Ibis supremo, there had been a curious and ancient report from an agent operating in a distant galaxy, which had mentioned a boon being granted. Mrs Challenger was not sure of the exact details, so she rushed to her files. Soon she had the answers laid out upon the occasional table, burying the unread reports, which would have to wait for another day to be checked over.

She quickly finished off the mug of hot chocolate, which had very nearly gone cold, put the empty mug to the far side of the table, and settled back in the armchair to read the reports of the Ibis agent who had been known by no name other than that of his home planet: Grun Din.

Her recollection had been correct. Grun Din had undertaken an action, on behalf of Ibis, on the planet of Melrune, an Earth-like planet in a galaxy far distant from that of Earth. In recognition of those services, a famous holy man, the grim thinker, had promised to Ibis a boon: that in case of disaster, if all else failed, they need only ask, and he would do all he could to help. At first Mrs Challenger was not sure

as to whether this would help in the current situation – after all, the report was over 4,000 years old, and she received promises like this from grateful holy men (and presidents, prime ministers and emperors) every other day. But as she looked through the notes in the folder, added by various of her predecessors, it became clear that the offer of the grim thinker had been taken very seriously by all of them. It had obviously come up for review periodically, and each of them, right up to the immediate tenant of her post, Hallius Dohander, had had no hesitation in re-affirming the file’s status as top priority reading for new inductees.

Would the grim thinker still be alive? There was only one way to find out. At this point, she had no other options. She headed back to the files. Who did they have on Melrune that she could send on a mission like this?

* * * * *

Rolnikov, known the world over as the mad knight of Uttar Pradesh, for reasons he had always kept to himself, was receiving a phone call. He was in the middle of a life or death struggle with an exomentarius, one of the most deadly creatures that ever lived on the planet Melrune, but, he reflected, that was no reason to be rude.

“Rolnikov!” called Pelney to his battle-embroiled friend, not that Pelney would ever have been so bold as to call him friend. Pelney would even have hesitated to call him master, since Rolnikov didn’t really seem to want him around. The round-faced fellow was probably somewhere in between the two – he usually described himself as Rolnikov’s squire, even though that was not exactly a fashionable term in those far from chivalrous days. “There’s a call for you.”

“Who is it?” replied Rolnikov, trying not to be distracted from his fight with the monstrous exomentarius. “You can see that I am busy, Pelney, so please take a message if you can.”

Pelney consulted the talkoscanner for information. “Rolnikov! It’s the orbiting princess!”

Though the exomentarius held mighty Rolnikov with two of its dreadfully muscle-banded arms, near squeezing the breath out of him, the hero somehow found the space to give a nod to his squire. Pelney pressed the relevant button on the talkoscanner and spoke into the metal grille that occupied its bottom half – Pelney left the visuals off for the moment, to give Rolnikov time to arrange himself. “Lord Rolnikov will be with you in a moment.”

Its wings flapping in the air behind it, the monster let loose a cry of triumph and prepared to feast upon Rolnikov's bare head. But with a massive burst of strength the mad knight broke its grip upon him, twisted about and planted his sword into the unshielded space between its three eyes.

"There should have been a better way," he said sadly as its life-blood spurted over his clothes.

"There should have been a cleaner way," Pelney observed. After all, who would have to scrub Rolnikov's leather chest-straps that night, when he could have been playing shakva or something? Poor old Pelney, that's who!

But then danger was their constant travelling companion in those days; it followed them through the dusty red plains of Melrune like monkey-bats stalked travellers through the equatorial jungles. With danger generally in close pursuit and Rolnikov's name and reputation usually preceding them, Pelney counted himself lucky on the occasions where he found a comfortable rock on which to sit and polish the mad knight's boots.

Rolnikov straightened his collar as he walked over to take the call. He was a tall man, easily surpassing six feet and certainly within whispering distance of seven feet. His hair was non-existent, except for a narrow black band about the base of his skull, hemming in that tempestuous mind. His skin was dark brown, his nose Roman, and his eyes black. Pelney had heard women call him handsome, usually when they had him at rest and asleep, his sleeping-mask tied about his head. Only a hardy few kept that opinion once the night mask was removed, revealing those tortured black eyes.

Pelney handed over the talkoscanner. No woman had ever called him handsome, but more than a few had liked him anyway. A little chubby in places, just before leaving his teens Pelney had finally managed to climb a few inches above five feet.

Pelney's most striking feature, Rolnikov often reflected, was the way in which he was extraordinarily pleasant, and was eternally surprised that others were not. Constantly expecting the best of people, he was dumbfounded by their actual cruelty and meanness of spirit. The only times at which his moods

really coincided with those of the dark, cynical and brooding Rolnikov were after the frequent disillusioning episodes dealt the unfortunate squire by an unfeeling universe.

"Hello, Princess Ranita," said Rolnikov politely, in the same tone of voice that most people would use to note animal faeces on their shoes. For him, that was polite. "How can I help you?"

Pelney could not hear her response, but Rolnikov's posture changed entirely during the course of the conversation. From having been slouchingly disinterested as to the topic of conversation – though Pelney had guessed he was quite interested in the conversationalist – he moved to a posture of rigid alertness.

"That sounds fascinating," he told her. "We shall be up there to discuss it with you shortly."

Pelney raised an eyebrow as Rolnikov switched off the talkoscanner and handed it back to him. He asked, "What does she want?"

Rolnikov stared at him, amazed at the audacity of his companion. Pelney was used to this kind of treatment, and waited patiently for the answer.

"She has a mission for us." He turned his back on Pelney and began to stride in the direction of the small town which had hired them to kill the exomenarius. "Good pay."

"Good pay, eh?" said Pelney with a laugh. "And a personal visit?"

Rolnikov continued to head into the distance, not breaking stride as Pelney struggled to keep up. "It is not a personal visit. It is entirely business."

Pelney laughed again and began to sing a little song to himself. "Rolni and the princess, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g..."

Though Rolnikov was not quite out of earshot, he decided he was far enough ahead to make ignoring the song the dignified approach. If he actually paid attention to half the things Pelney said, the only truly dignified course of action would have been to slice the chubby fellow into a hundred pieces, and he didn't want to do that. After all, he did not want to clean his own leather chest-straps or polish his own boots.

How Many Dusty Trails Must a Man Walk Down?

Once they reached the small dry town of Tunesome, Rolnikov wasted no time in collecting his payment. The town mayor made no trouble about handing it over – people just didn't do that with Rolnikov, at least not people who knew who he was. Those people who didn't know, and who acted upon that lack of knowledge, soon learned the importance of good research. Before leaving the mayor's residence, they decided that they might as well make use of his palatial bathroom. Both of them cleaned up, and Pelney did what he could to wash the blood from his boss's leather chest-straps.

Money in hand, Rolnikov and Pelney went to the pub and checked their maps. Calculating the route of Princess Ranita's orbiting space station, they worked out where they would need to be in order to be collected when she passed overhead, and when they would have to be there.

"We have time to eat," said Pelney happily.

"That's never a bad thing," growled Rolnikov. "Order me some food, and if it's bad, you die." He poked a finger into one of Pelney's round cheeks. "Understand me? Bad food, you die."

Pelney could hardly stop laughing. "Rolnikov, you crack me up!"

Rolnikov narrowed his eyes as Pelney headed for the bar. Rolnikov's stomach was rumbling. Rolnikov wondered if he should have taken a slice of the monster to snack on en route. Rolnikov was ready to throttle Pelney as the squire turned back from the bar, making a big show of pretending to suddenly have a thought.

"Rolnikov!" he called to the mad knight. "I understand the bit about the food – bad food, I die. That's simple! But what about the beer – if that's bad, will I die then too, or could I get away with an amputation?"

Remember the boots, Rolnikov told himself, gritting his teeth. Remember that the boots are exceptionally dirty today.

He resolved to step in something especially disgusting tomorrow. Just before he turned in, of course. He wouldn't want to be walking around with poo on his boots all day.

Pelney was soon back with two pints of beer. He put them on the table and tentatively sipped one. "Not too bad," he told Rolnikov. "Just try and pretend your mother made it or something."

"Don't talk about my mother," said the mad knight.

Pelney shrugged and took a big gulp of the beer.

"Are you looking forward to seeing the orbiting princess?" he asked.

"Don't talk about the princess," ordered Rolnikov, before picking up his pint and drinking it in a single draught. "And get me another beer."

"Sure," said Pelney, rolling his eyes and grinning. He then became more reflective. "Do you want to know what I think, Rolnikov? You seem undecided. I'll tell you anyway. This repartee of ours, this constant back and forth banter, which to you seems nothing but an irritation, is really the solid bedrock of our relationship."

Rolnikov thought about what Pelney was saying for once. "I believe..."

"Yes," said Pelney, leaning forward eagerly. "Go on!"

Rolnikov shrugged. "The bedrock of our relationship is that you clean my boots."

Pelney slumped back, and pushed his beer over to Rolnikov. "Here, you might as well have this. I'll get another two in a minute." The mad knight nodded his approval, but paused to speak even as he lifted the glass.

"Not that you do a very good job of it."

Once more he drank the pint in a single go.

"Well that goes without saying," said Pelney, glumly. "I mean, as if I could ever mean anything whatsoever to the mighty Rolnikov, mad knight of Uttar Pradesh." He cradled his head in his arms.

Rolnikov broke into one of his rare smiles. It always amused him when he managed to goad Pelney into a depressed mood. It amused him so much that he decided to go to the bar himself for a change. Usually he left anything that involved talking to people to Pelney. He got up from his stool and went up to the bar. Peeking out from his arms, Pelney could not repress a grin. He knew there was

only one surefire way to cheer up his boss. It never failed.

The barman moved to serve Rolnikov immediately. It was a mark of respect, or of fear, the kind of thing which the mad knight was used to – on the rare occasions when he didn't leave the human interaction to his flunky – but this time one of the other patrons took exception to it.

"Hey," he shouted at the barman. "Why are you serving this creep first?"

The barman shrugged. "He killed the exomentarius for us. It had been killing livestock and children around here for the last six months. It even took off one of Hudd's arms." He pointed out a one-armed man with shocking white hair and an exuberant moustache sitting at the end of the bar. Hudd gave Rolnikov a big thumbs up (with his remaining thumb). "We owe him a lot more than we can afford to pay him. So he gets served first."

Rolnikov gave Hudd a thumbs up in return. Maybe it was the dry heat of the day, perhaps it was the two pints, or could it have been, though he didn't dare suggest this even to himself, the prospect of meeting the orbiting princess once more? – but Rolnikov was feeling positively bouncy, by his standards, at least.

The other customer was not satisfied by this, which seemed odd to Rolnikov, as from his behaviour he had clearly been served six or seven times already.

"I don't care if he's killed a dozen of those things. If you needed him to do it that just shows what a bunch of pussies the men in this town are anyway. Doesn't say a thing about him. Now serve me and do it quick, mister! It took me all day to get here and I'm thirsty."

Rolnikov looked at him properly for the first time. "Sir, I'm happy for you to be served first. It is only fair. In fact, I am honoured that you go so far as to let me even drink at the same bar as yourself. Please, though, don't be so rude to the barman, who, after all, acts only out of an exaggerated sense of his danger in my presence."

Having pricked up his ears at the sound of Rolnikov actually getting into a conversation, Pelney's eyebrows were now scampering up his forehead as if they were trying to burrow into his hair. Fancy someone speaking to Rolnikov like that! Perhaps evolution on Melrune had been going more slowly than elsewhere in the galaxy after all, if there were still people that dumb here. Parallel evolution was evidently not all it was cracked up to be.

"Oooh, I'm frightened," said the drunk. "Danger

in your presence?" He threw his head back and laughed in Rolnikov's face. "Look at me, I'm crying because I'm so scared! Boo-hoo!" He pointed a finger at Rolnikov. "The only exaggerated thing around here is what an arsehole you are, craphead."

Pelney winced. This could really end up being painful to watch. He decided to intervene. After all, he reckoned, the man was drunk. He would not normally have been so boorish.

He jumped to his feet and ran over to the bar. Rolnikov was staring at the drunk, immobile as a statue before it falls on someone's head.

Pelney pushed in between the two.

"What's your name, friend?" he asked cheerily.

"What's it to you?" said the man with a sneer.

"Just seems fair to exchange names before there's any trouble, that's all, in case there's any complications later."

"The name is Smad. Are you going to ask the name of this jerk?"

"No need," said Pelney. "I already know it, and I can tell by your actions that you do not." He smiled and leaned in to whisper in the man's ear. As the man's expression turned to horrified shock, Pelney stepped smartly back. He'd seen this happen before.

A dark stain spread across the man's trousers; a dark pool appeared around his feet. The man began to shake and he put a desperate hand to grab his own backside.

At least, thought Pelney, he might keep that much of his dignity.

Unfortunately, he did not.

The one saving grace of the gentleman's accident – luckily for him – was that as the trousers slowly bulged outwards it made Rolnikov smile again. He took the two pints from the barman and went back to his stool without taking further action. As the drunkard ran out of the pub, struggling with his own stool, Pelney handed a few notes to the barman, apologising for the mess, then returned to sit with Rolnikov, whose smile was just beginning to fade.

"You love that, don't you?" said Pelney.

"I don't hate it," replied Rolnikov.

* * * * *

Later that night, they were standing on the highest point within reach that was on the course of the orbiting princess, which happened to be the local boot hill.

"Nice place to meet your date," said Pelney with a chuckle, which he quickly clamped down on after seeing Rolnikov's stern face. "Goodness me. You

really do take this thing seriously, don't you? I think you love her."

Rolnikov was still slightly drunk; drunk enough to enjoy teasing Pelney, at any rate.

"I did once love a woman," he said in what he thought to be a confidential tone.

"Really?" exclaimed Pelney.

"Yes," said Rolnikov. "Her name was Death and we danced the whole night."

Pelney stamped his feet in frustration. "Remind me to put that one in my little book," he told the mad knight. "These little sayings of yours, they're so wise, you know. It's like working with a new Buddha. Or at least a new Oscar Wilde. I don't know why you have to be so cagey all the time."

Rolnikov kept his mouth shut, but his enormous chest rippled with suppressed laughter. After a couple of minutes of Pelney being moody, Rolnikov spoke once more.

"I had to break it off though."

Pelney was sarcastic. "And why was that, pray tell, oh wise one?"

Rolnikov was looking up at the stars in the dark sky, now. Was it his imagination, or was one of them moving?

"She kept leaving with my friends."

Pelney hadn't finished thinking about that by the time a beam of light stabbed down from the heavens and disintegrated them both.

* * * * *

The orbiting princess was one of the most beautiful



women in the universe, according to popular legend. Pelney didn't know about that – after all, there were a lot of women in the universe, and who could say they had seen them all – but as far as he was concerned, there was no doubt she was definitely in the running.

For Rolnikov, there was no doubt whatsoever that the race was run and lost. Her raven hair shimmered in the light as if the stars themselves shone from within it. Even her own hair was in love with her, flowing down to brush the dark brown skin of her lovely neck with a thousand tender kisses each time she moved. As she led the way from the transporter room of her satellite to somewhere more comfortable, he found himself afraid that she would turn to speak to him – he, the most feared man on all Melrune, afraid to look a woman in the eye! He worried that looking into her deep brown eyes he would forget everything, forget how to talk, how to walk, how to breathe. If they reached the observation room before she turned those eyes upon him, he could sit down, forget about walking, leave the talking to Pelney, and just concentrate on breathing; on taking in every molecule of oxygen that might possibly have brushed across her lips.

He worried about that, but also that if she turned she would see how he had been hypnotised by the rolling of her bottom as she walked, the warring for supremacy of the two beautifully rounded hemispheres engaging his almost total attention in a way that made him somewhat ashamed to be male. But then, as she turned a corner ahead of him, he had a moment to reflect that even had he been female it would have been insanity not to appreciate these gentle tyrants of his lustful attention.

Finally they arrived, without, to Rolnikov's relief, any untoward or embarrassing incidents. He had met her just once before, for a moment so achingly brief he still felt the twinges, after he had completed a task for her and beamed up to receive his payment, but they had spoken on the talkoscanner a few times since, and though he hardly dared hope for anything between them, he dared not face the world without that hope.

The two of them sat in opposite chairs, Pelney off to one side, almost forced away, Rolnikov felt, by the magnetic forces that pulsed between him and the princess. He wondered if she felt it too. Would he ever know? At the moment he was so hard, tightly packed, like cement, but if he ever opened himself to her, only to be rejected, he would be scattered forever like grains of sand in a hurricane.

Forcing himself not to look at the princess,

Rolnikov had to admit the alternative view would only look shabby in *this* particular company. The floor and one wall of the observation room were entirely transparent, allowing the visitors the treat of seeing their world from high above. Melrune was stunningly beautiful, the huge red plains in which Rolnikov generally plied his trade just one facet of a multifaceted world which elsewhere shone bright green, blue and yellow.

"How do you feel about the mission?" asked the princess.

Rolnikov continued to look down at the planet – it was the only way he could keep his composure. "It sounds intriguing, princess. Give Pelney the details. He'll do the thinking and let me know when I have to hit something."

She smiled and turned to Pelney, who had become rather engrossed in a little bowl of sweets embedded in the arm of his chair. Although it was off-putting to speak to someone with cheeks stuffed like a squirrel (yes: like Rolnikov himself, the princess originally hailed from our planet), the princess intended to do her best, while Pelney planned to get through the conversation with a combination of all-purpose waves and meaningful grunts. He was hardly about to pass up the opportunity to eat food as good as this.

"The mission is a simple one, Pelney, on the face of it. At least, the instructions are simple. Following them through to the mission's end may prove more difficult. I want you to find the grim thinker."

Pelney blew all the sweets out of his mouth. Fortunately there was not enough power put into the expellation of the items for any of them to reach the princess, but she raised an eyebrow as they scattered over the floor, spoiling the view of Melrune.

"The grim thinker?" hooted Pelney. "Are you mad? He's a myth! And even the myths say he lived thousands of years ago! Have you heard this, Rolnikov?"

Rolnikov didn't move. "She's paying, so we'll look for him. We get paid either way."

"Well, fine then," said Pelney with a laugh. "Should we look for the October fireman and the scarlet noosereader while we're at it?"

The orbiting princess didn't blink. "You can if you like, Pelney, but I'm not paying you to." She shrugged. "But if they should turn up on your travels, let me know and I'll see if I can sort something out for you."

"So why do you want us to look for the grim thinker?"

"It's a rather unusual matter, but among my other responsibilities, I am the representative in this region

of space of an organisation called Ibis – the Interstellar Bureau of Investigation and Skulduggery. It seems that something over 4,000 years ago they did something on Melrune which earned them the gratitude of the grim thinker – he offered them a boon, a boon which they now need to be granted."

"They expect him to keep a promise made 4,000 years ago? Are they completely mad?"

"I don't honestly know," said the princess. "They speculate that the grim thinker may not necessarily turn out to be a single, long-lived individual, but instead a position, or rank, and that the present incumbent may wish, and may be able, to honour the promise made all that time ago."

"What's the boon?"

"You have to ask the grim thinker to free," she consulted a datapad, "Milon the Assassin, Detective Jim Grimmett, and Professor Samson Quigg, if he is still alive."

"Isn't that three boons?" asked the squire. "Are they being held by the grim thinker himself, or something?"

"They're together," replied the princess. "So I think that makes it one boon; but if it comes down to it, ask for Milon the Assassin – he's the important one. And this is the strange thing about the request – they are definitely not being held by the grim thinker – they are in the grip of the tin can brains."

Pelney winced.

She went on, "And they tell me that the fate of the universe rests upon the success of your mission."

"So no pressure then?"

"None at all," she smiled.

Pelney rolled it over in his mind a few times. "Have you got any idea where we might find the grim thinker, princess?"

"I believe, and bear in mind that this is only a hunch, that you might find him there." She pointed to a mountain just passing beneath their feet.

"Why's that?" asked Pelney, always the willing stooge.

"Because," said Rolnikov out of the blue, "it is called the Mountain of the Grim Thinker in the local dialect." In fact, he had only been feigning a lack of attention. Every second of the last ten minutes of his life had been spent studying the princess's reflection in the observation window. "And she didn't tell me that on the talkoscanner."

After a small adjustment to the direction and speed of the station, to bring the mountain quickly back under their feet, Rolnikov was the first back into the transporter room. Meanwhile Pelney hung back a moment, affecting to tie up his bootlaces. The

princess paused for a moment, partly to hurry him along, partly to make sure he didn't steal anything. As she waited, the door to the transporter room slid shut behind Rolnikov.

"Come along, Pelney," she scolded.

"Sorry, princess," he said, quickly getting to his feet. Just before he caught up with her, he asked, "Did you really need to bring us up here for this?"

She pursed her lips and pouted a little. "What do you think, Pelney?"

"What do I think? I'll tell you what I think: I thought so. Not that it's a bad thing, you understand. It's just I have to be careful with the boss, he can be temperamental at times; my role, though you might not realise it, involves a great deal of man-management, and if I'm going to manage that man, it helps

for me to know if his goals are realistic."

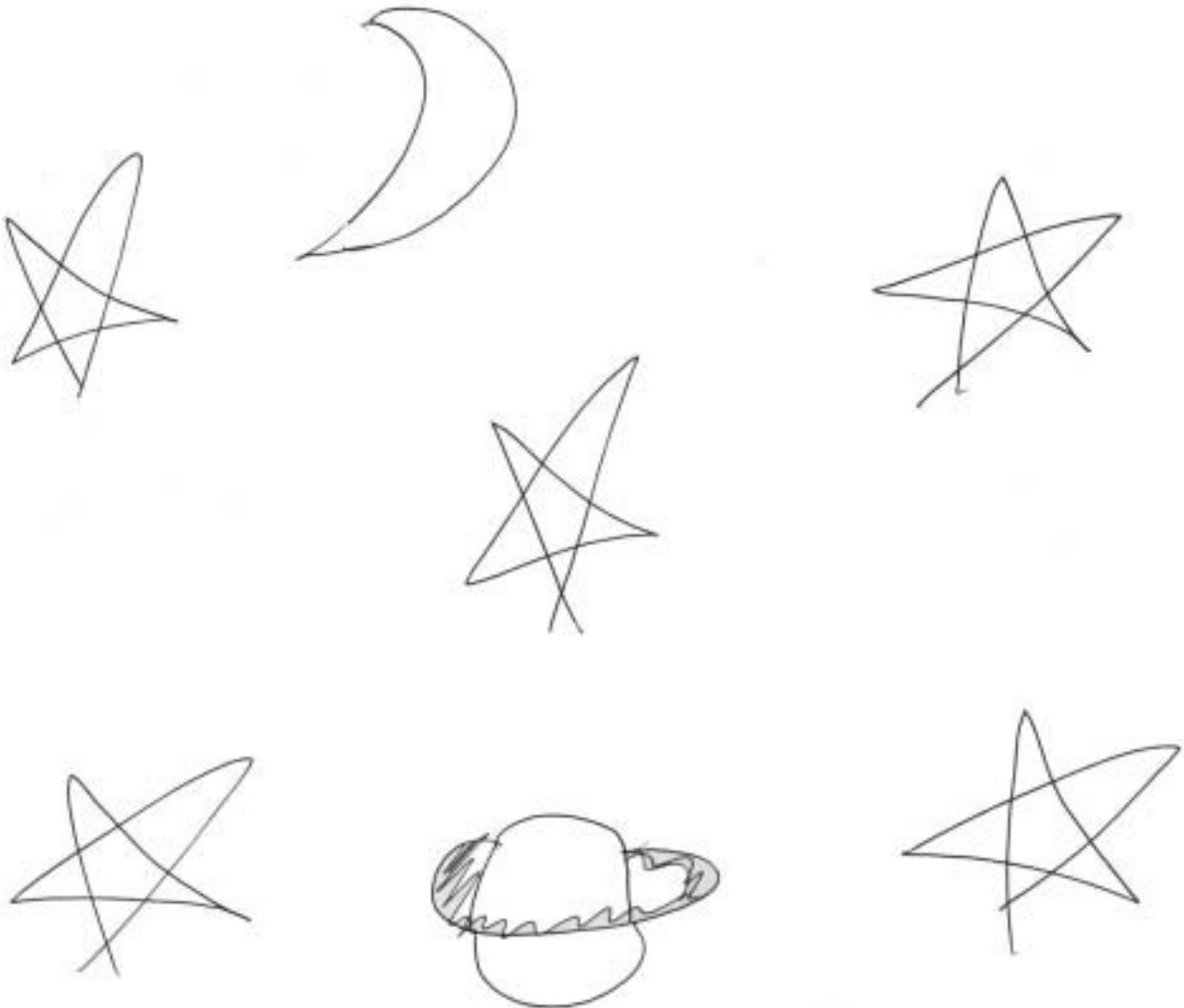
She laughed. "They are realistic, Pelney, stop worrying. There is one thing, though."

"What's that?" he asked.

"Tell him to stop watching my reflection in the window – it really creeps me out."

Pelney laughed too, quietly though; he didn't want Rolnikov to hear and have his feelings hurt. "It's only because he's too shy to look you in the eye; but I'll try and let him know."

"Thanks, Pelney," she said as they went into the transporter room. "I think we are going to be great friends. Especially," she said, as she laid a hand on his shoulder that would put Rolnikov in a foul temper for the next six hours, "if you find the grim thinker and get him to grant this boon."



The Town of Monkey- Monkey

The mountain of the grim thinker was very large, and for the sake of safety the orbiting princess had dropped Rolnikov and Pelney off at the bottom. It was a long way up, but then they had no reason to assume that the grim thinker would be at the top. It just seemed like the natural place for him to be. So they set off. Although it was a large mountain, the foothills were not too demanding, and Pelney had spotted a small village part-way up the mountain, where he hoped they could find a guide, provisions and, if they were lucky, directions. It was up to Pelney to make these decisions, because Rolnikov was not yet back to his usual self. He stumbled around in a lovestruck daze, half out of his mind with passion, and it was all Pelney could do to get him walking under the right direction.

Pelney did worry about him sometimes.

The weather at this level of the mountain was quite temperate, so there was as yet no snow or ice, and there were even patches of mossy grass here and there, which could be just as slippery as ice. Pelney tried to lead Rolnikov around them, and as they trudged along he left the mad knight to his own thoughts for a while. There was no point at this stage in getting him all worked up about it – he didn't want to waste his ammunition. Who knew if at some time over the next few days he might need to really work Rolnikov into a fighting frenzy?

They walked in silence like this for almost two hours. When they had landed at the foot of the mountain it had been early morning, local time, but the two of them were three or four hours past midnight in personal terms. Pelney suggested a rest, and hunkered down on a large flat rock beneath a spindly dried-up tree. Rolnikov shrugged, and joined him.

Pelney opened up his pack and put together a reasonable lunch for them: bread and ham, with a couple of biscuits each. He poured wine into a pair of small cups.

Rolnikov finally spoke. "Isn't it a bit early for wine?" he growled.

Pelney almost dropped the canteen in surprise, but smiled and passed one cup to the mad knight. "I just thought we could finish it off, so we could fill the

canteen with water next time we passed a stream."

"Fine," shrugged Rolnikov. "So long as that's the only reason."

"Of course," replied Pelney placatingly. "Here, let me re-fill your cup for you."

"Thank you," said the mad knight. "I'm as tough as I ever was."

"No doubt in my mind!" said the round-faced squire. "Even if you were in love with someone – not that I'm saying you are – I should think it would only make you tougher than ever, having someone to fight for, to champion, so to speak."

"Eat your bread and ham, buffoon," commanded Rolnikov, with somewhat unnecessary rudeness.

A couple of hours later they reached the village. It was a small place, with no more than ten or twelve small huts gathered round a central space, where a handful of children played shakvi. Pelney's first impulse was to join in, but Rolnikov held him back. "We don't have time for fun," he said. "Remember that the fate of the universe depends upon us being successful in this mission." In any case, the children soon stopped playing to run up and gather round the strangers. There were few other people about, but none seemed hostile; wary and quiet, but not hostile.

As each of Rolnikov's hands were taken hold of by a gaggle of children who proceeded to try and pull off his fingers by swinging on them, Pelney could not hold back a laugh, which earned him a very dirty look from the mad knight. For some reason, children loved Rolnikov; maybe it was just because he was rather funny-looking, with his great height, leather chest-straps, bald head and big boots. As was ever the case, except during fights, and even then only during fights worth the effort of drawing it, the knight's massive sword was strapped to his back, securely in its scabbard and well out of the each of the children.

One kid could not find a spare finger, and so contented himself with coming to meet Pelney. "Hello, sir," said the boy politely, and, to Pelney's relief, comprehensibly. "I am Ronus."

"Hi, Ronus," said Pelney. In the course of their travels, he and Rolnikov had picked up a working

knowledge of most dialects on the continent. The way it usually worked was that Rolnikov would spend a night in deep and private conversation with the most gorgeous of the local girls, before giving Pelney lessons on the trail. It was an arrangement Pelney sometimes considered unfair, but then he could hardly begrudge Rolnikov a few perks of the job, and, if he was being honest, quick talker that he was, Pelney could never have learnt a language in a single evening. Especially with an attractive woman to distract him! "What's the name of this village, son?"

"It's called Monkey-Monkey," said the boy. "Because legend has it that there were once two monkeys here. No other village in living memory has ever had more than one monkey. This is why our village is the best." The boy thumped himself once on the chest, probably a little harder than he meant to, but doing his best not to wince in front of the stranger.

"It certainly seems like a fine old place to me," said Pelney with a smile, as Rolnikov got dragged off by the children to one of the huts; not the largest, but one which had two skulls on poles planted on either side of the door way. He began to walk in that direction – it wouldn't do at all if Rolnikov made a scene of some kind with the village headman.

"Let me guess," he said to the boy, who was making his best effort to keep stride with the interesting chubby-faced stranger. "The two skulls..."

The boy leapt in, more eager to show off his own knowledge than to let the stranger play guessing games. "The two monkeys! You see, there is proof!"

"Heritage is a wonderful thing," said Pelney with feeling, patting the boy on the head. They entered the hut, Ronus leading the way, pulling open the wooden door, allowing Pelney through, then following and closing the door behind them.

The hut was pretty small, just a few metres square, but its owner was evidently very proud of it, beaming with joy as Rolnikov and Pelney sat themselves at his feet. He was bearded, but against expectation, it was not white, but dark brown, virtually the same colour as his sun-tanned skin. Pelney judged him to be in his mid-forties.

It was nice to receive a friendly welcome for once. He supposed that visitors must be fairly rare up here. The half dozen children in the children squeezed themselves against the walls as best they could; excited, but worried they might be dismissed from the historic meeting.

"Welcome, travellers!" said the bearded man, with a wave of his hand. "My name is Garto, and I am the

headman of this village, Monkey-Monkey. So named, because there were once two monkeys here, if you can believe that!"

"I have never heard the like before!" exclaimed Pelney, while Rolnikov remained silent, frowning at a child who was giggling behind a hand pressed against her mouth. "The two of us have visited every corner of Melrune, and we thought we had seen everything! Surely this tale of two monkeys can be nothing but a myth, a tale cooked up by the founding mothers and fathers of your village to justify such a bold, proud and boastful name!"

There were gasps of amazement all around the room.

"Oh no," said Garto, his eyes wide. "It is true, stranger! As you entered this hut, did you not see the evidence, the very skulls of the two monkeys?"

"He did, headman," called Ronus quickly. "I showed him them!"

"Well then!"

"It's true," said Pelney, shaking his head in amazement. "But I could hardly believe such a wonder. I hope you will forgive me."

"Of course we will, stranger!" said Garto with an ebullient laugh. "Why, I remember the first time I was told that each star in the sky is bigger than a dozen Melrunes! I laughed for three days and three nights! Some things are too wondrous to swallow at the first attempt! You shall see, when we have a feast in your honour tonight!"

"My stomach rumbles in anticipation already," said Pelney with what he hoped looked like a smile. "But tell me this, headman, if your village is called Monkey-Monkey because there really, really were two monkeys here once, why is this mountain named the Mountain of the Grim Thinker?"

The room went almost absolutely quiet. No one breathed, no one made a movement – all apart from the one little girl who just couldn't help giggling more and more the more deeply Rolnikov frowned at her.

After a tense moment, the headman spoke, with bulging eyes. "You dare speak of" – he paused before whispering the last three words of his sentence – "the grim thinker?"

"Isn't he just another legend?" asked Pelney blithely.

The headman shook his head slowly. "We don't talk about him. We never have."

"But you named the mountain after him...?"

"An oversight," said the headman, clapping his hands, making everyone in the room jump, even Rolnikov, who had not really been paying attention

to anything other than the war of nerves with his giggling adversary. "Quickly, now, let us put this dangerous topic to one side, and prepare for the feast!"

The children all let out a big hurrah, pulled open the door, and ran out into the town common area, where they began to run round in circles as fast as they could until they fell over. Rolnikov and Pelney were left for a moment alone with Garto, who gave them a wink and said, "Later, my friends, I will tell you the story of the grim thinker, but in private."

Noticing that Rolnikov was about to speak, probably to suggest that Garto close the door and tell them now, Pelney leapt to his feet and thanked the headman for his kindness, before leading the mad knight out onto the common. "We don't want to seem too eager, Rolnikov," he whispered, "or they'll clam up."

Rolnikov shrugged and let Pelney lead him up to a little spur of rock at the edge of the village, from where they could watch the preparations for the feast.

"Is this a necessary delay?" asked Rolnikov as they sat there, Pelney swinging his legs back and forth through the thin air.

"I think it is," replied the squire. "We don't know what we're going to encounter up there on the mountain, and it has been almost 24 hours since we last slept. We can take a quick nap here, eat when we wake, get the information we need, then head up onto the mountain fully refreshed, fully fed, and fully informed."

"I'll leave the decision to you, then," said Rolnikov, lying down on the rock, swinging the sword scabbard up so he could rest his head on it. "But if the universe ends while I'm asleep, you die."

"Sounds fair," agreed Pelney, before moving away from the edge and lying down himself. The rock was obviously hard, but it had been warmed by the afternoon sun, and there were no insects or bugs around, so it would almost certainly make a better bed than any of those in Monkey-Monkey would have done. With that thought, he dropped off to sleep.

When Pelney awoke, Rolnikov was already on his feet, doing callisthenic exercises by the light of the moon.

"Do you always have to be so vigorous?" Pelney asked peevishly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Ask me again the next time your life depends on it."

"Good point," answered the squire. "What woke you up?"

"They're almost ready for us." He pointed to a small dark shape approaching their vantage point.

"Ronus has been sent to collect us."

"So he has," said Pelney. "Do you think they'll send him with us as a guide?"

"He was the only child who didn't swing from my fingers," replied Rolnikov. "So he's obviously the smartest one among them. And there are so few adults here that I doubt they'll want to risk one of them up the mountain."

A few minutes later they followed Ronus back to the common, where the party was just starting to get going. The time the two travellers had spent napping had given the villagers time to summon those who had been grazing animals on other parts of the mountain, and so the full complement of twenty or so adults were there, all together – a rare enough event in itself that the party was bound to be a roaring success even before the presence of the strangers was added to the mix.

Three men had dug out some dusty musical instruments and were banging and twanging away on them without a care, and everyone else was either dancing or eating. Most of the children were running round in circles again.

"That looks like fun," said Pelney.

"Sometimes I feel that's all I ever do," replied Rolnikov.

A long table, quickly put together by borrowing the planks of wood from someone's fence and some stones from the wall of one of his wealthier neighbours, was covered in food, most of which looked intriguing to Pelney – from a biological point of view, less so from a gastronomical one. He could see why other visitors had found it difficult to swallow the wonders of Monkey-Monkey cooking at the first attempt. Nevertheless, nothing ventured, nothing gained, and he couldn't always leave the ventured part to Rolnikov, so he found a spare place to sit and began to test the different varieties of Monkey-Monkey culinary expertise.

Rolnikov looked around, feeling a bit lost. He wasn't hungry, there were no unattached women, and he didn't dance, except in extreme circumstances. (Curiously, though Rolnikov no longer danced, he was in all likelihood the finest dancer on all Melrune, it having formed an inescapable part of his training as a young warrior. In fact, the twist he had performed in the arms of the exomentarius had been learnt on the ballroom floor.)

Suddenly there was a whisper from the darkness off to one side, putting him immediately on his guard.

"Psst! Stranger!"

He turned to see who was there, hiding away from

all the activity, but even his keen eyes couldn't pierce the darkness. Ronus had already tagged along after his new best friend Pelney, so it could not be him.

"What do you want?"

"It's me, Garto, the headman! Come quickly, while no one is looking!"

Rolnikov shrugged, and headed into the darkness. Once out of the lights of the village common, his eyes adjusted, and he could make out Garto clearly. He was not carrying a weapon, so the mad knight relaxed a little.

"You wanted to know about the grim thinker?"

"That's right," said Rolnikov. He thought about what Pelney had said to him, and decided that in this particular situation honesty would probably be the best policy. Pelney was a good fellow, but he did overcomplicate things unnecessarily sometimes. "He granted a boon to someone, and we've been asked to find him and request it."

Garto was flabbergasted. "What? Really?"

"Yes, really," replied Rolnikov. "Do you have information that will help us find him?"

"Well, to be honest," said the headman, rubbing his beard, "I was going to tell you that the grim thinker is nothing but a myth, that he's completely made-up. I just didn't want to say that in front of the children. If we keep them scared of him, it stops them wandering off up the mountain."

"That's disappointing," said Rolnikov. "Because the fate of the universe depends upon us finding him."

"All the universe?" asked Galto, incredulous.

"All of it," replied the mad knight.

"It's a lot to gamble on a myth."

"Well, I'm told that all other bets are off," said Rolnikov, turning to go and collect Pelney.

The headman trailed behind him, deep in thought. "Wait, there might be something after all."

Rolnikov turned. They were back on the edge of the common now, and Rolnikov could see the man's brows were deeply furrowed. He was probably think-

ing harder than he had ever thought before in his life.

"Just because I've always thought it was a myth, doesn't mean it can't be true – you and your friend doubted that there had ever been two monkeys in Monkey-Monkey village, but there were. In the same way, perhaps there really is a grim thinker!"

"Well, friend," said Rolnikov. "If the myths say that there is a grim thinker, where do they suggest that he is?"

The man tugged at his beard so hard a few strands of hair came off between his fingers, searching his memory for childhood tales. "The story said that he lived up there, over a hill, under a stream, erm, after a rock, and between two minutes. I don't know what that means."

Rolnikov was thoughtful. "I think I might. Come, I must tell Pelney what you've told me. If you are agreeable, he has suggested taking Ronus as a guide."

"He's a good choice," replied the headman, nodding. "I have always had the feeling that he is one of the few who was never scared by the tales of the grim thinker. I reckon he knows more ways hereabouts that any of us, especially up there, where we are never supposed to go. Legend has it that if we disturbed the grim thinker, he would send an avalanche down to crush the village." He looked at Rolnikov in sudden anxiety. "So if the stories are true..."

"Don't worry," answered Rolnikov with a pat on the back. "I'm sure he won't punish anyone for collecting on a promise he made."

He was about to go, but had one more thing to say. "Galto, you should know that I always believed that there had been two monkeys in Monkey-Monkey."

Garto nodded his thanks, and shook Rolnikov firmly by the hand. "That means a lot to me. Good luck on your quest. Though the whole universe depends on you, the people of Monkey-Monkey will always be grateful to you, successful or not."

The Way to the Grim Thinker

The next day they started early, and the whole village gave them a big send-off.

On their way up the mountain, Rolnikov did not speak a great deal. Ronus, however, did not stop talking. He had a million questions to ask Pelney about the world beyond the mountain, and the squire was doing his level best to answer them all. But it was worth it: the boy proved to be a more than capable guide, and their progress was good.

Although there were a number of streams which came tumbling down the mountainside, the boy chose one in particular as being the most likely to lead to the home of the grim thinker, mainly because he had followed most of the others to their source. This one, he explained to the travellers, he had never really felt like exploring, which, now he came to think of it, did seem a bit odd, especially as the route was not particularly difficult.

"You know what, Ronus?" said Pelney, coming to a full stop, after they had been working their way up the slope for over two hours. "I know just what you mean. Why bother climbing up here? We should just head back to Monkey-Monkey." He turned and started to head back, wondering why he had ever set off in the first place.

Ronus shrugged and followed him. "I suppose we might as well."

Rolnikov had been bringing up the rear, and he came to a dead stop as he saw the other two heading his way. "What are the two of you doing?" he demanded.

"Going home," said Ronus.

"It's boring up here," said Pelney, "and such hard work."

"I don't know what's got into you fools, but there is no chance of us going back down. Is that clear?"

Pelney and Ronus stopped and looked at each other.

"He's right," said Ronus. "We have to get up there to save the universe." Pelney had seen no reason to keep the importance of the mission from the young guide, just in case they ended up in a situation where he could tip the balance. They had even told him their names, which, oddly enough, no one had asked

them to do in the village – and they didn't usually announce themselves if they could help it. The news had a tendency to send people fleeing to the hills. But their fame obviously hadn't spread to the foothills of the mountain of the grim thinker – the boy hadn't heard of them.

Pelney frowned. "That's the strangest thing. I know we must climb the mountain! Why ever would I decide to head back down?"

"Why indeed?" said Rolnikov. "Cowardice, perhaps?"

"I'm no coward!" said Ronus. "It's sorcery!"

Pelney and Rolnikov looked at each other. "He may not be far wrong," said the squire. "There may be some kind of device there, gently sending out telepathic commands to encourage people to leave."

"That would explain why I never came up here!" said the boy.

Pelney nodded. "If you were not that bothered about getting up there to begin with, you would have no reason to suspect your motives for changing your mind."

"This sounds very plausible to me," said Rolnikov. "Let's try again."

The three travellers resumed their way up the mountain, and soon they reached the point where Pelney and Ronus had begun to have second thoughts. They began to feel them again, but this time, when they turned, they found Rolnikov had quietly removed his sword from its sheath and was barring their way back with it. With this added incentive to press on, they soon found that the feelings began to fade.

"How do you feel, Ronus?" asked Pelney. "Do you still want to go back home?"

"Never!" said the boy.

"Excellent," replied Pelney. "What about you, Rolnikov: didn't you feel it at all?"

Rolnikov slipped his sword back into its scabbard. "I felt it," he growled. But he did not go into detail, and they did not dare to ask. If he had decided to share his feelings with them, he would have said how he had first experienced that feeling as a six year-old boy, when he awoke, after spending six months in a

coma, to find that his parents had been murdered and his home razed to the ground. The desire to go home was something he felt every time he saw a smile, every time he saw a child playing, every time he picked up a cut in a battle. It was a feeling he had learnt to ignore by the age of seven. An unfortunate side-effect was that feelings come as a bundle – you can't ignore one and expect the rest still to function normally – but seeing as that suited his chosen career path just fine, he was not going to complain about his childhood traumas. Certainly not to Pelney; he would rather die than take sympathy from his lackey. And it was important to Rolnikov that Pelney kept a certain image of him in mind: it helped him stay in character.

Five minutes later they came to a little crest in the mountain. The main peak was still far off in the distance above their heads, but Pelney had a good feeling that they were getting close to the grim thinker. Immediately before them the surface dipped to create a small plateau eaten into the side of the mountain, almost as if someone had taken a bite from it. This plateau wasn't the source of the stream, but it was an important point along the way. At the far side of the plateau, some twenty metres or so away, the stream poured down a sheer face, to create the pool that they now faced, of cool, clear liquid. Close to where they stood the edge of the pool lapped over the plateau to begin its long journey down to Monkey-Monkey and beyond.

"Over the hill," said Pelney, using a wave of his hand to show what he meant.

Ronus did a double-take. "You mean this could be it? The home of the grim thinker?"

"Could be," confirmed Rolnikov. "The next bit was that it was under the stream."

Pelney dropped his pack and went to look at the pool. It ran the whole length of the plateau, and though it didn't look too deep at the edges, and it was clear enough, he couldn't see how deep it went in the middle. He couldn't see any monsters in it, though, which was definitely a bonus.

"You think it could be under here?" he asked Rolnikov. "Some kind of trapdoor entrance, or an airlock?"

Rolnikov shrugged. "One of us will have to dive in and take a look." He sat down right where he was.

"You mean me?"

"I'll do it," said Ronus.

"There you go!" said Pelney demonstratively. "The boy will do it!"

"You do it," said Rolnikov. "What if there's something in there? Wouldn't you feel bad if the boy

died?"

"I'd feel a lot worse if *I* died," muttered Pelney to himself, while wriggling out of his jacket and trousers, making sure that he didn't say it loud enough for the boy to hear.

He ran to the edge of the pool and dived in. The water was very cold, his skin developing instant goosepimples all over, but it was very refreshing, especially after the way his mind had been clouded on the way up here. He drank in a few gulps, and it tasted good. He shouted to Rolnikov, who was watching him with a look of dry amusement. "You should come and try it! It's wonderful in here!"

That was enough to spoil Rolnikov's enjoyment of the moment. "You are there to do a job, Pelney. Get on with it, you dim-witted buffoon!"

The squire cheerfully began to swim back and forth across the pool, dipping his face into the water to see the better, but after ten minutes he was forced to admit defeat, and climbed out of the pool, shook himself off like an animal, and came to sit by a fire that Rolnikov had started.

"There," said Pelney, "you do care after all. You lit a fire for me."

"The boy complained he was cold."

Pelney looked over at the boy, who gave him a wink.

"Ah well," said Pelney, taking off his underclothes so that they could dry by the fire, and putting his trousers and jacket back on in the meantime. "At least it shows there's a heart beating in there somewhere."

"There's nothing in there," said Rolnikov.

"Nothing?" said Pelney. "Nothing at all? My, you really are as hard as they say, Rolnikov."

"I meant the pool, numbskull."

Pelney laughed. "Well, in that case you're right, Rolnikov. From inside the pool I could see right down to the bottom, and there was definitely nothing there. There wasn't even any dust in which a trapdoor could be hiding – it was solid rock at the bottom."

"Then it looks like your swim might have been a waste of time," apologised Rolnikov.

"No problem," said Pelney. "I enjoyed it, really. But where do we go now?"

Rolnikov pointed to the other end of the plateau.

"This is just a guess, but I think if we go over there, and look under that waterfall, we'll find that part of the rock wall there will swing open if we apply enough force to it."

"Under the stream and beyond the rock!" said Ronus.

"Good work, Rolnikov!" Pelney was impressed, despite himself. Rolnikov so often made comments about leaving the thinking to Pelney that the squire sometimes forgot just how smart his boss could be when he put his mind to a problem.

Five minutes later, the three of them were standing in the entrance to the home of the grim thinker. The cave looked very dark and musty. There were cobwebs everywhere, and dust covered the floor. It was easy to believe no one had been there for 4,000 years.

"Shall we go in?" said Pelney.

"Maybe I should wait outside," suggested Ronus. "Just in case the grim thinker is in a bad mood."

"Oh, don't worry about him," said Pelney. "In all likelihood all that's left of him will be a pile of old bones and, if we're lucky, instructions on how to do the impossible and free some people we don't know from a place which we don't know!"

"I'm not so sure," said Rolnikov. "I think there's a chance he might be waiting for us. Follow me."

The mad knight led the way into the cave. The other two followed, more warily, but at the same time not keen to get separated from the toughest of the group. Rolnikov could just about see, once his eyes had adjusted, but he was going to ask Pelney to light a torch anyway, just so no one tripped over and set off any alarms or anything. Just as he turned to speak, though, lights flashed on, first directly above their heads, and then all the way down a long smooth corridor leading into the heart of the mountain. Only the area by the cave entrance was rough-hewn and cobwebbed; the corridor beyond was spotlessly clean.

The three explorers exchanged a series of glances, but by mutual and silent decision agreed to continue: this did not really change anything. They set off down the tunnel. No end to it was currently in sight – though cylindrical, the tunnel was perfectly straight, and came to a vanishing point far off in the distance. It angled slightly downward, not so much that they were in danger of slipping down, but enough so that if they began to forward roll down it they'd soon pick up a breakneck speed.

"This is incredible!" said the boy, a little too loudly. His voice echoed down the tunnel, growing more distorted as it went, eventually becoming nothing more than an incoherent moan.

"Wow!" said Pelney, very quietly – in his time with Rolnikov he had got used to sneaking around places, so he was an old hand at this kind of thing.

It seemed to be taking a while to get anywhere, and the mad knight of Uttar Pradesh was only too

aware that time might well be of the essence for the captives of the tin can brains. "Let's run," he said to his companions, and so they did, Rolnikov leading the way. At first Pelney lagged behind, as the boy kept pace at Rolnikov's heels, but underneath the chubbiness, Pelney had the stamina that Ronus lacked, and overtook him, though both were by that point lagging some way behind Rolnikov, who, after almost ten minutes of running at his best speed and finding no change in the tunnel (other than that he could no longer look back and see the cave entrance), finally found himself with a destination in sight.

He stepped up the pace. The others might fall behind, but there did not seem to be any danger, and they would catch up eventually. In the meantime, time might well be of the essence. After another five minutes of running, he was there, standing at a windowless metal door, upon which was mounted a gigantic metal wheel as wide as the corridor itself. Trying the obvious route first, Rolnikov tried pushing the door. Nothing happened. He shrugged; the door might well have been left open by the last person to go through it. Looking more closely at the wheel, he saw that cogs at its centre bit into holes in a massive locking bar that was obviously holding the door shut. He put his impressive weight into pushing on one of the spokes of the wheel. It gave a little, then a little more. Pelney and Ronus were still some way up the corridor, so Rolnikov took a deep breath and tried again. This time it seemed looser, and he was able to turn the wheel a full quarter of a turn. Standing back up straight and shifting his grip, he pushed again, then again, and again, and one by one the teeth of the cogs pushed their way through the notches in the locking bar, before, eventually, the bar was completely clear and the door swung open.

Rolnikov took a moment to wipe the sweat from his forehead, just as the other two finally arrived, out of breath and twice as sweaty as he was.

"Well," panted Pelney, "what are you waiting for? Let's go inside!"

"Hold on," said Rolnikov, stopping the others from getting by. "This sanctum has been undisturbed for 4,000 years. We can't just barge in like riotous children. Gather yourselves together, and make sure you are ready to meet the grim thinker with all due decorum and deference."

"Sorry," said Pelney. "I just got over-excited, as usual."

They stepped through the door, into the inner sanctum of the thinker, and there he was, right in front of them, suspended in mid-air, in the literal centre of the spherical chamber. They stood on a

small walkway that went right round the circumference of the room. A small flight of steps ran down to computer equipment at the bottom of the sphere, another flight went up to meet a transparent bubble, in which sat the thinker, in the very pose in which Pelney had imagined him: his thin legs crossed beneath him and his scrawny arms crossed over his flat stomach, wearing nothing but a wrap of white cotton around his loins. He didn't move a muscle as they came in, though a length of his long white beard, which fell from his chin over his crossed legs, and through a hole in the bubble, right down to the bottom of the room, where it curled like an albino snake among the computer equipment, was swaying in the breeze from the door.

Ronus began to move along the walkway to see the thinker from a different angle, but there was still no reaction. Pelney tried waving, without success,

then called out, "Hello there, thinker!" For his efforts, he received nothing but a clout on the back of the head from an annoyed Rolnikov.

"Perhaps you recall what I said about decorum?"

"Oh, what does it matter?" said Pelney, moving out of range. "He's dead to the world, anyway. Probably just a statue or a hologram."

"Think so, eh?" replied Rolnikov, quickly darting forward and clipping Pelney on the back of the head again before he had a chance to react. "Don't you recall what Gorto said? Between two minutes?"

"I thought that was just primitive gobbledegook," said Pelney in surprise. "I never realised it could actually mean what it said!"

"Well," said Rolnikov, "I think it does. I think that the grim thinker has been in some kind of suspended animation for the last 4,000 years! And we must wake him!"

A
SILVER
AGE BOOKS
PRESENTATION

The Cosmic Butterfly

The three of them spent a little while poking their noses in and amongst all the bewilderingly advanced technology that filled the sphere of the grim thinker, hoping to discover a way to wake him from his ancient sleep. His beard made getting about in the lower level quite difficult, and there was some discussion as to whether it should be removed. In the end, despite the protests of the other two, whose weaker physiques made it harder for them to press through the piles of silver hair, Rolnikov decided not to. For all he knew, the grim thinker might well have gone into suspended animation for precisely the purpose of growing an exceptionally long beard! The others laughed, although they had to admit it must have been difficult to design a suspended animation system that *would* let the beard continue to grow while the man remained the same age, and more than that: actually untouched by time, living between two minutes.

Eventually, though, Rolnikov came to the conclusion that there was no immediately obvious way of waking the grim thinker. The mad knight was one of the most intellectually advanced men on all of Melrune, but Melrune was not the most advanced planet in the universe, and this technology was quite beyond him. For one thing, there were no buttons to press, no switches to pull, no visible way at all of interacting with the machinery. He was baffled.

"Any ideas?" he asked Pelney.

"We tried shouting, didn't we?"

"Yes, you tried shouting, buffoon." Luckily for Pelney, there was a sea of crispy white hair between him and the mad knight. "What about you?" asked Rolnikov, turning in desperation to Ronus. The boy looked thoughtful. "What do you think we should do?"

"Well," said the boy, putting a finger to his chin, "when I was a little kid, I used to wake my dad by pulling his beard."

"Genius," said Rolnikov in disgust. "They raise real geniuses in Monkey-Monkey, don't they?" He sat down to think.

Pelney did not think it was that bad an idea. It was worth a try, anyway. They had disturbed the beard a little, of course, when wading through it, but all three had been careful not to deliver any sharp tugs to the grim thinker's chin. The breeze from the entrance,

too, had made it swing back and forth slightly, but again without effect.

"It's not so dumb," said the squire. "I'm going to give it a try, Rolnikov."

Rolnikov looked at him sourly. "Go ahead, Pelney. Show the boy how *full-grown* idiots behave."

Pelney shrugged, and Rolnikov went back to his thoughts, which by this time were principally concerned with the effect of the failure of the mission upon his relationship with the orbiting princess. Would she care for a man who had failed at the last hurdle? And if the universe really did depend upon his success, would it matter anyway? This was perhaps the major flaw in the mad knight's character. His dark and brooding nature sometimes got the better of him, leading him into bleakness and defeatism, especially at times like this, when the enemy was ineffable, diffuse, and impossible to attack with a sword. In the midst of a fight, his anguish would disappear, sword stroke would follow head-butt, and problems were resolved by the twist of a knife. Left to brood, he easily fell into inaction – but then it was not as if he was blind to this fact. At some level, this must have partly accounted for the way he kept the otherwise irritating Pelney around. Despite what he always said, it couldn't be just about boots.

So Pelney pulled the beard. He grabbed hold of it with both hands, made sure the grip was firm, and gave it three hard, quick jerks.

The effect on the grim thinker was unusual: delayed, and taking place in slow motion. Long after the chubby squire had released the beard from his hands, the chin of the sleeping thinker was being pulled forward, millimetre by millimetre. His body rocked forward – Rolnikov was glad to note that the head had not simply come off at the neck – and after ten minutes or so it seemed that there was a hint of an opening eye. Ten minutes later it was clear; the grim thinker was slowly waking from his long, long sleep, and Pelney and Ronus were shaking hands in satisfaction, while Rolnikov was shaking his head in disappointment. Why did the universe conspire against him in this way?

After an hour, time in the grim thinker's bubble seemed to be back in synch with the rest of universe. As two of the trespassers gazed in awe, and the third

sat nursing his pride, the grim thinker staggered to his feet, still bleary-eyed and apparently unaware of his visitors. He got to the exit from the bubble, to the top of the flight of stairs, but stumbled and fell. Quick as thought, Rolnikov leaped to catch the falling thinker, but the man's beard, twisting through the hole in the base of the bubble and the steps, caught, and the wisest (so legend said) man in the galaxy hung in the air, suspended over their heads by his chin.

Fortunately, his neck did not break, and Pelney ran up to the walkway, and then up the staircase, to the bubble entrance, and cut the beard with his knife. Below, Rolnikov gently caught the thinker, and then laid him on a bed of his own erstwhile beard.

"Thinker!" said Rolnikov, insistently. "Are you all right?"

At first there was no response; the thinker's eyes seeming to stare almost sightlessly, but in reality simply waiting for the brain to wind up to the point where it would be able to make sense of the input it was receiving.

Pelney had a go. "O grim thinker, tell us, how does it feel to be in the future?"

The old man's eyes suddenly seemed to focus.

"Fancy that," said Rolnikov with a dry laugh. "The first thing he sees after 4,000 years is your face, Pelney. I bet he wishes he stayed asleep."

The grim thinker pushed himself up, and looked around at the bed of beard he lay on. "4,000 years, has it been? Well I never! And it feels just the same!" This last bit was addressed to Pelney.

"Did you expect to be asleep for so long?" asked Ronus, finding his voice, although it did crack a little at one point.

The grim thinker got to his feet and climbed the stairs to the walkway while answering. He was pretty steady on his feet now, but just to be sure Rolnikov shadowed him closely.

"Oh no, boy. But then I understand there's a saying: don't tug on the grim thinker's beard, is that it?" Behind the thinker, Rolnikov looked angrily at the boy, who shrugged in mock innocence. "That one was going around before I even went to sleep. So I knew no one would wake me frivolously. Once Ibis gave me the technology to put myself in suspended animation, I had no idea how long it would take for them to send someone to wake me. But then that was all I wanted, to take a nap for a while, just till it was time for me to help out. The universe didn't need me then. It took 4,000 years for it to need me again." He looked over his shoulder at Rolnikov, and then at Pelney. "That isn't so bad, is it? Some people the uni-

verse never needs."

"Ha ha," said Pelney, to Rolnikov's irritation.

Leading round the walkway, the grim thinker came to a point opposite the entrance to the tunnel. He waved his hand and a part of the wall faded away, to the surprise of those who had only just searched the room.

"Come in," said the grim thinker. "Have a cup of tea. And tell me how I can help you."

Rolnikov, Pelney and the boy followed him through the opening, which re-solidified behind them. They found themselves in a comfortable and spacious lounge, a small food preparation area off to one side, sofas for sitting on in the centre, and shadowed doorways leading off here and there.

"It's amazing," said Pelney, "that all of this lasted for 4,000 years."

"It didn't," replied the grim thinker, pouring some tea for each of them. They went and sat on the sofas. The grim thinker took great pleasure in stretching every bit of his body as far as he could in every direction. "None of this existed until you opened the cave entrance – none of it, that is, apart from the spherical room in which you found me, which was built by Ibis on my behalf all those centuries ago. The second you opened the cave door, billions of magnificent nanorobots sprang into action, creating the tunnel that led you down to me, constructing this entire suite of rooms, turning the lights on, and even boiling the kettle." He sipped his drink. "I told them, you see, that I'd like a cup of tea with my wake-up call."

"Will you go back to sleep?" asked young Ronus.

"When you're done with me, yes, I'll go back to thinking – not sleeping, thinking, but thinking very, very slowly – there are problems that can't be solved any other way. Now, to business, what do you want from me?"

Rolnikov was the one to answer. "We have a message from Ibis. They want you to free three people, if they are still alive – Milon the Assassin, Professor Quigg and Detective Jim Grimmett, all of whom are in the clutches of the tin can brains. I do not know how you can help, but—"

The grim thinker cut him off. "I can help. Don't worry about that. That's why they sent you to me, even after all these years."

"How?" asked Pelney, leaning forward in excitement. "You don't even know where they are. They could be virtually anywhere in the universe!"

"I have a few tricks up my sleeve," replied the thinker. "Let's finish our tea before getting onto that. And do you want anything to eat?"

Since Pelney and Ronus started immediately to salivate like Pavlovian dogs, Rolnikov said he wouldn't mind. The grim thinker was obviously keen to eat something too, now that a few sips of tea had settled his stomach, and he rushed off back to the food preparation area, leaping over one of the sofas in his haste to get there.

Soon they were all having an excellent meal that thrilled even the overused taste buds of Pelney, and which to Ronus seemed the feast of a king. The grim thinker, clearly no ascetic, tucked in as heartily as any of them. Before ten minutes were up, his tray was clear, and he hurried the others into finishing off theirs. He got them all to their feet, and led them off to one of the shadowed doorways.

The light switched on as they entered. It was a simple, bare and small room, with only one interesting feature: a stone pillar, upon which rested a glass jar, within which was a butterfly. Rolnikov leaned forward to take a better look at the insect. It was not, however, the most lovely butterfly he had ever seen – its wings were not particularly brightly-coloured, and the pattern was positively drab.

"Here we are!" exclaimed the grim thinker. "This butterfly was something I earned a long, long time ago. Deconstructed and stored in the memory of the nanorobots all these long centuries, it now stands ready to help solve your little problem." He took the lid off the jar, then turned to Rolnikov. "What did you want, again?"

The mad knight looked at the old man queerly, but repeated the problem. "We would like Milon the Assassin, Professor Quigg and Detective Jim Grimmett to be freed from the grasp of the tin can brains."

"Fine," said the thinker. The others stared at him, but he directed their attention to the butterfly as it beat its wings a single time. The grim thinker smiled, and put the lid of the jar back on. "It can only do that once in a millennia, so I hope that was worth it."

"What?" demanded Rolnikov. "How will that free anyone?"

"Don't get testy," the old man said. "Listen, have you ever heard the idea that the beating of a butterfly's wings on one side of the world can cause a hurricane on the other?"

Rolnikov admitted that he had, although Pelney and Ronus were stumped.

"This is the cosmic butterfly, created thousands of years ago by intelligences long since departed from the universe to control events at every level of reality. Its mastery of cause and effect is absolute, so well-defined that a single beat of its wings can make

virtually anything happen anywhere in the universe. Your friends will be freed."

"Wow," said Pelney. "That's pretty cool."

"Thank you," said the grim thinker. "Now, I think you should leave. I've been thinking something over for the last 2,314 years and I really think I'm on the verge of a breakthrough. Make sure you go quickly – I wouldn't want the tunnel to be deconstructed by the nanorobots while you were still within!"

He led the way back into the spherical room, and behind them they could already see the lounge area dissolving as billions of the invisible beings swarmed over it, packing it away all neat and tidy, ready for the next visitors to come a-tugging on the grim thinker's beard.

The grim thinker climbed back into his bubble, and waved goodbye to Rolnikov, Pelney and Ronus, who waved back and then began the long trudge up the tunnel.

So that was it, thought Pelney. The mission was complete, and, to the extent that they could tell, successful. Hopefully this would leave the orbiting princess and Rolnikov happy enough to spend a bit of time together. Meanwhile, he could get on with cleaning the mad knight's boots, which were covered in long, white strands of hair.

Imagine that, thought Pelney, the mission done, and Rolnikov never even had to use his special power!

* * * * *

When the butterfly beat its wings, ever so gently and slowly, a small bit of cobweb from the cave entrance; a piece that had travelled down most of the tunnel stuck to Ronus's backpack, before being knocked off him in the lounge area when the thinker leapt over the sofa, and had then been blown about in the air until it floated into the butterfly's room; that piece of cobweb, which had been dropping into the glass jar, was reversed in its direction by the breeze from the butterfly's wings. So thin and light that it was imperceptible, the web flew back up out of the jar and settled upon Pelney's cheek.

Back out of the mountain plateau, panting with breath after having had to outrun the nanorobots' destruction of the long tunnel back to the surface, Pelney wiped the back of his hand across his face, unwittingly dragging the cobweb across his nostrils. It tickled him and he sneezed, extravagantly.

With nothing else to do while the others caught their breath, Rolnikov had been sharpening his sword with a small grinding stone. When Pelney sneezed, it

made Rolnikov drag the grinding stone across the back of the hand holding the sword. The mad knight let out a massive roar, as much from annoyance at Pelney as from the pain.

Further up the mountain, an accumulation of winter snow, loosened by the warmer summer weather, shook to the echo and began to plummet down the mountain. Fortunately for Rolnikov, Pelney and Ronus, it missed their position, though they were able to watch as it gathered speed, snow and debris as it continued on its destructive route. Rolnikov glared at Pelney, who shrugged and ate a sandwich.

In the village of Monkey-Monkey, a man on the look-out for the return of the adventurers saw the avalanche begin its descent, and quickly raised the alarm. Everyone within reach rushed to the common area, and at the order of the headman emergency procedures were followed, and so the town of Monkey-Monkey lifted off, a powerful force-field – Melrune was not a very advanced planet, but it goes without saying that every village had at least the basic amenities – slicing off the little chunk of the mountainside upon which the huts sat and trapping a bubble of atmosphere for the people to breathe.

The sudden emergency had left Garto a little shaken, though – especially as he thought it might be the result of tugging on the grim thinker's beard, so to speak, and because he had every reason to think his son might have come a cropper – and he was little too forceful in manipulating the controls of the emergency anti-gravity apparatus. The village flew up into space.

A passing asteroid, which had been on its way to incinerate itself in the uppermost reaches of the atmosphere of Melrune, was knocked off course when it was struck like a billiard ball by the shooting

village of Monkey-Monkey. The asteroid shot off into space, while Garto tried to guide Monkey-Monkey back down to the surface.

Amazingly, as luck would have it, literally at that very moment a wormhole, one which was due to exist for no more than a handful of seconds, came into being in the route of the asteroid, which flew down it, before emerging in a different galaxy altogether.

The last of the tin can brains to have left the home planet were at that point on a ship which was preparing to dock – preparing to dock with a craft so terrible that it threatened the whole future of the universe. On board the ship were the two prisoners, Milon the Assassin and Detective Jim Grimmett, held fast by robotic bands, their bodily functions – the tin can brains had learnt their lesson! – being dealt with by painfully inserted catheters. A tin can guard was nearby, its sensors straining to detect any hint that the prisoners were trying to escape their bonds.

The asteroid hit the ship, just as it let down its shields to dock, but in the millisecond before the shields of the dark matter destroyer reached out to protect it. The rear of the ship exploded, and shock waves ran through the whole of the structure. The guard watching over Milon and Grimmett, not having a firm grip on anything, was flung across the room and it smashed into a hundred pieces when it hit the wall. The bonds that held the two Ibis agents exploded, leaving them free, though with rather sore wrists. Removing the catheters left them even sorer elsewhere.

In another part of the explosion-wracked ship, a man banged his head against a doorway, and remembered that people had once called him Professor Samson Quigg.

Better Living Through Cannibilisation

This time, rather than leaving a purely mechanical guard-droid to watch the prisoners, the enemy had left a fully-fledged tin can brain, and as Milon and Grimmatt removed themselves from their bonds, they couldn't help noticing the brain itself, lying in the shattered remains of its body, rudimentary tentacles flailing about for the connections which had been destroyed.

"Do you think it can still see us?" asked Grimmatt.

Milon the Assassin shook his head. As ever, he was immaculately dressed, the weeks in captivity having done nothing to wrinkle his black suit or to knock his carefully lacquered eyebrows, which extended two and a half centimetres (he measured it each morning, or at least each morning that he did not spend being tortured by his enemies) beyond the sides of his head, out of place. His bald head shone as if freshly polished, and the smartly cropped strip of black hair that ran around the base of his skull was as tidy as it had been when he had first left the house, all that time ago, before his unwitting destruction of half of Golgokkamok.

Thinking of that reminded Milon of his small friend and assistant, Zaaloon the Robotoface, who had after all been responsible for the cataclysm. Now that he was free, he would have to try and make contact.

He supposed he'd better pay some attention to his "rescuer". They had not spoken much over the last few weeks, largely because of the danger of being overheard by the tin can brains. Milon did not want to give away how much he knew of their plans, and he did not want Grimmatt to give away how much Ibis knew or did not know – the very piece of information for which he assumed they had been tortured every day. There had never been any danger of Milon succumbing to the torture – he was too much of an egoist; if he had submitted to the demands of the tin can brains, the automatic Ibis hypnotic programming would have kicked in, erasing his personality – rather the universe die than that, he thought.

"Doubt it," he replied. "They didn't evolve into this. They were human, most say, but packed it in." He walked over and stamped on the brain. "Never

know, though, it might have raised the alarm." Grimmatt gawped.

"It was defenceless! That was really cruel."

Milon looked at him with a raised eyebrow – with eyebrows like his this was a very striking expression. "They don't call me Milon the Assassin because I like fluffy bunnies."

"Even so," said Grimmatt, "I thought you were on the side of the angels!"

"Sorry to disappoint you," replied Milon. He began to root around in the innards of the tin can body, and managed to put the creature's blaster back together, and jerry-rig a power source for it. He began to head off. "This baby should help us get out of here." He saw that Grimmatt was still holding back, a frown on his face. "Listen," said Milon, realising that a little tact was necessary, especially given that this guy had not been an Ibis agent for very long; that this was his first mission in fact; not to mention his first time in space and all the rest. He had to make some allowances. "Within twenty minutes that brain would have been back in a new tin can body blasting away at us as we tried to make our escape. Would you have shot it then?"

Grimmatt had to admit that he would have done.

"Well, come on then, don't be so queasy."

"You're right," said Grimmatt. "It just looked pretty disgusting, the way the brain gave way under your boot and everything."

Milon punched his shoulder. "Chin up, old boy. There's no time left to lose." He ran off down a corridor, and Grimmatt followed him.

As they made their way through the ruined ship, dodging sudden explosions from left and right, zipping as quickly as they could past disabled tin cans and murder-droids, blasting the occasional one who looked like it might be a threat, Milon could not help reflecting on how he had got into this situation. Naturally, sometimes getting captured by the enemy was a sure-fire way to get taken to their most secret bases and lairs – although he could not be sure, he thought it pretty likely that this had happened in the present case – but more often than not it was a one-way route to sudden death, or, worse, torture and a

long, *lingering* death. He thought he had been pretty unlucky back there on the planet of the tin can brains. It had not been his fault that Zaaldoon had left the mega-wave on, after all, so he was not really responsible for the damage done to Golgokkamok, or for the subsequent vow of Nanotus the giant to pursue him to his death. He had not even had time to eat the eggs Zaaldoon had made in the mega-wave that fateful morning!

The mission had been going pretty well till the giant showed up and spoiled things. As the tin can brains had hunted him all over the galaxies he had slowly gathered information on them, and made his way to their home planet, where he had spent weeks hiding under the surface of the planet, tunnelling here and there, with Zaaldoon's help, and leaving listening devices secreted in each of the major war rooms of the metallic maniacs. Although the tin can brains were close-mouthed even with each other, Milon had soon worked out that the major thrust of their plan was the destruction of the universe, and shortly after that, even as one by one the audio pickups went silent, as the tin can brains abandoned their home planet, he had discovered the means by which they intended to implement that plan. That, of course, was when the psychotic Nanotus the Giant had shown up, ripping up everything in sight in his attempt to get at Milon. The tin can brains, alerted by the presence of the new intruder to the presence of the first, had soon come close to capturing both. At the last, Milon had shared a little of what he had learnt with the giant, had managed to get through the rage that had been dominating his will, and had seen real repentance in the giant's eyes as he used the dimensional opener, on his way, as Milon had then hoped, and as he now learnt from Grimmatt in a quickly whispered conversation while they fled down the corridors had actually been the case, to get word to Mrs Challenger. Milon was pleased that the information-carrying microbes had worked so well.

"We've been everywhere," said Milon, after twenty minutes of running around, "and there's no sign of any escape pods on this ship. The tin can brains may well just rely on their metal casings to protect them out in space if necessary."

"So what do we do?"

"I have an idea, but it is slightly mental."

Grimmett didn't seem to mind. "If the alternative is falling back into the hands of the tin can brains, mental sounds good to me. Do you mean some kind of astral projection?"

Milon laughed, the short cynical laugh which was the closest he ever came to genuine good humour.

"Not that kind of mental – I mean the crazy sort of mental."

"Whatever gets us out of here, Milon!" said Grimmatt with feeling. "What's the plan?"

Milon led him off back in the direction they had just come from. They soon reached the tin can brain which he had most recently finished off. It was still pretty much in one piece, the assassin having held the blaster to its head and boiled its brain on a low power setting. Grimmatt had not laughed when Milon asked if he was hungry.

The assassin took firm hold of one of the tin can arms and began to drag it down the corridor.

"Again I ask," said Grimmatt in a slightly exasperated tone, "what is the plan?" After all his years in the force it was rather galling to him to be treated like a raw recruit, even though he recognised the authority of the other man, and was willing to be guided by his superior knowledge of the situation they were in.

"I take back what I said before," replied Milon, indicating that Grimmatt should take one of the other metal arms. "Upon further reflection I have come to the conclusion that my plan is actually one that only such a refined master of the secret agent arts as myself could have come up with." Now it was Grimmatt's turn to raise an eyebrow, though he did grab an arm and start pulling. Soon they reached a second dead tin can. "The tin can brains don't have escape pods, do they? We think it's because they can go into space, don't we? So we'll slice a few of them up to create our own spacecraft. What do you think?"

Grimmett thought about it – the plan didn't seem so stupid, especially when the ship they were already in seemed to be on the point of breaking apart, and the only other option was to head into even greater danger – whatever the ship had been docking with when the explosion had occurred. He knew Milon had an idea what it was, but that he did not want to say – there was always the possibility that their whole escape had been staged for precisely the purpose of finally getting him to talk. Perhaps that was why he had taken such sadistic pleasure in finishing off the wounded brains, thought Grimmatt. It was just in case they thought they were playing him for a fool. He resolved not to play any pranks on Milon at the Ibis office party.

"I suppose it is worth a try," he said out loud to Milon. "Although in my experience their bodies haven't been that tough – I've blasted holes in a few with bullets. Plus, back in prison on their planet, Quigg and I managed to short one out by throwing, erm, liquid over it."

Milon thought about what Grimmatt had said – he

did respect the detective from Earth, even if, in his opinion, he could do with being a little more ruthless. After all, rookie that he was, he'd made it this far.

"You probably caught it by surprise: I imagine they wouldn't be completely airtight when they go about their normal day-to-day evil business. But shot into space, or even going underwater, they would probably clam up to protect the brain within the casing. As for the bullets – it's a good point. We don't want to get out of here only to be blasted by the first micro-meteorite that shoots by. I'll double up on the thickness of the shell, and see if I can put together some kind of rudimentary shield."

"Great," said Grimmatt. "How can I help?"

They chose a suitable place in which to do their butchering. It was either a storage area for shipped goods or soldiers, or a hangar of some kind, although it was at present empty, apart from the two escapees and their raw materials. At the far end was a huge bulkhead door which, although it was sealed tightly shut, with no visible means of opening it, Milon was pretty sure would give way to space if blasted hard enough. At the other end of the hangar, the two of them began to pull apart the tin can bodies, threw the brains off to one side, and turned up the power on the blaster Milon had scavenged in order to use it as a welding torch. The assassin took out his sunglasses – "I've looked into the hearts of suns with these on," he told Grimmatt proudly – and got to work welding the body parts together, while the detective set off to drag extra bodies back to the work area.

It was not long before Milon, working at a frantic speed, and onto his fourth blaster, had put together a pretty decent outer casing for their ship. They had still not been discovered by any active, fully functioning tin can brains. Milon speculated that the explosion must have damaged some central electronic nervous system shared by the robot bodies on the ship – probably something that saved a lot of wear and tear on their internal processing equipment, but which in this case, by a million to one chance, had left them wide open to a devastating blow.

"What do you think it was?" Milon asked Grimmatt, who for a while had been sitting with his back to the assassin as the welding continued, to protect his eyes. He had already gathered enough raw materials for their miniature ship and was using a sliver of metal to work the panels of the tin can bodies apart, so that they were ready for Milon to work on.

"I don't know," said Grimmatt, surprised to be asked. "Did they crash instead of docking?"

"It seems possible," replied Milon, speaking

loudly to make himself heard over the noise of the blaster as it seared together segments of the tin cans to create airtight joints. "That would explain why tin cans haven't poured into the ship from over there."

Grimmett began to ask where that was, but Milon shushed him.

"But the original explosion was at the back of the ship. It could have been some ship attacking, but if it was, it was quickly destroyed because there were no follow-up blasts. It could have been a long-range missile. I suppose it might conceivably have been my pal Zaaloon, although I doubt he would have the sense to do anything quite so effective. It seems most likely that it was an asteroid smashing into the ship."

"That was a lucky break," said Grimmatt.

"Yes," said Milon, pursing his lips. "It was, wasn't it?"

"So that's why you're so suspicious?"

"You got it," the assassin called back. "But you never know, so we have to take the chance if it's there. If we get to kill a few tin can brains along the way, the afternoon won't have been a total failure!" He laughed, switched off the blaster, and got to his feet to admire his handiwork. "And who knows, maybe we have just been lucky – and it would be stupid to pass up the chance of escape."

The shell he had created was a simple cylinder, with just enough room inside for two people to sit fairly comfortably. One panel had not yet been welded into place, leaving room for them to climb inside. In effect, it looked just like a giant tin can brain's torso – on many of the recycled bodies they had left the blasters intact, with the power packs and controls inside the ship – these formed a belt around the centre of the cylinder, ready to blast it in whichever direction was necessary.

"Okay," said Milon. "Get inside."

Grimmett excitedly climbed into the ship, taking with him the welding blaster Milon had set down. Inside he couldn't see a thing – he had faith that Milon had given some thought to the method they would use for navigating the ship.

Outside, the assassin was gathering together all the other blasters that were at hand, both the ones for which he had expended the power packs, plus half a dozen which he had saved for this very purpose. (In all, fully seventeen tin can brains had given up their bodies for this project.) Piling them up by the bulkhead door, Milon began to flick each of those still with power to the highest power setting. Each had been rigged to blow once a critical level was attained, and the ones without power he had added to the pile just in case they had any combustible bits

that might add that little something to the explosion.

He began to head back to the ship. A few metres away he saw Grimmatt peering out of the ship at him, and gave him a wave. But then, suddenly, he was stopped in his tracks by a guttural shout from off to one side, from an entrance that led off to a part of the ship they had not explored.

“Stop there!” called the voice.

Some part of Milon’s brain, the part not considering the possible outcomes of the hundreds of different combat opportunities open to him at this point, noted that the voice was in English. However, he did not recognise the helmeted figure that now stumbled from the shadows, gun in hand and pointed firmly at the assassin’s chest. That was the first thing Milon noticed about him. The second was his unusually enlarged cranium, and the strange, tightly sealed opening that sat in the middle of the huge forehead, almost as if a third, outsized eye was there in hiding. The last thing Milon noticed, before leaping for the opening in the ship, was the man’s peculiar clothes, made of a sort of hard, black metallic material. It looks pretty cool, thought the assassin, even as a blast from the man’s gun scalded his heel, though it does make him look a bit like a tin can brain on legs. As Grimmatt held up the single remaining piece of the shell for him to weld into place, Milon decided to have a word with his tailor.

“Who was that?” asked the detective, whose field of vision had been restricted to seeing Milon and his reaction to the attacker. He had not recognised the voice.

“I’ve no idea,” said Milon, dropping the blaster and moving to take hold of two of the blaster controls that ringed the inside of the cylinder. Unfortunately there had not been time to rig a centralised control panel, so each of them would have to be switched on by hand. Grimmatt grabbed two others, ready to go on Milon’s mark. Of course, if the interloper outside managed to prevent the explosion, there would be no point in switching them on at all – there was no way they would be powerful enough to get the makeshift spacecraft moving if gravity and atmosphere kept their hold on the hangar bay.

There were several tense moments, and then they heard an explosion which shook their little craft, but didn’t appear to damage it – although the test was still to come.

“One, two, three, ...” counted Milon, but then they were both thrown flat on their backs as the little ship was sucked out into the darkness of space, along with all the other contents of the hangar: chunks of the blasted bulkhead door, the atmosphere, leftover bits and pieces of tin can bodies... Milon wondered if the guy who had attacked them had made it out before the explosion, but he didn’t think about it long – he didn’t really care.

“The plan is go!” said Milon. The two of them resumed their places. “One, two, three, go!” Each of them switched on two of the blasters, and they felt the pull on their bodies as the cylinder began to pick up speed. Milon hoped that they were not just heading straight back whence they had come.

Smouldering Coals

As the blasters pushed the ship into the inky blackness of space, Milon and Grimmatt held their breath for a few moments. But there was no collision, and both let out a deep sigh. They had successfully managed to pull away from the wrecked ship of the tin can brains.

“Looks like we made it!” cried the detective.

“This far, at least,” said Milon, trying his best to contain the ebullience that he, too, felt. “I guess it wasn’t such a crazy plan after all.”

“There is one thing,” said Grimmatt. “How are we going to navigate when we can’t see a thing? I mean,

I’m sure you have it all worked out and everything...” He trailed off.

“Don’t worry,” said Milon, clapping him on the shoulder. “I think our eyes and ears are out there, somewhere. He drew Grimmatt’s attention to what looked like a watch on his wrist. Before he could continue the explanation, Grimmatt had leapt in.

“What a fancy timepiece!” he said with enthusiasm, looking at the small display, with flashing numbers and symbols which meant nothing to him. “Is it able to tell us where we are?”

“Actually, no,” replied Milon, “although it would,

coincidentally, have been able to if I had had the opportunity to download the appropriate galactic data to its memory banks. Unfortunately I had no way of knowing where this quest would end up taking me, so at the moment it is still full of information about the galaxy in which Golgokkamok and Earth are located."

"Ah," said Grimmatt, disappointed.

"However," said Milon, with a vocal flourish, "it will allow me to communicate with my great friend, Zaaloon the Robotoface, who has hopefully been following at a safe distance, ever since my capture by the tin can brains! Let's see if he's out there!"

Milon started to fiddle with his watch. At first all Grimmatt could hear was the hazy buzz of empty space, and Milon's voice as he called into the void.

"Zaaloon," said the assassin, "Zaaloon, faithful friend, are you there?"

For a minute or two there was no reply, but Milon kept on trying. Then, when Grimmatt was all too ready to give up, and resign himself to a slow, blind death in the depths of space, a tinny voice piped up out of Milon's special spy watch.

"Hi boss, it's me, Zaaloon! I'm here!"

"That's great!" shouted Milon, the suddenness of the noise making Grimmatt jump a little – just enough to make him bang his head a bit on the roof of their cylindrical ship. "Can you see us? Where are you?"

"Yes, sir, Zaaloon is here! Ready to help!"

"I know you are, Zaaloon," replied Milon with patience. He was used to dealing with his over-exuberant robotic pal. "Where are you?"

"I'm stuck to the ship of the tin can brains, Milon. I glued myself to it back on their home planet. I knew if I waited long enough you'd get out. Are you in that cylinder over there? The one that's about to hit a slowly-spinning piece of jagged wreckage?"

Milon and Grimmatt looked at one another in alarm. "That would be us," said the assassin hastily. "Could you scoot over here and give us directions? Just perch on the bonnet, and lead us to safety?"

"No problem, Milon," said the voice. "In the meantime, turn left."

Grimatt switched off the blasters on his side for a few seconds, then switched them back on again. Confirmation of the operation's success came over Milon's watch. A few seconds later there was a clunk on the nose of the cylinder.

"Is that you?" asked Milon.

"It is, sir!"

"Great," said the assassin. "Now you can give us directions to get us out of here. First, just tell me, is

it finished?"

"Is what finished?" asked Grimmatt, but Milon shushed him.

The voice took a moment or two to speak. "It certainly seems to be, boss." Milon shook his head in sadness.

"Is it what we thought it was?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so, boss. It stretches as far as the eye can see, an ocean of smouldering coals covered in a spider's-web of tin can construction. They're still building stuff, but that just looks like the icing on the cake. It looks ready to set off any time."

"Cack," said Milon.

"Tell me what it is!" demanded Grimmatt. "What could possibly be so dangerous that it could destroy the whole universe? What was it that started this whole insane quest? That it was worth the lives of Nanotus and Quigg to stop?"

Milon was shocked. "Nanotus is dead?"

"Er, sorry, yes," said Grimmatt rather sheepishly. He would not have wanted to break the news this way. He had just forgotten to tell Milon, in all the rush and hurry. "At least I think so. He was left in the travelling dimension, surrounded by vicious void-wraiths."

Milon shrugged, locking the image away in a part of his mind which he did not visit very often. "No matter. He had been trying to kill me for months, anyway, when you think about it. Okay, we've got to get going now, before the tin can brains notice we've escaped. Zaaloon, which way? Anything nearby?"

"We passed one solar system on the way in, and I remember seeing a planet there that looked pretty decent. We should be able to reach it in a few hours. I don't know what it'll be like when we get there, though. The dark matter destroyer is messing all nearby solar systems up bad."

"We'll have to take that chance," said Milon. "We need to land somewhere, take stock, and see if we can contact Mrs Challenger and Ibis somehow."

Zaaloon told them which blasters to switch on, and they were on their way, but Grimmatt hadn't forgotten his questions, and once the course was set, he went through them once again. Before talking, Milon broke radio contact with Zaaloon, just in case the tin can brains were listening in. He had not yet discounted the possibility that the whole escape might be a plot to find out how much Ibis knew. But though Milon was a natural cynic and pessimist, he knew from experience that the harder he pulled on the leash, the better the chance that the captors would drop it.

"If you need us for anything," he said to the robot-

oface, before breaking contact, “just knock.”

Then he turned to Detective Grimmett.

“Basically, it’s this. The tin can brains have built something they call the dark matter destroyer. You don’t know what dark matter is, do you?” Grimmett shook his head. “The mass of the universe cannot be explained by the number of visible objects in it. At some point in the future, scientists on your world will surmise, and be at least partly correct, that this means there must be matter in the universe which we cannot see – dark matter. Highly dense stuff, it’s the matter that never got it together in time to make stars. There are patches of it out in space, in between the galaxies, at the edge of the universe, at the middle.”

“Have the tin can brains built something that can destroy it?”

“Oh no,” said Milon. “Although if they had it would not have been much worse. *They’ve built a spaceship out of it!* Can you imagine what that means? They have picked up a chunk of some of the heaviest stuff in the universe, reignited it somehow, kept it ticking over, and turned it into a big ship which can go wherever it pleases – any obstacle in its path, any planet, any star, will become a smear on the forward bow.”

“My God!” exclaimed Grimmett.

“It might as well be,” said Milon. “It’s the most powerful artificial object this universe has ever seen. It will plough through the galaxies, serving the colossal blood lust of the tin can brains. Nothing will stand against it.”

Grimmett was awe-struck. “And now it’s operational.”

“We were brought on the last ship to leave the planet of the tin can brains. Apart from those left behind on already conquered worlds, every single tin can brain is here, now, ready to take on the galaxy.”

What can we do?” asked the detective, squeezing his nails into the palm of his hand.

“Just what I said before,” replied Milon, ever calm in a crisis. “We contact Mrs Challenger, see what she can do.”

They continued talking for a couple of hours, Grimmett telling Milon everything that had happened up to that point, Milon answering any questions the detective had.

Suddenly there was a bang on the nose of the cylinder. Milon quickly switched on his watch communicator. “Milon here!”

“We’ve got company, Milon!” said Zaaloon. “Tin can fighters!”

“Marvellous,” said Milon to Grimmett. “Tin can brains fitted out in special suits, with added



weaponry and propulsion capabilities. Shame we couldn’t have got a couple of those to power this ship! We could have been safe by now!” He turned back to the communicator. “Zaaloon, how far to the planet?”

“We’re almost there, but the brains are gaining on us, sir!”

“We’re going to full thrust, hang on out there!”

“Sure thing, sir!”

Milon and Grimmett both took hold of the controls of the blasters, and turned the whole lot to full power. It would burn the power sources out quickly, but there was no other option. They felt the pull against their bodies, and then there was an explosion, and an electronic shriek from Milon’s communicator – “I’m hit, Milon!” – and somehow Grimmett came to be sprawled on the floor, blood streaming from a wound to the head.

Milon flexed his fingers, said a quick prayer to the grim thinker, and took hold of as many of the blasters as he could. Landing, without eyes, ears or a co-pilot, and with a squadron of special tin can space fighters on his tail, would be hellishly difficult. But then he needed a challenge, the mission having been such a breeze up till now. He laughed bitterly, and gave it his best shot.

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Milon dragged Grimmett along, his hands locked under the unconscious man’s arms. It was difficult, the earth shifting beneath his very feet, in response to the gravitational pull of the dark matter destroyer, but

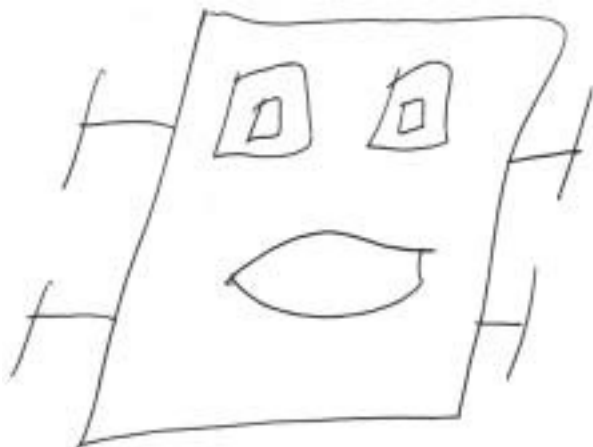
he struggled on. He thought that he had seen a cave halfway up the hill, and if he could get Grimmett there safely, they might have a chance.

There had been little he could do to hide the wreckage of their makeshift spaceship, though. Less than 500 metres away at the foot of the hill, he had not even been able to put out the flames that had engulfed it moments after he had got the detective out. There was a small chance, though – he had left the damaged Zaaldoon behind to clear up the mess as best he could. If the robotoface did not go on the blink again, maybe he would be able to cover the cylinder with earth before the tin can brains made their appearance in the purple sky above. Milon kept going. As long as there was even the slightest chance, even if that chance depended on the efforts of his half-baked robot pal, he would keep going. The universe, not for the first time, depended on him.

Every step seemed to take an eternity. Out in the open like this, he would be a sitting duck for the first enemy to discover him. Of course, he had thought about abandoning the Earthman, but that was not Milon's style, and without his style, Milon would just be another run-of-the-mill intergalactic secret agent assassin with a robotic chum, and god knows there were enough of those around already. Plus, there hadn't been time to dig a hole to put him in.

Milon reached the cave opening. He picked up a nearby rock and chucked it into the darkness. There being no response, he took the risk and plunged in and dropped the detective to the ground. If there were wild animals inside, Grimmett would have to take his chances. Better for Ibis, reflected Milon, in any case, that he be eaten by local fauna than be captured again by the tin can brains, given how much he now knew.

He spent a moment trying to make the detective comfortable – though grumbling and groaning,



Grimmett was still unconscious, or delirious. He did not have a temperature though, and the wound to his head was not serious. Milon quickly wiped it and tore a strip from his own shirt for a bandage. He reckoned that his fellow Ibis agent would come round soon enough. In the meantime, he had work to do.

He went to the cave opening to see how Zaaldoon was getting on, but the news was not good. The wiring in the robotoface had always been somewhat shaky, and the hit from the tin can guns had obviously done nothing to improve the situation. Zaaldoon was currently preparing food for a horde of expectant lizards that had gathered around him. One by one he doled out little insects grilled on the flames of the makeshift spaceship, to the glee of his little friends, who had doubtless been finding it harder to feed themselves in the changing conditions of their world. Milon clapped a hand to his head, just as the first streaks across the sky indicated the arrival of the tin can brains.

“Zaaldoon!” he called. “Get up here!”

The robotoface looked up, saluted, and tipped the partly-cooked contents of his grill over the lizards, who leapt into the air to try and snatch them from each other. One insect – Milon's eyesight was exceptionally good – which had obviously been only recently added to the grill made a brave attempt to flutter away, but was caught by a long, flicking tongue. Zaaldoon quickly flew up to the cave entrance.

He was a curious-looking kind of robot, having been designed to Milon's particular specifications. He looked a little like a microchip blown up to child-size proportions, and had three arms on each side of his stubby, squat body. He moved about by means of a small but powerful anti-gravity unit at his base. The whole of his front side was a big, stupid grinning face. Milon had a very testing life – you should not be surprised that he went out of his way to create comic relief for himself.

“How are things, chief? We were having a real shin-dig down there, but I brought you a doggy-bag!” He held out a toasted insect for Milon to try. It was thick and crispy, with a hairy, singed body, and cracked wingshells of hard chitin.

Milon took a bite. “Not bad,” he admitted. “Now let me have a look at you, Zaaldoon.” He turned the robotoface around and opened up his back. The damage was not extensive, but neither was it fixable. He would just have to try to keep his pal close by and under careful supervision.

“Okay, Zaaldoon,” he began, “this is what we're

going to do. Do you remember back on the planet of the tin can brains?" He stopped, because his robot pal had stopped paying attention, and was instead staring out of the cave entrance. Milon realised that it seemed to be getting very dark out there, and he pushed past Zaaloon to take a look.

From his vantage point he could see that the lushly covered ground everywhere was slowly rippling, like a tide on a world of half-frozen seas, and everywhere it was falling dark. He looked up at the sky, and saw the stars going out, one by one, as a huge black mass blotted out the sky. Here and there, lines of livid red

broke through the pitch blackness, shudders of heat running through the dark matter. Before long, all the stars were gone, and the red streaks ran uninterrupted from one horizon to the other across an expanse of solid darkness. Then, from one end of the sky to the other there began to fall, like tiny steel raindrops, drops of silver death, jetting down to search for Milon and Grimmett.

"Damn!" said Milon. "The tin can brains have found us! And they've brought the dark matter destroyer!"

Milon Does What Milon Does Best

This was the lay of the land: Milon stood at the entrance to a cave, half-way up a hill. At its bottom the hill lazed out into miles of overgrown vegetation, though a space had been cleared by a crashing cylindrical spaceship, now burning and the focus of the attention of a dozen tin can brains and their attendant murder-droids, some of which were on the ground, while others flew about it the air. All – Milon, cave, hill, vegetation, clearing, cylinder, and tin can brains – were on a planet of which I don't know the name – no one had ever lived there – but which was roughly Earth-sized, with a breathable, if somewhat stuffy, atmosphere. Not that Milon knew, not having seen the view on the way in, but there were no seas, the water on this planet being circulated through vast underground rivers, into which the long, long roots of certain, ancient plants descended. Animals and other plants were forced to live parasitically on those massive plants, which, seeing as he discovered them, we might as well call zaals, after Zaaloon, but all in all, it had been a happy little world, as they go. Things had been working out all right – right up to the point when the tin can brains chose a nearby spot in space for the construction of their dark matter destroyer. As the building blocks of the great ship were towed past, enormous tsunami would run through the underground routes of the rivers, ripping the roots of the zaals to shreds, and seriously damag-

ing the flow of water to the surface. That had been bad enough, but now the dark star destroyer had actually moved into this system, and its gravitational weight was putting an gigantic strain on the planet's integrity. One thing was already clear to Milon, looking at the visible tumult in the planet's crust: if the planet did not actually break into pieces and form a new asteroid belt, its orbit would be so badly affected that all life on this planet might well be destroyed within the year. And worst of all was the thought that unless he could extricate himself from this impossible situation, this planet would only be the first.

It looked tricky. He had no weapons. They outnumbered him six million to one (at a conservative estimate). And they were only looking for him for the sake of extra information. If, at some point, they could no longer be bothered, they would just stomp on the planet like an elephant steps on an ant.

On the other hand, he was Milon the Assassin. Killing was his business. For them, it was just a hobby, however enthusiastically they pursued it.

The first thing was to camouflage the cave entrance – if he had seen it from down there, it was only a matter of time before the tin cans did too. He reached up to grab hold of a tree branch that drooped overhead, and pulled it down, slowly, slowly, so that no one was alerted by the sudden movement, and tied

it, using its own rubbery twigs, to a spike of rock just below the entrance. Maybe it would help, maybe it would not. He would have to make sure the tin can brains were looking elsewhere before long.

He gave Zaaldoon strict instructions and got him started at the back of the cave, then continued to watch the tin can brains. He lay flat on his front, peering through the branches of the tree. Were it not for the cracks of red lightning that intermittently opened up the sky, and the lights emitted by the tin can brains themselves, Milon would no longer have been able to see a thing.

The tin can brains seemed to be dismantling the makeshift spaceship piece by piece, almost reverently, having put the fire out. I suppose it is made of the bodies of their comrades, thought Milon to himself. Or maybe they just want to recycle the bits... Then he did something of a double take – standing off to one side, partly hidden by some hanging purple fronds, so that Milon had not immediately noticed him, was a humanoid figure. Milon was sure that this newcomer had not been there when he left to speak with Zaaldoon – he must have been brought down from the dark matter destroyer to supervise the search, guessed Milon, and so it proved. The figure turned to look around, letting Milon get a good look at him – it was the guy from the hangar – and waved the tin can brains off in different directions. One zoomed up in Milon's direction, causing his alien heart to flutter like a hummingbird's wing, but it continued on past the cave at speed, obviously intending to start its search at the very peak of the hill. A handful of murder-droids and tin can brains stayed nearby, waiting for his instructions.

He was a strange-looking person, thought Milon. In most respects he looked reasonably normal, slightly overweight perhaps, and well into middle age, but still fairly normal, apart from that devilishly-tailored silver suit, but it was that head that would have made him stand out from a crowd in Piccadilly Circus – it was bizarrely distended, the forehead rising to a height twice that normally found among humans. What's more, there was that third eye in the centre of the enormous forehead! Literally to cap it off, he was wearing a funny green shell-like helmet. An odd fashion accessory for a servant of the tin can brains, thought Milon. But he knew immediately that this guy might well be his only chance to get off the planet safely, whoever he was.

He turned back to look at Grimmatt, who was still dazed, and only barely conscious.

"Hey, Grimmatt," he said. The detective swung his

head at the sound, but gave no sign of having understood. "I don't know if you can hear me, Grimmatt, but I'm going to go for a little stroll. The tin can brains are out there, but there's a guy that I might be able to take hostage. I don't have a gun to leave with you or anything, but just try to hang on in there. I'll be back soon."

He gave his fellow agent a slap on the arm, then went to the back of the cave to see how Zaaldoon was getting on. He had already dug a fair hole for starters.

"Good work," said Milon. "Are you ready to really get on with it?"

"Sure thing, sir," said Zaaldoon. "This hole goes right down to ground level, and a bit lower after I overshot." He started to tell Milon what he'd found out about the planet's ecological system, but Milon cut him off.

"Fascinating as it will be to hear about that later, Zaaldoon, we really must get on, before the tin can brains have a chance to discover our unconscious colleague."

Zaaldoon led the way, floating down the shaft he had dug, while Milon clambered down the series of handholds which Zaaldoon had been good enough to cut into the walls. There was danger – at one point the shifting of the ground in response to the presence in the solar system of the dark matter destroyer threatened to crush Milon, but for that few moments he dropped onto the shoulders of his robotic pal, who was just able to support him long enough to avoid the danger. Soon they were down at ground level.

"Which direction?" asked Zaaldoon, eager to get on with digging again.

Milon, relying on his memory of the big forehead man's location, set Zaaldoon to work again, now heading in an easterly direction, although he angled the tunnel downward a little, so that rather than emerging from the side of the hill, they would end up just beneath the target. This had been how they had managed to successfully spy on the tin can brains for so long on their own home planet – under Milon's direction, Zaaldoon had dug a series of tunnels that ran under all the most important buildings of the tin can effort.

After ten minutes of Zaaldoon's frantic attack upon the planet's shifting crust, Milon asked him to redirect his efforts. "Let's go up a bit, but slowly."

Zaaldoon followed the orders. Milon was pleasantly surprised that there had been no further problems as a result of the damage to his systems. He supposed that it might be to do with this being such a basic, mechanical function. Minutes later,

Zaaldoon reached a layer of mud. Leaving the earth untouched, he cleared a space in the rock large enough for Milon to be able to get through, then dropped down to collect his master.

“Good work, Zaaldoon!” whispered the assassin. “They never stood a chance, did they?” The robotoface simply beamed. “Now give me a leg up!”

It wasn't far up, just a couple of metres, so it didn't put too much of a strain on the little robot's anti-gravity unit to carry Milon up to the top of the shaft. Using his fingers, Milon began to quickly dig away at the earth. He could have left this bit to the robotoface, but there was no sense in taking risks. After a few minutes of scrabbling away at the earth, he felt a draught of air upon his face. He lifted his eye to the tiny hole.

Perfect! He had come up right beneath the supervisor of the tin can brains! He had expected him to move at least a little, but Milon figured his efforts so far had earned him a lucky break.

He slowly pulled at the earth, bit by bit, leaving just the thinnest of crusts beneath the supervisor's feet. Milon could tell that Zaaldoon was beginning to tire, but that would not be a problem for long. He bent over to whisper instructions to the robotoface, and then straightened again. Taking a deep breath, he burst up through the earth, grabbed the startled supervisor, and dragged him down through the hole. He didn't bother to hold onto him, but let him drop down the shaft, before pulling himself up through the hole. Meanwhile, if Zaaldoon was following his instructions, he would be dropping down to give that oversized cranium a good solid crack, making sure the fellow was out for the count, before dragging him off through the tunnel back to the cave.

Milon, meanwhile, had to make sure there was no one to follow them there. Pushing himself out of the hole with such force that he rocketed into the air a good four metres before landing on the ground, he quickly took stock of his surroundings. There were two murder-droids to his right, one to his left, and a pair of tin can brains studying the dismantled wreckage of the makeshift ship.

Before any of them had even registered the disappearance of their supervisor, Milon had somersaulted through the air to land between the tin can brains – who, he had decided in the split second before leaping, posed the greater threat to the mission, because of their superior intelligence and reasoning ability, making it more likely that they would work out where the supervisor had been taken, as well as their being able to communicate meaningfully with others of their kind – the murder-droids, left with no

leaders, and no visible enemy, would neither investigate further nor be able to communicate any concerns, even if they had them, to anybody else.

A single finger of his right hand extended in the shape of the solid hammer, Milon thrust it into the casing of the tin can brain on the left, putting the full force of his landing behind the blow. The finger went right through the metal, the fist followed through, and the brain of the tin can was mush. Extending his left arm to its full length and swinging to his right, Milon made the shape of the scissors, his arm slamming against the left hand side of the other tin can brain just as his stretched out right leg hit it from the other side. The tin can fell the ground in a crumpled heap.

“Mamma!” shouted Milon. “I'm on fire tonight!”

The noise finally attracted the attention of the three murder-droids to his location, but even as they fired he was already in the air. Expelling all the air from his body as he rose, he assumed the pose of the waterfalling log, legs straight out, arms crossed over his chest. His two feet hit the top of the solitary murder-droid with the force of a battering ram, knocking its head unit right into its body. As it fell to the ground, he spun off into the darkness, dodging the shots of the pair of remaining murder-droids, and threw his jacket over a small bush. It was a shame about that, he had time to think, before emerging from the vegetation just behind the two murder-droids who had been advancing, firing all the while, on his poor old jacket. He channelled his feelings about the jacket into his next blow, the shining shimmer hand, vibrating his hand through super-tension and slicing through the two of them in a single go.

Milon dropped to the ground to take a deep breath. That stuff was hard, which was why he always used a gun when there was one to hand. He dragged himself back over to the hole he had burst through, and dropped down. It was hard to see anything, without Zaaldoon shining his luminous robot face around, but he took the fact that Zaaldoon and the captive were not there to be a good sign, and, after checking himself over, finding nothing but a few minor cuts and bruises, he headed up the tunnel himself, back to the cave.

He arrived, having struggled to make it up the vertical shaft, but having been unwilling to call Zaaldoon away from the prisoner, to find Grimmitt still unconscious, though wearing rather more tattered clothes than he had been when Milon had left, and the supervisor tightly bound and gagged with strips of cloth. Zaaldoon rested nearby, eagerly

waiting for a sign of approval from his master and hero.

"Good work, Zaaldoon," said the assassin. "I knew I could trust you."

The robotoface could not hide his happiness. "Thank you, boss!" Milon smiled, and plumped himself down on the cold stone floor, opposite the captive, who was only now beginning to come around. Quite apart from the circumstances in which they had met, Milon did not like the look of the man. Every line of his face betrayed self-interest, self-absorption, and, if Milon were to be as blunt as he usually was, self-abuse.

Milon gave him a slap across the face. "Wake up," he said through gritted teeth, trying to convey menace without actually raising his tone. There were still tin can brains flying around out there. "Wake up!" He pinched the man's cheek, and the eyes abruptly opened. At first dull, they soon shone with terror. Mmm, thought Milon, perhaps he knows who I am.

The eye in the middle of the forehead remained closed, though, and somehow the helmet had stayed on throughout the abduction. Milon tried to flip it off, but it seemed to be stuck. Perhaps it was some kind of biomechanical implant.

"Well," said Milon, "what do you have to say for yourself?" The man, still gagged, just glared at him. Milon searched the pockets of the strange silver suit, and found a small pistol. "I'll look after this, if you don't mind, sir. And then I'll ransom you in exchange for our freedom. It may not work, of course, but if they don't agree, what the heck, I'll still get to kill one of their chief lieutenants, so the day won't have been a complete wash-out!"

Milon left the man for the moment, seeing as he was securely tied, and went to check on Grimmatt. He seemed to be getting back to full consciousness, although he had yet to speak. Finally, his eyes opened for the first time, focusing first on Milon, then on the smiling face of Zaaldoon, who he had never seen before, and then upon the tied up figure of the tin can supervisor. All of a sudden his face turned to alarm, and Milon tried to reassure him, saying, "Don't worry, we have him hog-tied, he isn't going anywhere."

But Milon's over-confidence was his undoing.

Without a sound being made, other than the warning grunt of Grimmatt, Milon found the pistol wrested from his grasp and pressed against his spine. He put his hands up. Behind his back he heard the sound of a robotoface being kicked very, very hard. It sounded as if poor Zaaldoon had been kicked into the hole he dug himself. Milon gritted his teeth.

"Well then," said the supervisor, in perfect English. "If you would care to take a few steps forward, Milon, and then turn to face me, we can resume the conversation you were so eager to begin."

The assassin walked toward the entrance to the cave. "How," he asked calmly, "did you escape?"

"Oh, you shall see," said the supervisor with a laugh. "Just as Detective Grimmatt already has."

Milon turned around, to be greeted by one of the most incredible sights of an incredible life. He realised now that the helmet was no helmet at all, but a shell, and the third eye was no eye. The aperture was now open, and out of it protruded a small reptilian head on the end of a long, thin scrawny neck. Pieces of tattered cloth hung in shreds from the creature's mouth.

"What the hell is that?" asked Milon.

"It's a tortoise," said the man. "The tin can brains implanted it for me; I have had the theory in place for years; my grandfather and father before me had toiled long and hard on it; but it only became possible thanks to the marvels of tin can technology! And now, like the tortoise, I shall live forever!"

Milon shook his head in horror. "Who are you?"

"You mean, who was I, before I became what I am today? Why not ask Detective Grimmatt, who seems to have finally returned to his senses, such as they are? I think he knows, and I think he was trying to tell you."

Milon looked to his prostrate colleague. "Who is it, for crying out loud?"

Grimatt struggled to get his breath together, and said in a single violent expulsion, "It's Professor Samson Quigg!"

Milon stepped back in horror, as Grimmatt slumped back down.

"That is who I was," said the man, grinning evilly. "But that was long, long ago. Why not call me... Tortoisio!"

The Original Tin Can Brain

There was not a lot Grimmatt and Milon could say to that. As they sat in stunned silence, Tortoisio, formerly Professor Quigg, the man Grimmatt had once considered, if not a friend, at least a trustworthy colleague, summoned a squad of murder-droids to escort them to his ship.

On the way up from the surface of the planet, which by this point was beginning to come apart at the seams, Quigg was kind enough to answer some of their questions.

Although Grimmatt had worked closely with their new enemy in the past, Milon was more surprised to find him working for the other side. "There's one thing I don't understand – the automatic programming implanted into all Ibis agents – why wasn't your memory wiped clean when you went over to the tin can brains?"

"Oh, I did. I thought it was a price worth paying, in order to live forever. But amazingly, I took a bang on the head when the asteroid hit the tin can brain's ship, and it was as if I was set free – I remembered everything! And, of course, I then gave every bit of that information to the tin can brains! All your fortitude, Milon, all your efforts, Grimmatt, were in vain! I gave them everything! Mrs Challenger and the rest will soon die – my allies have promised me that our first port of call will be the hated planet of Earth!"

As he reached the end of his rant, there was a loud clank. The ship had reached the dark matter destroyer. Tortoisio cackled with glee.

"Now, my tin can brains, take hold of them – they are to be taken to the very bridge of the dark matter destroyer, where they shall meet: the original tin can himself!"

Grimatt and Milon bit back any feelings of fear that might have tried to assail them. There was no room for those kind of emotions. It's a terrible thing to face the end of one's own life, but they had a lot more than that to think about. Dragged through the endless corridors of the dark matter destroyer by the tin can deputies – literally dragged, in fact, and at high speed, their knees, shins and feet being scraped raw as the malicious metal beings deliberately held them lower than necessary – while Tortoisio proceeded ahead on some kind of hovercar, there was no time for them to come up with even the glimmering

of a co-ordinated plan. Milon, though, did have two options in mind, though he thought each as likely to fail as the other. Grimmatt was wondering how he could have misjudged Quigg so badly, and kicking himself for the grief he'd felt after the professor's apparent self-sacrifice – he realised now that that had been the point at which Quigg had sought out his new allies, and their comradely handshake the point at which he had stolen the dimensional opener.

Soon they found themselves in a gigantic and cavernous hall, the forward wall of which was a huge viewscreen showing the route ahead of the dark matter destroyer – right in the middle of which, Milon and Grimmatt saw to their dismay, sat the planet from which they had recently been abducted, and on which, Milon thought with sadness, remained the bits and pieces of his old friend Zaaloon the Robotoface. But that grand, magnificent and yet terrible view was not the main feature of the room. Not at all.

Fully one quarter of the space in the room was taken up by an enormous, rattling, clanking, seemingly steam-driven tin can brain, which must have been seven or eight times the size of the makeshift spaceship Milon and Grimmatt had put together earlier that day. It wheeled about, making the noise of seven hells from each of its grief-stricken gyroscopes, to face the newcomers.

"Well," said the original tin can brain, in a metal voice that seethed with malice. "At last we meet! The famous Milon the Assassin! And the slightly less famous, despite his reputation in his own backyard, Detective Jim Grimmatt!"

"At last," said Milon, unenthusiastically. "The moment I've been waiting for. I've discovered what happens to dead central heating systems."

"Ha ha," laughed the original tin can brain. He waved a long, fibrous antenna at one of his attending brains. "Let's set off."

The tin can lieutenant inclined itself forward, then moved off to implement the order.

"No!" shouted Grimmatt. "You can't destroy that planet!"

The entire misshapen body of the original tin can shook with laughter, so much so that here and there a few rivets made their bids for freedom, propelled

by jets of superheated steam. As a couple of unfortunately close by tin can brains melted into slag heaps, others, attendant technicians, rushed in to fix the leaks.

"I can," said the worst monster of them all. "And I will. And after I've done it here, I'll do it to every planet in this universe! Won't we, my soldiers?"

Every tin can brain in the room joined together in a bizarre affirmation, an electronic keening noise of increasing intensity and rising pitch. Even Tortoisio had a go, though his voice was somewhat out of key. Just as it threatened to crack Grimmiett's skull, the original tin can wave for them to stop.

"I want to enjoy this moment," it said, as the planet on the viewscreen began to break apart into first two, then four, then eight, then a multitude of pieces, as the dark matter destroyer drove right through it.

"Monster!" accused Grimmiett.

"Thanks," said the original tin can brain. "It's nice to be appreciated."

One of the tin can brains asked for new co-ordinates. Tortoisio leaned forward in excited anticipation, but was unhappy with the answer the original tin can gave.

"But, you said we were to destroy Earth first," said the former Professor Quigg in a peevish tone of voice. He was immediately made to regret doing so, as the original tin can brain lashed a single antenna viciously across his face. Tortoisio was thrown back against the wall, his hands to his lacerated face. His resident tortoise, having seen the blow coming, had retreated back into his skull before it struck – it now, tentatively, poked back out of its hole, and began to tend its master's wounds with little flashes of its narrow tongue.

"Do not dare to question me, you fool," said the original tin can. "It's a long road I've travelled," he said, turning his attention back to Milon and Grimmiett. "So many centuries, so many deaths..."

"What a shame it has to end!" shouted Grimmiett, feeling pretty brave for a man held tight in the grasp of killer robots.

"I don't know what you mean by that," said the original, slowly wheeling its massive bulk over more closely to poke its antennae into the detective's face. "How do you intend to stop me?"

"We'll come up with a way," said Grimmiett with a growl. "We have to, and we will." From the corner of his eye he saw Milon giving him a wink. From somewhere he dredged up a spark of hope: perhaps his resourceful colleague might find a way to take the words beyond mere bluster.

"Original tin can brain," said Milon. "Tell me, how did you get into this line of work?" Grimmiett sagged against his bonds, despondent.

The original tin can brain snorted, a disgusting noise for an electronic creature to make. "Not that old chestnut?" It dragged itself over to poke its antennae in Milon's face. "Well, you are my guests. I should play along – it's only polite when I'm about to destroy your universe!" It laughed, and the pitilessness of it made Grimmiett's stomach churn. There really wasn't any hope... but then, all of a sudden, Milon swung into action!!!

Twisting his head with all his force, the assassin slashed against the original tin can brain's front with the edge of his eyebrow, which was, as ever, lacquered to a point an inch beyond the edge of his head.

Grimmiett held his breath in anticipation as sparks flew up and around the combatants, dazzling him and obliterating the view! When his vision returned, he saw, to his infinite despair, that there had been no effect on the tin can brain's body whatsoever.

"Damn!" said Milon, shaking his head, less forcefully this time.

"Ha ha!" laughed the original. "Thought you'd get me then, eh? With your razor sharp eyebrows? Tough luck, Milon, that was your last chance."

"I don't believe it," said the assassin in disgust. "My final, secret weapon. All these years of having such ridiculous eyebrows, and for what? Nothing."

The original tin can brain rumbled with pleasure. "I too planned ahead, Milon, and took care to specially reinforce my metal body. I knew you would try the eyebrows."

"How could you?" said Milon. "I never told..." He was quiet for a second, his brow furrowed, before he spoke again. "Oh, forget it."

The original brain rolled off elsewhere to oversee the progress of the dark matter destroyer toward its new destination. Grimmiett wondered whose fate it was to die next, if not Earth's. Then he remembered what Milon had said to the original tin can.

"What did you mean by that?" asked Grimmiett, when it seemed to be out of hearing range, but Milon had obviously decided to say nothing. Grimmiett took the hint and shut up.

The journey seemed to take days, but it must only have been hours, Milon and Grimmiett held there on the bridge like idiots, their knees and shins bleeding through the scraps of their trousers, forced to watch as their hated enemies proceeded to victory without a care in the world. Every so often Tortoisio would leave the bridge, presumably to have a nap, or get a

bite to eat, but he always made sure he was back in time for the ritualistic taunting of the captive Ibis agents, and the insane bouts of piercing electronic cackling that broke out every forty minutes or so.

Eventually they arrived, although it was not immediately clear where. "Right," said the original tin can brain, "here we are."

"What is the target, sir?" asked Tortoisio, as meekly as he could. "There's nothing here."

The tin can brains all looked to their leader.

The original tin can looked around with his optical unit, then laughed. "Ha ha! You've finally caught me out, after all these millennia!"

"What do you mean?" demanded one of the tin can brains. The others shrieked in agreement.

"You've really caught me out. I'm in the soup now! I don't really want to destroy anything. I'm actually a secret agent of Ibis, planted in your organisation to destroy you all."

"You will never succeed!" shouted Tortoisio, leaping forward, as all about the bridge the tin can brains reluctantly raised their weapons to fire upon their leader.

"Shut up," said the original tin can brain, lashing out again with an antenna, which caught Tortoisio in the stomach and left him sprawled on the floor,

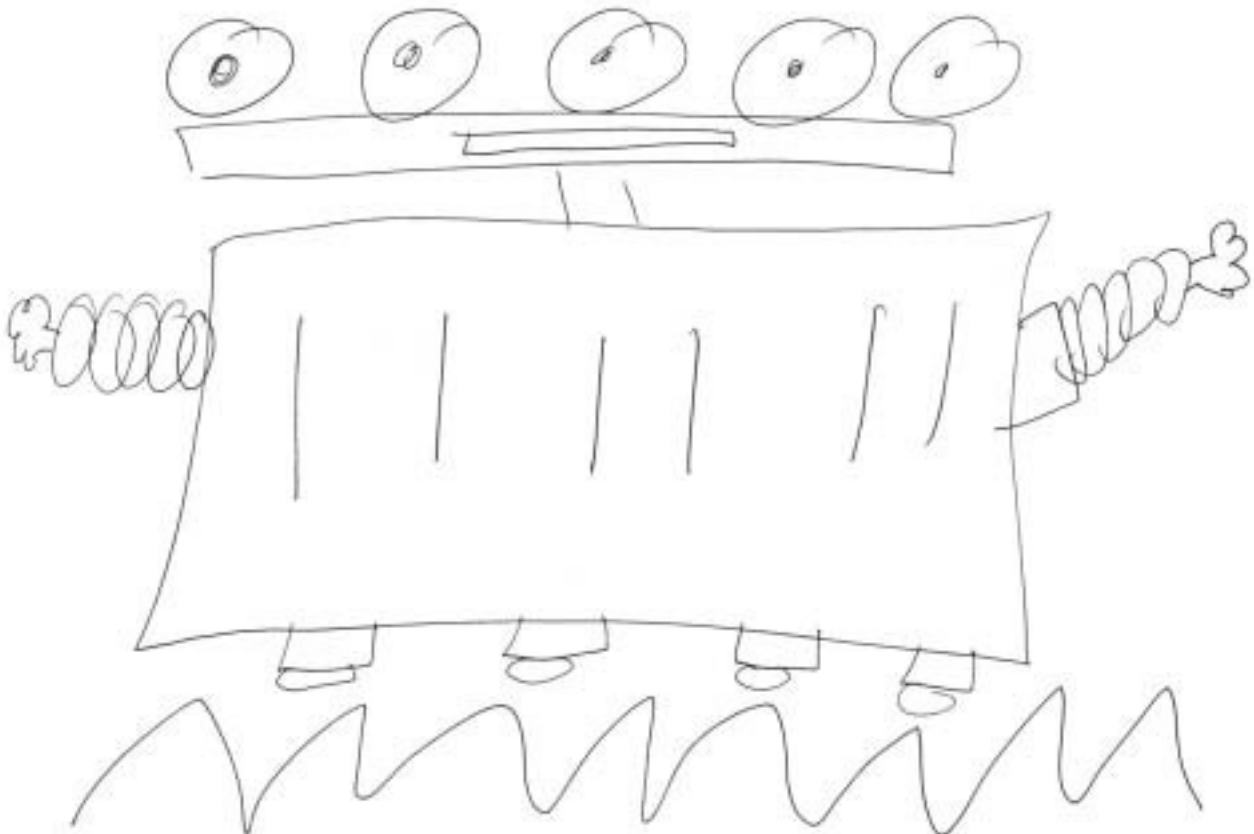
winded. "I will succeed." And at that, he flicked a switch on his body, a unobtrusive and seemingly insignificant switch, which no tin can technician still living had ever thought to question, and disabled virtually every power source on the ship, other than his own. Why do you think he had kept such an old and decrepit body, when everyone else was zipping about in sexy new high speed models?

Every tin can brain and murder-droid on the ship slumped to the ground. The brains would continue to live, but only for a matter of minutes, trapped in their metal shells. The forces that held it together decommissioned, the dark star destroyer would soon begin to drift harmlessly apart, and the original tin can brain had made quite sure it would do so in a decently empty part of space.

"Wow," said Milon. "That's pretty cool. Who are you?"

"It's me, Milon," said the original tin can brain. "Nanotus the Giant! Although I can see why you can't recognise me. I did it, Milon, I saved the universe!"

"So that's how he knew about the eyebrows," said Grimmett. Milon nodded. The detective turned to Tortoisio, who was just getting up from the floor. "So it must have been the same for you, Professor Quigg?"



You crafty old dog! I should have known you wouldn't have sided with these metal morons!"

Tortoisio looked at the detective for a moment, a million thoughts running through his mind as he weighed up the options. Would it be worth pretending that he *had* merely pretended to join the tin can brains? Would he be able to convince Mrs Challenger of that? After all, he had what he wanted – eternal life, or near enough. What did he have to gain by pursuing a life of crime?

But in the end, he did not have the choice. Grimmett had looked into the tortured eyes of a thousand criminals, and he knew, almost immediately, that Quigg had truly turned evil. "Wait, you did side with them, didn't you?"

Tortoisio scowled and ran out of the room, unfortunately managing to make good his escape, despite the efforts of Milon and Grimmett. He knew the ways of the dark matter destroyer too well, and seeing as Nanotus could not very well help in the search, they soon had to give up and return to the bridge.

"Don't worry," said Nanotus. "There's nowhere for him to go. In a matter of hours this ship will have broken into a million drifting pieces. There's nothing he can do to prevent that, nothing he can do to escape it."

"And what about us?" asked Milon.

Nanotus laughed again, although luckily this time he didn't rupture any rivets. He reached into one of the many compartments in his bizarre body.

"We owe this to Professor Quigg, who, after stealing it from you back on the planet of the tin can brains, was good enough to pass it to me upon joining our team," he said to them, pulling out the dimensional opener. "Good thing it was me, and it's all thanks to you Milon – your plan worked. You knew there was only one way that this could possibly work out, only one way in which the universe could be saved, and that it was for a friend to be waiting for you here on the bridge. What's more, you knew that for a friend to be waiting here, for a friend to have the

power to save the universe, that friend would have to be the one in control of the situation." A few moments passed, silent but for the clanking of his internal machinery. "And you knew that that friend would have had to have been responsible for everything the tin can brains have done over the last few thousand years, for every murder, every outrage, every conquest, every death."

Milon was sad, but happy. "I'm sorry, Nanotus. I would have done anything I could have to have taken your place."

"That's the problem," said Nanotus. "You would have. And you would have enjoyed it too much. By this time, you would have been as truly evil as any tin can brain – you don't have the self-control necessary for something like this."

"But you did?" said Grimmett, surprised. "The first time I met you, you had just been chasing Milon across the galaxy in a murderous rage."

"That's right," said Nanotus. "But the last time you met me, I was in a fight with the void-wraiths, if you remember?" Grimmett nodded. "And after that fight, I lived with them for many years; I achieved an incredible level of spiritual enlightenment; without which, this mission would have been an impossibility."

"So I suppose," said Milon, "you wouldn't want Mrs Challenger to assign you the mission until you're ready for it."

"It could be a few years down the line. She'll know when it's the right time – that's her job, and she's very, very good at it. The plan worked, after all! Plus, she needs a chance to find some time travel technology."

"Of course," said Milon. "I doubt if she'd be allowed to use Zangpan's World for a mission like this..."

Nanotus then activated the dimensional opener and the three of them skated back to Earth, and Mrs Challenger's house. Every so often, though, Milon and Grimmett had to wait for Nanotus to catch up, despite the bleeding of their legs.

Dinner with Mrs Challenger

So that was just about it for the adventure of the tin can brains. Grimmatt was overjoyed to get back to London. He had enjoyed his big space adventure, but from now on he expected to stick to his usual patch.

“That’s quite all right,” said Mrs Challenger, when he brought it up with her. “That’s why we have Milon on the team!”

Whenever there was a big adventure of this type, Mrs Challenger always loved to wrap things up with a big dinner party, and this time was no exception, even if the guest of honour hadn’t eaten for so many thousands of years that he had forgotten what he used to enjoy about it! They had a big surprise for him, though, so he would not leave the party unhappy.

Mrs Challenger *was* slightly sad about one thing: that she could not include Rolnikov, the mad knight of Uttar Pradesh, and Pelney, his faithful squire, in the celebration, seeing as they had played such a huge part in saving the universe. Melrune was just too far away from Earth for it to be worth the trouble. Nevertheless, she sent a message by way of the orbiting princess to let them know that everything had worked out so well. The princess had said she would let Rolnikov know over dinner.

Despite the absences, there were plenty of people at the table. To begin with, of course, there was Mrs Challenger herself, who had worked up quite an appetite waiting for her agents to return. Beside her sat Milon the Assassin, who had been dying for a good square meal ever since he arrived on the planet of the tin can brains. On her other side was Detective Jim Grimmatt, who tucked into the meal so heartily that Mrs Challenger had to reprimand him for his manners. Beside him sat the sad-faced Mrs Quigg, and though Mrs Challenger had made an effort to provide comfort, the news of her husband’s madness and ghastly transformation had done much to rattle her already shaky foundations. At the other side of the table, the bay doors had been thrown wide open, so that the original tin can brain, his bulky form causing havoc on the Challengers’ back lawn, could squeeze his head unit inside.

Oddly enough, Nanotus the Giant, the un-tinned original version, was there too. He had finally managed to make his way out of the travelling dimension, to be reunited with his friends and colleagues. It could have been quite awkward, what

with everyone else knowing he was shortly destined to wage war on the universe, even if it was in a good cause. For the time being, it had been agreed by Grimmatt, Milon, Mrs Challenger and the original tin can brain that he should be left in the dark as to his fate. As far as the original tin can brain could remember, he still had years of gradual self-enlightenment to go. Once that had been achieved, Mrs Challenger would approach him, quietly, with the offer of the crucial mission.

But that was for the future. For now, as far as Nanotus was concerned, the original tin can brain was just another Ibis agent, whose name no one happened to mention. That afternoon, they all ate a delicious meal, principally of roast beef and potatoes, although there were many, many side dishes, providing a myriad of mouth-watering choices to each of those sitting at the table, as they savoured the after-taste of a job well done.

After allowing herself to enjoy the general chit-chat for a while, Mrs Challenger decided it was time to perform one of the many irksome duties imposed upon her by her position as head of Ibis. It might have been rude to bring up such a matter over dinner, but then she knew that, given half a chance, Milon would be out of the door and on his way to entirely unregulated adventures before the dinner plates had even been cleaned!

“So,” she said to the assassin at her side, “what are your plans?”

Milon thought carefully about his answer – if it looked like he had nothing to do, he would end up having to perform some irritating, undemanding task that could be handled by any old Ibis agent. Better to get himself out of the way, and wait for something really juicy to turn up on his plate.

“I think I should go and see if my electric buddy, Zaaldoon the Robotoface, managed to survive the destruction of the planet we were stranded on.”

“I’m really sorry about that, by the way,” interjected the original tin can brain.

“It can’t be helped,” reassured Mrs Challenger, patting one of his antennae. “You were only doing your job.”

“Still,” he said, “if there’s anything I can do to help...”

“That’s very good of you,” said Milon. “I thought

I'd search through the planetoids left by the break-up of the planet. It might take a while, and I know he was an annoying little git sometimes..." Mrs Challenger and Nanotus the Giant raised their eyebrows in unison. "Okay, I know he actually did a fair bit of damage, but that was just bad programming, and he did save our necks over and over during this mission."

"That's true," said Grimmett, speaking with some difficulty past a mouthful of brussels sprouts. "He did."

"I feel terrible about the whole thing," said the original tin can brain. "But there was no other way to prevent the other tin can brains, not to mention that little rat Tortoisio, from revolting. I had to destroy at least one planet, otherwise they would never have let me drive off into the middle of nowhere. Still, I wish there was something I could do: I doubt I'm really mobile enough nowadays to help you in your search..."

"Well, actually..." began Mrs Challenger. "There might be something we can do to help. All of Ibis owes you for your efforts in this mission – the whole universe owes you! – and after discussing your case with two of my friends, the engineers Klothe and Melenkius, we think we might be able to transfer you into my husband's old spaceship, *The Rocket*. We would have to refit it somewhat, and reinstall the galactic-level engines, but in a couple of weeks you would be able to fly anywhere in the universe!"

"What a marvellous idea!" exclaimed the original tin can. His excitement was such that it took quite an effort not to begin the electronic keening which had so grated on the ears of Milon and Grimmett. "And then I could take Milon to search for his little friend!"

"Now everyone's happy!" said Grimmett. "Is there anything for dessert?"

"Well!" said Mrs Challenger. "Haven't you had

enough yet, detective? You've eaten enough for a team of horses!"

Suddenly there was a heavy-fisted knock at the door, and a voice bellowed, like an elephant caught by a blunderbuss, "Will somebody damn well let me into my own home!"

Mrs Challenger had taken the precaution of locking the dining room door, thinking of the potential embarrassment should a visitor unexpectedly barge in on their little group – a robot, a giant, a man with the most peculiar eyebrows on Earth, not to mention the wives of two prominent academicians and a detective from Scotland Yard! Questions might well have been asked in Parliament!

"Who could it be?" asked Milon the Assassin.

"I think I know," said Mrs Quigg, pulling a shawl over her shoulders.

"It is!" said Mrs Challenger, throwing the door open. "It's George!"

"Hullo, there! What's this?" said Professor Challenger, striding in and looking at the assembled heroes and heroines with a pair of mad eyes. "Would someone be kind enough to explain what the devil is going on here? And did I hear something about someone giving my spaceship away?"

Mrs Challenger smiled sweetly. "Later, darling! First, tell me about *your* day."

THE
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THEAKER'S

QUARTERLY FICTION

Issue 4

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2004

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Stephen William Theaker

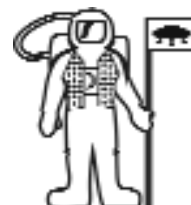
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Stephen William Theaker
Editor and marvel

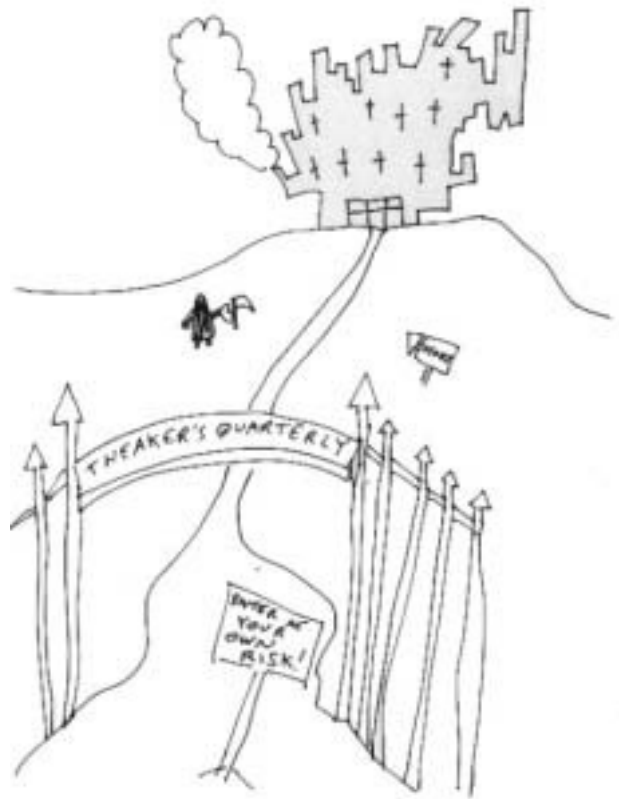
This is the fourth issue of this marvellous magazine, and I have yet to meet a single person who has disliked it. That I have yet to meet a single person who has read it is entirely beside the point – the potential is there!

As mentioned in previous editorials, this is our first non-reprint issue, and so you may be surprised by what is on offer. Did you think our writers had stagnated during the long hibernation of the super S.A.B.? More fool you! They are back and firing on all the cylinders they have! Would that they had more, but beggars cannot be choosers, and since I prefer to remain a chooser I chose the stories within, rather than submitting to the humiliation of begging real writers to submit something worthwhile!

I joke, but it is at my own expense – it costs me nothing save dignity, and that is a reasonable price for the entertainment of my readers – since the second story to feature in this issue is my own tale of the *Terrible Trio*, a set of youthful adventurers whose exuberance, inventiveness and refusal to give up take them from one exciting incident to the next as if they were careering through a child's waking dreams. Originally intended as an early instalment in a biography of the great hero Rolnikov, Mad Knight of Uttar Pradesh, these tales overflow with such innocent vim and vigour that the rest of his life may well have to wait its turn. Readers are allowed their own opinions, of course, but remember whose name stands guard at the front of the magazine, all too ready to bar entry to those looking to make trouble for my creations! All are welcome within, but doff your hats and scrape your forelocks on the floor.

Our first story is something of a bizarre experiment by Howard Phillips, a man slowly feeling his way back to the light. Some may find its unusual

style off-putting, but try to make some allowance for the poor man's state of mind. Once a promising young poet, he has spent more than one year since in



the embrace of old father booze, and the stink has not yet faded. With this publication we hope to give him a little encouragement, and if you do not feel he has earned it, remember the times when good turns were done for you, and take pity on a man who can get so much from so little.

*Lots of love,
the Editor!*

The Power of Death

Transcript of a Film I

Directed While Sleeping

Howard Phillips

Drunken Master of the Macabre

Ravitraj, a young man, is running through the woods, pursued by a relentless enemy – The Snake, although we don't see his face yet; just his feet – he isn't even running. Ravitraj is panicky, terrified, and he doesn't think he has a chance of escaping. At the same time, he can't believe this is happening.

He's running and running, stumbling here and there, looking behind him, then looking ahead desperately for a way out, but the landscape is just more of the same. If anything, he's getting deeper into the woods.

There is another shot of the pursuer, then Ravitraj stumbles and falls to the ground. The Snake catches up, stands on the edge of the clearing. Ravitraj turns to face him, and tries to scramble away; he backs into the legs of another man – Mohander.

Mohander says (off screen, except for legs, speaking in a friendly, patrician voice), "Hello."

Ravitraj turns around, grasping Mohander's legs desperately. He thinks he's found someone who can help him.

Ravitraj says (getting to his feet, hasn't yet see Mohander's face), "Thank God, please, you've got to help me – he's been chasing me through the woods..."

He tails off as he sees Mohander's face, the camera pans towards it so we can see. While he wears a normal Indian suit, his face is covered by a strange occult tattoo.

Mohander says (patting Ravitraj on the shoulder), "It's all right. We're all friends here!" (laughs)

Although we still don't see his face, The Snake steps up behind Ravitraj and grasps his upper arms. The signs of relief that had appeared on Ravitraj's face disappear, replaced by utter terror.

Ravitraj says (struggling in vain against The Snake's steel grip), "What is this? Who are you

people? I don't even know who you are!"

Mohander says, "It is obvious that you don't." (Close up on him) "Because if you did, you would be much more frightened..."

Close on Ravitraj, who doesn't look like he could possibly be any more frightened than he already is. Fade to titles.

The scene changes.

Amardevita in her house. She's bustling around, making a drink and putting a few biscuits on a tray – a typical domestic scene. Once she's ready, she takes the tray and goes out of the room – the camera follows her. She goes through the living room and on to another room with a padlocked door. She puts the tray down, unlocks the padlock, opens the door, picks up the tray again and goes inside. The camera is inside waiting for her, so we are looking at her face when she says:

Amardevita says, "Would you both like some tea?"

The camera pans around to show The Snake sitting malevolently in an armchair, and Ravitraj gagged and bound hand and foot on the floor. The room is just a normal lovely living room. The Snake nods, stands up and takes the tray from her.

Amardevita says, "Will he be staying long?"

Snake shakes his head. He points to the calendar. Tonight is a full moon. Ravitraj starts to scream, although it's muffled by the gag. The Snake gets up reluctantly and starts to kick him until he shuts up.

Amardevita says, "Not a very friendly boy, is he?"

Snake shrugs sadly and shakes his head.

The scene changes.

Location could be a pub inside or outside, or failing that, someone's living room. Characters present: Savita, Veronica, Jason, Samantha, anyone else we can round up, possibly me (Bill). At the

beginning people are just chatting as you would in a pub. Savita looks at her watch and frowns.

Savita says, "Ravitraj was meant to be here by now."

Jason says, "He must have been too busy."

Savita says, "He's usually one of my more reliable friends, though."

Veronica says, "And he's got a mobile, so he could have rung the pub or something."

Savita says, "It isn't that important, really. I just haven't seen him for a few days now."

Veronica says, "Me neither."

Bill says, "Most likely he just couldn't be bothered."

There's a lull in the conversation while everyone sips their beers and tries to think of something dazzling to say. Samantha hasn't seen Savita for a while, so she wants to catch up a bit.

Samantha says, "So Savita, do you still see Cornelius Gilligan at all?"

Savita says (laughing semi-bitterly), "Oh, don't talk to me about him!"

Jason says, "Why's that? You seemed to be really close back at university?"

Savita says, "Yeah, we got pretty close, close enough for me to find out what an asshole he was!"

Samantha says, "So you dumped him?"

Savita says, "Yeah..." (She takes another gulp of her drink.) "Well, we were never really going out, but we used to hang around together a lot. Most of the time he was just too full of himself. He thought he was something really special, and that it was only a matter of time before everyone else noticed. The rest of the time he spent depressed over the fact that he was just ordinary like the rest of us. Anyway, he went off to Brighton to live the bohemian lifestyle, I came here to Birmingham, and we haven't seen each other since."

The scene changes.

Mohander's front room. It's dark, night. Snake is still in the chair. Ravitraj is still on the ground, although following the kicks he received he's now facing away from Snake. He slowly starts to take his mobile phone from his jacket. Struggling all the way, he manages to get it out. He thinks for a moment, His eyes staring into the darkness. There's no time to dial; the beeps would give him away; he has to speeddial, and hope someone hears and answers before Snake gets to him. He presses one of the numbers. It speeddials a number. The Snake hears the noise and twists his head towards it.

Cut to: Savita's home. She's there talking to a friend – Veronica. The phone rings. She puts it on

speakerphone.

Veronica says, "Hey, that's cool!"

Savita says (laughing), "Hello, who's there?"

Cut back to: Mohander's front room.

As the Snake gets up, Ravitraj tries desperately to say something into the phone, but it is too muffled.

Cut back to Savita's home:

From the phone is just coming a load of muffled grunts. The two women look at each other and grimace.

Savita says, "Well, that's made my evening!"

Veronica says, "That is exactly why you bought a speakerphone..."

Savita says, "Yeah, so I could share my perverts with my friends."

She hangs up.

Veronica says, "I think we should look at it as a bonding experience..."

Savita says, "Sounded more like a bondage experience to me!"

Veronica says, "Oh that's a bad one, Savita."

Cut back to Mohander's front room:

Ravitraj is desperately holding the phone, the realisation that they have hung up on him, that he has lost his last chance at getting away, proving almost too much. Snake casually swats the back of his head, knocking him unconscious, then picks up the phone. He presses redial, and raises the phone to his head.

Cut to Savita's room:

The two women are sitting on the sofa, watching TV, and the phone rings again. Savita winces.

Veronica says, "It's okay, I'll get it."

Veronica gets up, Savita watches her go to the phone. Veronica picks up the phone, not bothering to put it on speakerphone (which they had just been using as a novelty anyway).

Veronica says, "Hello?"

She pauses, listening to the person on the other end of the line. She begins to smile, visibly charmed.

Veronica says, "Yes."

Savita is frowning.

Savita says, "Who is it?"

Veronica shushes her, waves her away.

Veronica says, "That's right, yes."

Savita holds her hands up in frustration and goes back to watching TV.

Savita says, "If she wants to talk to perverts..."

Veronica says (grinning widely, one might say she looks like she's in love), "My name's Veronica... Veronica Holden, seeing as you asked so nicely!"

Savita is completely amazed.

Savita says, "What are you doing? That could be anyone!"

Veronica says (putting her hand over the mouth-piece), “Sshhh! He’s lovely!”

Savita says, “Have you gone mad? That’s probably the pervert who just rang!”

Veronica says (ignoring Savita, entranced by the voice on the phone), “Birmingham, what about you?”

Savita says, “That’s enough!”

She pushes Veronica to the side, grabs the phone off her, and slams it down. She turns angrily and virtually shakes Veronica.

Savita says, “What’s got into you? That could have been anyone...”

She trails off – Veronica hardly seems to be hearing her – she seems dazed – as if she’s about to fall over.

Savita says, “Are you all right?”

Veronica says (letting Savita sit her back on the sofa), “I think so; I just feel a bit dizzy. There was a voice on the phone...”

Savita says, “You gave him your name... you were about to give him your address.”

Veronica says, “Was I? I don’t remember... There was a voice; I don’t remember what it said... It was lovely; no one ever spoke to me that way before...”

Savita says, “And you can’t remember what it said? This is too strange...”

She goes over to the phone and dials 1-4-7-1. Veronica is watching; she’s obviously still shaken. Savita notes a number down on a piece of paper. She puts the phone down and passes the number to Veronica.

Savita says, “It looks like a mobile number. Do you recognise it?”

Veronica thinks for a minute.

Veronica says, “Isn’t it Ravitraj’s number? I think it is.”

Savita takes another look at it, then flicks through her address book.

Savita says, “I think you’re right. *Was* it Ravitraj on the phone?”

Veronica says, “No, it definitely wasn’t. I don’t know who it was.”

Savita tries to ring the number, but the line is unavailable. Savita and Veronica look at each other and shrug; weird things happen every day; then both settle back down on the sofa.

Veronica says, (she looks at her watch) “When is Captain Mutant on?”

Cut to: Mohander’s front room. Ravitraj is still unconscious. The phone is switched off. Snake is looking through a phone directory...

The scene changes.

In the street. Savita and Veronica walking along, chatting. They are approaching camera, and are walking past Katherine, who is walking away from the camera. As they walk past her, Katherine stops and turns, becoming the focus of the shot. As the two women walk away, she stares at them for a moment, thinking hard. Veronica turns to make eye contact; but Veronica’s eyes seem dead, almost as if they are not her own. Katherine then gathers her coat around her with a shudder and hurries off.

The scene changes.

Katherine at home. Spread out around her on a desk are the paraphernalia of a mystic, runes, astrological charts, etc. Ideally, also a big pile of pizza boxes. As we watch, she casts a handful of runes, and is obviously not pleased with the result.

Katherine says, “There’s not enough time... not enough time...”

She goes to a desk and takes out a map of the UK. She holds above it a plumbline; it swings over Birmingham, and then moves to Brighton, then moves back and forth between them. She puts it down. Thinks. Picks up her phone book and goes to G. She’s about to dial when there’s a knock at the door. Thinking nothing of it – they couldn’t have tracked her down already – she goes to answer it. She opens the door. The Snake stands there. He smiles and nods...

The scene changes.

Mohander’s living room. Our villain sits on his favourite sofa, in his favourite spot, watching the news. Amardevita comes in, and starts to berate him.

Amardevita says, “How long are they staying?”

Mohander says (impervious), “They’ll go, soon. Soon.”

Amardevita says, “I hope so – you invite guests; but who has to make food for them, drinks, eh? And I don’t like that Snake boy... And today I had to look after this man when Snake went out on one of your silly missions...”

Mohander nods and waves her arguments down. Slowly he gets to his feet and goes to the front room, where the Snake still sits in his armchair and Ravitraj is still bound and gagged. Outside children are playing.

Mohander says, “Is everything all right?”

Snake nods.

Mohander says, “The psychic – did you kill her?”

The Snake smiles and nods.

Mohander says, “Good. She could have been a problem. What about the girl?”

Snake shrugs.

Mohander says, “Well make sure. We can’t afford

any interference. I want that done before tonight's sacrifice."

The Snake nods affirmatively and looks at his watch.

Mohander says, "Good, good. You want olu prunti? No? You go then. I'll watch our guest."

With obvious eagerness, the Snake uncoils from the armchair and leaves the room. Mohander takes his place and watches Ravitraj.

The scene changes.

Detective Grimmett is at home, playing a variety of Bust-a-Move on an Xbox. His phone starts to ring; he leaves it a minute, then sighs, pauses the game and answer it. He listens for a moment.

Detective Grimmett says, "Is that all? Someone not answering the door. Come on, I'm rushed off my



feet these days. I stayed at home today to avoid this kind of piddling call..."

He listens again.

Detective Grimmett says, "What am I doing? Important background research, that's what. Collating evidence. Something big is going to blow and I want to be ready..."

He listens again.

Detective Grimmett says, "Well, if you put it that way, yes I do still want my job. I'll finish up here,

then go round there right away. But I want you to know that this kind of tyrannical behaviour allows no room at all for inspiration!"

He puts the phone down and unpauses the game; plays for a minute, then loses. He looks at the final score, picks up the phone and dials the score/number. It rings, then is answered.

Detective Grimmett says, "That you, Cracker Smith? Detective Grimmett here. Look, we know you did that job last night ... Yeah, that's right, so be a good little crook and present yourself to your nearest station, would you? ... Good lad."

The scene changes.

Inside Katherine's room. Looking at her table; it still has the astrological tables, runes and the map of the UK laid out on it. There's no sign of her (she's on the floor behind the camera). There is a knock on the door. Then another, more urgently.

The Pizza Boy says (offscreen – behind the door), "I know something's wrong; she always answers right away; half the time before I even knock... I don't know how she does it. She orders a pizza every day for lunch."

Detective Grimmett (off-screen, behind the door), "Okay; stand back."

The door bursts open and Detective Grimmett comes in, followed at a distance by the pizza boy.

Detective Grimmett says, "Looks okay to me... No sign of breaking and entry... No signs of a disturbance."

He moves further into the room, and sees her body behind the table.

Detective Grimmett says (pointing behind the camera), "Look, there she is. Looks like she choked on something."

The camera pans around to show Katherine's body. Her clothes are covered from top to bottom in blood. It is clear that she has not choked on something. Painted in blood across her face is a sigil. This is what stops them from seeing the true picture. Detective Grimmett goes over and puts a finger on her throat, getting his hands covered in blood.

Detective Grimmett says, "She's dead, all right. I'll call an ambulance for the body. And I suppose I should call this in as death by natural causes."

Frowning, he strokes his chin with a blood-covered hand, and then wipes his brow with the other, smearing blood across his face.

Detective Grimmett says, "But I can't help feeling there's something I'm missing..."

The scene changes.

Veronica at home. She seems disturbed. She's sitting on the sofa, tossing and turning. (Possibly

close up on one eye and solarize?) There is a knock at the door. She goes to answer it. It is the Snake. He smiles and nods. She lets him in.

The scene changes.

A hillside. A tree. Ravitraj tied to a tree. Mohander stands there. On one side is the Snake, holding an axe. On the other is a masked woman – it is Veronica in disguise, although we don't know that yet.

Mohander says, "I am very sorry about this, young man."

He waves for Snake to pass him the axe. He takes it, holds it up against the sky, then brings it down heavily against Ravitraj. Blood splashes up across his face and suit. He takes a few more swings. Then he passes the axe back to Snake, who wipes it down with a towel. He puts the axe back in a bag, then offers the towel to Mohander.

Mohander says, "I'm not finished. Give me your knife."

Snake passes him a knife, and Mohander bends down over the body of Ravitraj, slicing and cutting away until Ravitraj's innards lie exposed to the sun. Mohander looks at them intently, holds some intestine up to the sun for a better view, then gets up, nodding to himself. Snake offers him the towel again.

Mohander says, "Give me a clean one!"

Snake gives him a clean towel from his bag, and looks quizzically at Mohander.

Mohander says, "The omens are very, very bad... Just the way I like them! Ha ha ha!"

(Keep him laughing as long as possible, then fade to black.)

The scene changes.

Savita's bedroom. Morning. A bright new day beginning. She's fast asleep. Someone is ringing the doorbell. She makes a weary effort to get up and answer it. She's living in a flat. When she gets to the door, the paper has been delivered; she looks at the headline as she opens the door: "LOCAL PSYCHIC DIES AT HOME She Didn't See the Pepperoni Coming". Savita looks at it with interest though without particular horror since she didn't know Katherine, then notices the photo, and recognises the woman from the street. She frowns and opens the door. It is Detective Grimmett with bad news.

Savita says, "Hello?"

Detective Grimmett says, "Good morning. I'm Detective Grimmett; could I come in for a moment, please?"

The scene changes.

Savita at the morgue, accompanied by Detective Grimmett.

Savita says, "I can't believe it. He was like a brother to me; he never seemed unhealthy; I can't understand how he could have had a heart attack..."

Detective Grimmett says, "It can happen to anyone, I suppose. Like I said, they just found him slumped against a tree in the park; no signs of foul play; it must have happened suddenly.

Savita says, "It's funny though, no one had seen him for days, but you say he only died last night?"

Detective Grimmett says, "Mmm, that's right. I'd better look into that, see if anyone had seen him going in or out of his flat during the last few days. Just to tie up the loose ends."

He makes a note in his pad.

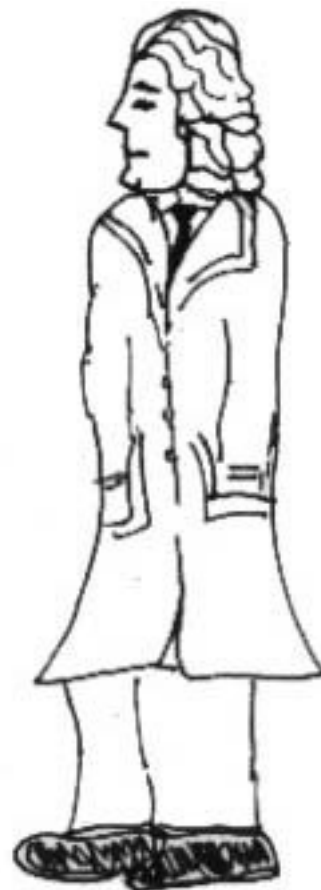
Detective Grimmett says, "Are you ready to identify the body?"

Savita says, "Yes, I think so."

Detective Grimmett holds the door open for her and she steps through. Ravitraj is laid out on a slab. He is absolutely drenched in blood. He looks terrible. He has the same sigil drawn in blood on his face that was on Katherine's face. Savita looks at the body in shock and horror.

Savita says, "Is this some kind of sick joke?"

Detective Grimmett says (genuinely worried because her upset is obvious), "Sorry, what's



wrong?”

Savita rushes forward to the body.

Savita says, “Do you call this natural causes?”

Detective Grimmett says (coming forward to look more closely – he thinks that she must have spotted something), “What? Can you see something?”

Savita says, “What do you mean? Look at all the blood! Look at the blood! He’s been ripped to pieces!”

Detective Grimmett takes a step away, then checks himself, realising that this is very traumatic for her, and that such an outburst is not that remarkable in the circumstances.

Detective Grimmett says, “There’s no blood, miss... do you want to sit down outside? Have a cup of tea or something?”

Savita puts her hand in the blood, and holds it up to Detective Grimmett’s face.

Savita says (utterly astonished), “Can’t you see it?”

Detective Grimmett says, “Sorry, I can’t.”

Because Detective Grimmett seems so sincere and concerned, Savita starts to doubt herself; maybe it is the shock of seeing a friend dead... she lets Detective Grimmett lead her out of the room. Detective Grimmett takes another look at the body as they leave... there’s something he’s missing...

The scene changes.

Savita is back at home. She tries to ring Veronica, but there is no answer.

Savita says, “Veronica, where are you when I need you?”

She looks up Jason and Samantha’s number, and phones them.

Savita says, “Do you want to meet me for a drink? Thanks...”

She puts the phone down; goes off to get ready.

The scene changes.

Savita at the pub with Samantha and Jason. In the background we can see the Snake, drinking a Gin and Tonic. Savita doesn’t recognise him – why would she; she hasn’t met him – but we do, although the camerawork doesn’t make a song and dance about the fact that he is there. There’s a woman sitting opposite him with her back to us (Evil Veronica), but they aren’t interacting at all. Savita has obviously just finished telling her friends about Ravitraj.

Samantha says, “I don’t know what to say, Savita.”

Jason says, “Yeah, we didn’t really know Ravitraj, but for him to die so suddenly... What do you think happened?”

Savita says, “I don’t know... maybe he’d been on a bender or something, and his body just couldn’t take it...”

Samantha says, “And you really freaked out at the morgue?”

Savita says, “I don’t know what happened... it just seemed like there was blood everywhere, but the cop couldn’t see it. Anyway, look, I’ve got to get to the gallery; thanks for listening.”

Jason says, “Are you sure you’ll be okay? We’ve got to go back to London today.”

Savita says, “Yeah... I’ll give you a ring.”

Samantha says, “You can always pop down for a day or two if you need to rest.”

Savita says, “Thanks, guys. See you later.”

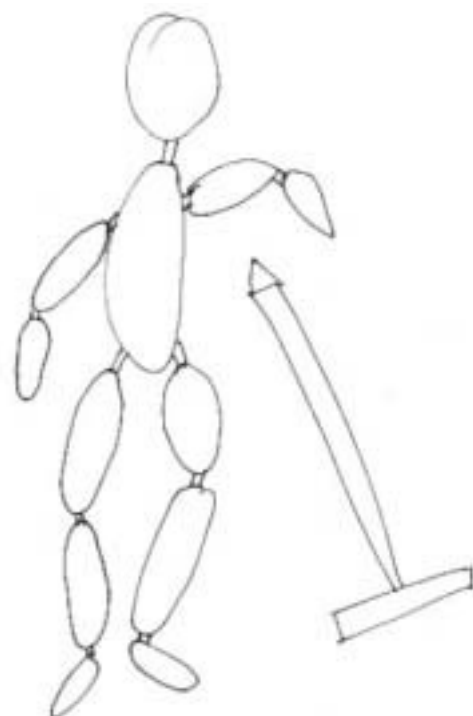
Savita gets up and goes off. As Samantha and Jason talk quietly about what Savita said, the Snake watches Savita leave. Evil Veronica gets up and follows Savita. The Snake then examines Jason and Samantha.

The scene changes.

Much later in the day, Savita gets home. She unlocks the door and lets herself in. The camera doesn’t follow. A few moments later we see Evil Veronica arrive. She looks at the house; looks at the windows, looking for a means of attack. There’s an artist’s doll in one window. That’s it. She walks up to the house, takes a piece of paper from her pocket and sticks the paper to the door – it bears a strange sigil. She walks away unhurriedly.

The scene changes.

Savita walks over to her bed, going past the



window in which the artist's doll stands. She gets into bed, pulls the covers over her, and is soon asleep.

The artist's doll begins to move. At first gingerly testing its new ability, it then stretches out its feet to push itself off the pedestal it is attached to by a spike. The spike comes free from the pedestal, and the doll falls to the floor. It begins to drag itself across the ground, and climbs up onto her bedside table. It stands up, looks at her to make sure she is still sleeping, then turns to Savita's electronic alarm clock. It rips out the power lead and wraps the wire around its body. It then climbs up onto the bed, uncoils the wire, and prepares to press the bare wires against Savita's back. At the last possible moment, there is a noise outside, and Savita stirs; she looks toward the window, to where the doll normally stands by Godzilla; sees the doll missing, and leaps up from the bed in terror, sensing rather than knowing that the doll is there beside her. She runs to the light and switches it on; the doll has dropped lifeless onto the bed, the bare wires beside it; Savita reaches out to touch them in curiosity, then comes to her senses and switches everything off at the plug socket. She runs to the window and looks out, but sees no one.

Savita says (looking at the Godzilla toy that sits on her dressing table), "What the hell is going on here? There is no way I imagined that! And why the hell am I asking Godzilla? This is going to take more than nuclear-powered breath... I need help from someone who knows about this kind of thing..."

She grabs a bag and begins to put enough clothes in it for a weekend. She picks up Godzilla and puts him in the bag.

Savita says (speaking to Godzilla, a very nervous note in her voice), "Thanks for waking me up, little fella. You keep up the good work!"

The scene changes.

Savita in her coat, bag ready; on the sofa, feet pulled up; cooking knife in her hand; eyes darting around the room. Every light in the room is on, and the TV is on, showing BBC News 24. A clock is on the table right in front of her. She's waiting for it to be time to go for the train to Brighton. In the meantime, she's playing at Ripley waiting for the aliens... Any wooden dolls come near her she'll slice them into matchsticks!

The scene changes.

Six o'clock; she can go for the train. She gets up and runs out of the house. On the way out she notices the sigil stuck to her front door. She rips it off and throws it on the floor. She starts to dash off, has second thoughts, comes back, picks up the screwed-

up paper and tucks it into her bag – evidence!

The scene changes.

Savita on the train, looking moody.

The scene changes.

Savita arriving in Brighton. She looks around her in the station.

Savita says, "This is stupid. As if he'll be able to help... As if he'll even want to."

But she shrugs, there's no one else who would even take her seriously. She sets off toward the exit determinedly.

The scene changes.

Cornelius Gilligan's flat. Gilligan asleep, looks like an idyllic morning scene (it is about 9.00 am, meaning Savita is on her way). Birds are singing (if available) and the world is new. Then a woman, out of shot – Dottie – begins to talk to him.

Dottie says, "Cornelius? Cornelius, wake up..."

Gilligan's eyes stay determinedly shut. The camera turns to show Dottie, who seems to have just finished getting dressed. She shakes her head and leans over to wake him up tenderly.

Dottie says, "Wake up, it's morning!"

Gilligan says (without opening his eyes), "And don't I know it... If I had my way there'd be a lot fewer mornings in the day."

Dottie says (laughing), "Let me give you my number, so you can call me sometime?"

Gilligan says (opens his eyes and lifts himself up onto his elbows), "Dottie, last night was special... let's keep it special... but unique..."

Dottie stares at him.

Dottie says, "You arsehole."

She stamps off toward the door to the room, gathering her things as she goes.

Dottie says, "Well, it might have been special for you, but I'll tell you right now it was far from special for me; I've had better times sitting on the corner of a washing machine!"

She leaves the room.

Gilligan says (frowning), "Women don't really do that, surely?"

He picks up a calendar which shows that last night was the full moon (not the same night as Ravitraj's sacrifice; the night after; remember that full moons last for more than a single night; or at least they always do in werewolf movies).

Gilligan says, "No, you're wrong, Dottie. Last night was very special..."

He gets out his first cigarette of the morning and starts to smoke, leaning back against the wall and thinking.

The scene changes.

Savita is making her way through Brighton in the morning (at about 10.00 am).

The scene changes.

Cornelius Gilligan alone in his room, round about 10.00 am. He's had time to get properly dressed, but he might not have done anyway. He's doing some research, with occult books spread out around him, including but not only the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Souls of the Damned (a fictional grimoire) (or photocopies of pages from it), a map of England with ley lines drawn across it. Eventually and somewhat sadly he begins to write a letter:

"Dear Savita, Go to..."

(This is the letter that Savita will later find stowed among the CDs in her house – although Gilligan will profess ignorance when Savita arrives at his house, when she finds the letter the viewer might realise that Gilligan was expecting this; creating a nice sense of tragedy when thinking back over the film...)

The scene changes.

Outside Cornelius Gilligan's house. Savita arrives, pauses, looks around as if looking for another option, then resolves to go in. She hitches her bag up on her shoulder and strides forward. She's about to knock, when Cornelius Gilligan opens the door to her. This immediately infuriates Savita.

Savita says, "How do you do that?"

Gilligan says, "Last night I kind of had a psychic boost; you know what I mean..."

Savita says (wincing), "More likely you just always sit by the window in your pants watching the girls go by... You going to let me in?"

Gilligan says, "I don't know, Savita; I was up most of the night; not a lot left in the engine room right now. But I suppose if there's demand, I'll do my best to supply... But it's been a long time; you never called, you never wrote... I've been stuck in a mire of one-night stands, casually explosive sex and adorable women." (becoming a little angry) "Women, I might add, who have never kicked me in the teeth and told me to fuck off out of their lives."

Savita says, "Things weren't working between us; you knew that; and you weren't treating me properly. Anyway, it sounds like you're very happy here."

Gilligan says (relaxing again), "Oh the casual sex is great, but we're being honest, I have received the occasional fuck-off..."

Savita says (pauses before speaking, starting to smile despite herself; but still remembering that things are very serious), "So!"

Gilligan says, "So! What are you here for? Couldn't keep away from my king-sized loving?"

Savita says, "Ha ha! Still the joker! No, I'm not

here about us – and I am definitely not here for sex. I'm here because I need help. I'm in real trouble, Gilligan."

Gilligan says (frowning) "What kind of trouble?"

Savita says, "One of my friends murdered kind of trouble. Wooden dolls trying to kill me in the darkness kind of trouble..."

Gilligan lights a cigarette, takes a studied breath of it – remember he's playing a role to perfection here – he's had time to work out how he's going to act. He tilts his head forward and looks at her.

Gilligan says, "Go on, say it..."

(Savita is more or less biting her lip; she knows that he's pushing her into a certain role, but at the same time, she knows that by playing that role, she gets him to play the role she needs him to)

Savita says, "Your kind of trouble..."

Gilligan says (taking command; becoming more serious), "Come in, tell me about it."

Savita says, "Only if you promise to put your clothes on."

Gilligan says, "You really think I'm some kind of pervert, don't you?"

Savita says, "I think you're too many different types of pervert to count, and they're all struggling to make their voices heard..."

The scene changes.

Inside Cornelius Gilligan's place. The two of them are at his desk – he discreetly tidies away the letter he was writing her; she doesn't notice, and neither does the camera, particularly. Gilligan is dressed now.

Gilligan says, "Happier now? Does my body make you uncomfortable?"

Savita says, "Do you mean in the sense that it is too bony when one is on top of it or in the sense that it seems to be an affront against all that I, as an artist and student of the human form, believe to be right and proper?"

Gilligan says, "One snappy answer would have been enough... two just spoils the effect. Do you think we could go out and find somewhere else to talk? I've got a real hangover and I could do with getting some of that salty sea air."

Savita says, "Are you taking me entirely seriously?"

Gilligan says (stting down opposite her, sincere now), "If you *want* the scary version: just from what you've said already I can tell we're dealing with bad bad people. You could have been followed; I'd rather keep on the move... just telling me stuff can create ripples in the ether that could be traced."

Savita looks down, obviously frightened. Gilligan

gives her a friendly punch on the arm.

Gilligan says, "Anyway, I want to get some doughnuts for breakfast!"

Savita smiles.

The scene changes.

Gilligan and Savita in some nice place in Brighton, by the beach. Savita is eating doughnuts, Gilligan is thinking hard and not eating any. Every so often she offers him one but he doesn't take it.

(Could this be like Ford Prefect and Arthur before the Vogon destruction of Earth – maybe the doughnuts include an ingredient that acts as a psychic block – or maybe he just thinks she needs the energy!)

Gilligan says, "So you saw the body and it was covered in blood?"

Savita says, "Yeah, I put it down to shock, because the cop didn't see a thing, and I don't think he was trying to freak me out or anything. He seemed really worried.

Gilligan says, "You saw blood all over Ravitraj's body, right?"

Savita nods.

Gilligan says, "Was that because of the wounds?"

Savita says (thinking for a moment), "No, I don't think it was. I mean, the wounds were bad enough, like from an axe or something, but the blood was just smeared everywhere."

Gilligan says, "Now think carefully... were there any pictures or symbols drawn in the blood?"

Savita says (thinking back – remember that cool as she is, it was quite a traumatic incident for her – she's scratching at the back of her mind), "That's right, there was, I can't describe it; I didn't even think of it till you said..."

Cornelius Gilligan sketches the invisible sigil on a piece of paper.

Gilligan says, "Is that it?"

Savita nods.

Gilligan says, "Watch."

Gilligan makes a small scratch on his finger and smears blood across the sigil.

Gilligan says (pointing off to the side), "Hey, look, free ice-creams!"

Savita looks, realised she's been duped, then looks back.

Savita says, "So where's the paper?"

Gilligan is holding it in front of her face.

Savita says, "Well?"

Gilligan says, "It's right here. Watch."

He tears it in half and she blinks as it reappears.

Savita says, "Explanation?"

Gilligan says, "It's a mixture of hypnotism, misdirection, a dash of rune magic, etc. The people after

you must be very powerful. This is pretty easy: on a subconscious level you don't really care if you see the piece of paper or not, so it's easy for me, sitting here, to persuade you not to notice it. But to do the same trick on a dead body, to leave the spell in place while you go on about your business, and to have it last long enough to get the body safely buried... that's good voodoo..."

Savita says, "So how come I could see it and the cop couldn't?"

Gilligan says, "Hmm... that's a good question... Could be that you have natural psychic defences..."

Savita says (kidding), "Natural sidekick defences? Like Dr Watson or Robin, you mean...?"

Gilligan says (frowning at her lack of gravity), "The other possibility is that they let you see on purpose..."

Savita says, "Why?"

Gilligan says, "Think about it: what happened when you saw the blood? You completely freaked, right? So, off you go, driven half-mad by the death of your friend... who would then be surprised if you felt you had to end it all...?"

Savita says, "... by electrocuting myself with the wire from my clock radio..."

Gilligan says, "Well, it's not a common method, admittedly, but the point is that they wouldn't feel inclined to investigate further..."

Savita opens her bag, and gets out the picture that had been stuck to her door.

Savita says, "Yeah... so what do you think about this? I found it stuck to my door this morning."

Gilligan says (taking it and looking closely), "Same kind of magic. This is a kind of curse; it's from the dark ages. It would have been put on a kid, who would then have accidentally choked on a toy or something... I never would have guessed that it worked by actually bringing the toy to life... fascinating!"

As she closes her bag, Savita notices the newspaper and pulls it out. Gilligan is still concentrating on the animation sigil.

Savita says, "I almost forgot about this; it just seemed fishy... a psychic died, choked on a slice of pepperoni... I thought there might be a connection."

Gilligan says (absently), "What's that? Let's have a look."

He scans the headline, then looks at the picture.

Gilligan says (shaking his head – things are not as under control as he had thought), "Oh no, Katherine..."

Savita says, "Did you know her?"

Gilligan says, "Yes, we'd been contacts for a

couple of years. You need allies in this game..."

He looks at Savita sharply.

Gilligan says, "Did *you* know her?"

Savita says, "I was thinking about that on the train. I think she walked past me and Veronica on the street yesterday... I wouldn't normally have noticed or remembered her, but she seemed to stare at us..."

Gilligan says, "This is worse than I thought... much worse... Have you seen Veronica since then?"

Savita says, "No, her phone was just ringing out..."

Gilligan says, "This is very bad. I don't think it's just one killing, one cover-up. I think it's something big, and I think they're trying to wipe out any opposition... It's a good job you came here."

Savita says, "Who are *they*, anyway?"

Gilligan says, "I'm not sure... whoever it is has been keeping their cards close to their chest so far, hoarding their power for a big push... Remember I've only been on the scene a few years; there are a lot of players I haven't even been allowed to learn the *names* of yet."

Savita says, "So what do we do now?"

Gilligan says (leaping to his feet), "Are you kidding? Where else – we've got to go back to Birmingham!"

Savita says (slowly getting to her feet), "Cornelius, I just want to get away."

Gilligan says, "They'll come for you, Savita, wherever you go. And now they'll be coming for me, too. Our only hope is to get to them first."

Savita says, "But if they're as powerful as you say..."

Gilligan says, "Hey, don't worry, kid! I've got a few tricks up my sleeve!"

Savita says, "Yeah, your scrawny arms leave plenty of room up there..."

He laughs, punches her on the shoulder, and they walk off, leaving the cameraman behind. She punches him on his shoulder. He pushes her, she pushes him back...

(Fade to black.)

The scene changes.

Cornelius Gilligan and Savita going for the train in Brighton. Savita points to the ticket office, but Gilligan grins and shakes his head. They go to the platform gate. Savita shows her ticket but the guard doesn't even look at Gilligan. On the platform Savita looks at him quizzically:

Gilligan says, "One of the perks of the trade... almost makes up for the eternal damnation bit!"

The scene changes.

Savita and Cornelius Gilligan on the train. We

watch them travelling for a minute, then something occurs to Gilligan, "Did you tell anyone else about any of this?"

Savita says (thinks for a moment), "Oh no! Yes I did, Jason and Samantha! Do you remember them from university? I told them about seeing the blood at the morgue. Oh my god, do you think they're in danger? They were going back to London, and I forgot all about them!"

Gilligan says, "Look, don't panic. We have to change at London anyway. We'll phone them, check they're okay."

Savita says, "Okay."

Gilligan reaches out to hold her hand. She lets him for a minute then snatches it away.

Savita says, "Things might be very confusing for me right now. I'm in mortal peril, half my friends are dead or missing, and I may well be going mad. But one thing I do know is that there is no way I'm going to let you pick up where I left off."

Gilligan says (feigning innocence), "I'm just trying to offer some comfort."

Savita looks at him askance.

Gilligan says, "Physical comfort *is* the best kind..."

Savita says, "If you were able to give any other kind we might still have been together..."

Gilligan says, "Ooh, nice one... So all that emotional stuff aside, you were pretty happy with the, you know, physical side of things?"

Savita says, "Are you fishing for compliments? I wouldn't have thought you cared."

Gilligan says (crossing his arms), "What can I say? I've had a few bad reviews lately... It starts to affect your performance."

Savita says, "You only ever call when the moon is full – a girl can get testy."

Gilligan winces.

Savita says (laughing), "Don't tell me that's still how it is?"

Gilligan says (shrugging), "It's like boxers saving themselves before big fights..."

The scene changes.

In a station in London, at a call box. Savita is dialling. Cornelius Gilligan has bought a paper and is on his way over. The phone is ringing as Gilligan arrives, but there is no answer. Savita puts the phone down.

Savita says, "No answer. I'm very scared, Cornelius."

Gilligan says, "Everyone should be. Look at this."

He shows her the newspaper. The headline for the main article is "WAVE OF UNEXPLAINED

DEATHS ACROSS NATION". There is a smaller article headed "MOTHER OF ALL STORMS BREWING OVER NORTH SEA", and at the bottom of the page, "RIFT IN UK/US RELATIONS". Savita takes a look.

Savita says, "Unexplained deaths? Do you think it's the same thing?"

Gilligan says, "There's no doubt. Like I thought, they're eliminating the opposition... I didn't realise they were working on this scale."

Savita says, "We should check on Jason and Samantha."

Gilligan says, "Okay. Let's get going; we could still make a connection later on."

The scene changes.

Outside Jason and Samantha's flat. Gilligan and Savita run up. Gilligan points out a sigil pasted onto the door.

Savita says, "What's that one for?"

Gilligan says, "I'm not sure; it's very old though. And it definitely isn't good..."

They try the bell three or four times, but there's no answer."

Savita says, "This is bad. How can we get in?"

Gilligan holds up a finger. He bends down to the lock, and knocks on it three times, muttering something under his breath. He opens the door with an inappropriate flourish, and Savita pushes past him and up the stairs. The camera follows Cornelius Gilligan as he follows her; he's not hanging back deliberately, he's just thinking hard. She gets to the top and round the corner, and we hear her voice off-screen.

Savita says (tough but frightened), "Cornelius, I think you should get up here right now."

Gilligan rushes up the remaining stairs, and the camera follows him. Savita stands at the doorway to Jason's flat. The two of them move inside, leaving room for the camera to show what they see. Jason crouches at the end of the corridor, a bloody knife in hand, his face crudely daubed in a rough approximation of the look of a samurai. Savita screams, pointing to the door to the bedroom, where Samantha's lifeless and outstretched arm and hand can be seen, blood pooling on the ground.

Gilligan says, "Jason, is that you?"

Jason says (speaking in Chinese), "I am Lord Dragon of the Four Winds. I do not know where I am, and I do not know who are these creatures that beset me."

Savita says, "Jason, it's us! Remember!"

Jason says (in Chinese), "I shall kill you if you do not leave."

Savita says (to Gilligan), "Can't we just destroy the sigil?"

Gilligan says (to Savita), "It wouldn't help; I think the sigil summoned a Chinese demon or ghost. Now it's possessed Jason; I don't know how to get rid of it."

Savita says (to Jason), "Jason, remember me! What have you done to Samantha?"

Jason visibly reacts at the mention of Samantha's name.

Savita says, "That's it. Samantha, where is Samantha?"

Jason says (in Chinese), "The idiot human speaks a name which means something to this body."

Gilligan says (pointing toward the bedroom), "Yes, Samantha. Look at Samantha."

Jason says (in Chinese), "I should kill these insects..."

Despite himself, he looks into the bedroom, looks at the body, begins to shake a little, and a tear emerges from his eye.

Jason says (in Chinese), "This body weeps." (begins to shout) "Why do I weep when I live! I live again!"

He weeps even more, and suddenly his eyes seem to clear (the magical effect of running water).

Jason says (in English), "Samantha, what have I done?"

He rushes to her side (although he hasn't dropped the knife). Gilligan and Savita move forward to watch.

Jason says (in Chinese, taking the knife in both hands), "This unworthy soul must pay for this crime!"

Savita says, "No!"

Jason plunges his knife into his stomach and collapses across Samantha. Almost despite themselves, Gilligan and Savita grasp each other in horror.

Gilligan says, "We have to go... we can't be connected to this."

Savita says (pushing him away), "How can you think about that?"

Gilligan says, "Someone has to. Think: by the time the police finish with us this will all be over; and I don't mean in a good way."

Savita says (staring at him, then turning to go), "You might be right. But there's something you've lost... Or maybe you never had it."

Gilligan watches Savita go, pauses a moment, then goes into the bedroom, gets a blanket from the bed and lays it over Jason and Samantha, leaving them looking as if they are sleeping.

Gilligan says, "Bye, friends." (In a whisper:) "See

you soon.”

The scene changes.

Savita and Cornelius Gilligan at Birmingham New Street station, at a call box.

Savita says, “Thanks, Detective Grimm.”

She puts the phone down.

Gilligan says, “Did he tell you?”

Savita says, “Yeah, he was really helpful. I said we just wanted to go and pay our respects.”

Gilligan says, “Good work, let’s go.”

He dashes off, Savita wearily following.

The scene changes.

In Sutton Coldfield Park, Cornelius Gilligan and Savita are climbing wordlessly up to where Ravitraj was killed. Eventually they get there, and Gilligan gets onto his hands and knees and looks around. Savita just stands, looking around the park. Suddenly she shouts as the Snake leaps from cover to attack them. (The Snake must be wearing gloves for this scene, for reasons that will be apparent.) She stumbles back away from him, and Gilligan gets to his feet to grapple with the attacker. But the Snake has the advantage and gets his hands around Gilligan’s throat; Gilligan struggles to pull the deadly fingers away but the Snake is too strong. As Savita looks around for a branch or a rock she can use to attack the Snake, an unexpected ally arrives on the scene: Detective Grimm. He grabs the Snake from behind and tries to pull him away; as the Snake twists to face him there is a snap; one of his fingers comes away in Gilligan’s hand; disgusted, Gilligan drops the bloody item. The Snake frees himself from Detective Grimm, looks at the number of people ranged against him, and runs off. Detective Grimm tries to run after him, but returns after a moment having lost his quarry in the woods.

Gilligan says, “It’s good to meet you, Detective, if a bit of a surprise...”

Detective Grimm says, “I knew there was something weird about this case right away. When you said you were coming up here I decided to follow my nose... I thought something might happen.”

Gilligan says, “I came here for just the same reason.”

Savita says (pointing at the finger on the ground), “Seeing as you’re here, do you want to collect the evidence?”

Detective Grimm says (picking it up and putting it in a plastic evidence bag; speaking to Savita), “You realise that I need an explanation for all this for my report. And you should introduce your mysterious friend.”

Savita says (to Gilligan), “Aren’t explanations your thing? And you can introduce yourself. You don’t normally need so much encouragement.”

Gilligan says (to Detective Grimm), “Come back with us to her place... We’ll tell you everything, but you won’t be putting any of it in a report.”

Detective Grimm says (suddenly formal), “Is that a threat?”

Gilligan says, “Hardly. But take my word for it, you won’t put it in a report.”

Savita says, “Not unless you want to spend your early retirement in a padded cell...”

The scene changes.

Savita’s living room. Detective Grimm is there and so is Cornelius Gilligan. Savita is just making them a drink. Gilligan is nosing through her CDs.

Gilligan says (calling to Savita), “Nice place you have here. Superhero chic?”

While Detective Grimm automatically looks up at the superhero posters on the wall, Gilligan unobtrusively takes a folded piece of paper from inside his jacket and puts into a CD – let’s say *Violent Femmes*. Savita comes back in with cups of tea before he has a chance to put the CD back.

Savita says, “I was thinking more of neo-mythic grandeur...”

Gilligan says, “Not bad... boyfriend just moved out?”

Savita says, “Two months ago. But I resent the implication that they aren’t mine.”

Gilligan says (ignoring her), “So this guy put these up and left your paintings to rot? Nice guy.”

Savita says, “The posters are mine, buster. What are you doing with my CD?”

Gilligan says (holding it up for her to see), “Wasn’t this our song?” (sings) “Let me go o-on...!” (not singing in the face of disapproval from both others) “My voice isn’t so bad...”

Savita says, “It is.”

Detective Grimm says, “No, it’s worse.”

Gilligan says, “Well, thanks... never got around to buying the album, myself... guess it didn’t mean as much to me as it did to you...”

Savita says (coming and grabbing it off him), “Oh, I’m still so hung up on you, you know... I play this album every night and cry that you’re not here... Shall I put it on, we can test those embers...?”

Gilligan says (grabbing it back and putting it away), “Not right now.”

Detective Grimm says (clearing his throat), “I know the two of you have more important things than multiple homicides to discuss, but if you don’t mind...”

He takes the plastic bag from his pocket.

Detective Grimmatt says, "For a start, who was that nine-fingered man?"

He stops there, and takes a closer look at the bag.

Detective Grimmatt says, "That's odd."

Savita says, "What is it?"

Gilligan steps forward and grabs the bag. He takes a look and opens it despite the protests of Detective Grimmatt:

Detective Grimmatt says, "Hey that's evidence!"

Gilligan says (holding the gloved finger), "I'd say this evidence has already been contaminated, wouldn't you, officer?"

Holding the finger out for both the others to see, Gilligan takes off the part of the glove that remains on the finger. Despite the blood on the glove, the finger is made of solid wood. Gilligan passes it to Savita, and sits back to think. Savita and Detective Grimmatt just look at each other in puzzlement.

Gilligan says, "There is another option. I think that our killer might be a golem."

Savita says, "What's a golem?"

Detective Grimmatt says, "It's like a zombie."

Gilligan says, "Nearly, but not quite. A zombie is a dead person's body reanimated without a soul. A golem supposed to be an artificial body animated by the spirits of the dead. They're supposed to be a Jewish invention, and originally they were used to gain revenge on those who had abused the Jewish people. But like any technology, inevitably it fell into the wrong hands at some point."

Savita says, "Great, so we're talking Chucky."

Gilligan says, "Or Pinocchio on a particularly bad day... Once the finger was disconnected from the body, it began to revert to its normal state."

Savita says, "Why didn't they bring him back in his own body, with the soul and body together?"

Gilligan says (almost imperceptibly wincing), "It is possible to do that, apparently, but the reanimation never lasts for long."

Detective Grimmatt says, "So what now?"

Gilligan says (looking at his watch), "Well, I need to get some sleep. I've had a really bad day. I'll let Savita fill you in all the details –"

Savita says, "Thanks!"

Gilligan says, "– while I get some well-deserved rest. Then tomorrow, we have to do some preparatory work before we make our move... For one thing, I want to check out the famous buried church of Birmingham, referred to in almost every one of the great works of occult literature, from the Necronomicon to the Unnaussprechlichen Kulten of Von Junzt..."

Detective Grimmatt says (drawing Gilligan out, not really wanting to let on that he knows about a lot of this stuff already), "But it's only been like that a few years..."

Gilligan says, "Then wouldn't you say it is surprising that the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, knew about it centuries ago? Either he saw the future, or someone created the buried church with those books in mind... Either way, I think it could be important."

Gilligan starts to go off to bed.

Savita says (racking her brains), "Where should I start?"

Then Gilligan turns back to them.

Gilligan says, "There are a couple of other things, detective. When we're ready to make a move, we'll give you a call – and it'll be best to come alone, because the guy we're up against could easily turn somebody... well, turn them bad... The fewer of us involved, the smaller the chance of that is. The other thing: Savita might call you sometime before that with an unusual request –"

Detective Grimmatt looks at Savita, who shrugs.

Gilligan says, "Please grant it and help her as far as you can."

Detective Grimmatt says, "I'll do my best."

Gilligan goes off to bed, discreetly swiping the Godzilla from Savita's bag on the way, and Savita gets ready to tell Detective Grimmatt all the details of this murky business.

The scene changes.

Birmingham city centre. Savita and Cornelius Gilligan are walking across the square, starting from the steps near the lions going up past the fountains, and then in the direction of the buried church.

Savita says, "Do you really think this place is relevant to all this?"

Gilligan says, "Not really. But I've got a feeling about this place; plus, it's just darn interesting – a half-buried church! Who would have thought it? We have to find a way to pass the time before we make our move..."

Savita says, "Now that's the bit I don't understand. Why do we need to wait?"

Gilligan says, "Well, for starters we don't know who we are moving against. In theory it would be possible to trace the golem through its finger, but I'm just not powerful enough to do that yet."

Savita says, "I thought you could do anything... especially after screwing during the full moon..."

Gilligan says, "Against a regular Joe like you, maybe, but a powerful guy like the one we're up against has powerful defensive magic."

They get to the buried church.

Gilligan says, "Isn't it terrific? It's, like, buried!"

Savita says, "Yeah, amazing. So what are we waiting for?"

Gilligan says (glancing over his shoulder), "When I say run, run. We're waiting for them to attack us."

Savita says, "You what?"

She looks around and sees the Snake advancing towards them rapidly. If at all possible, it would be great to have Amardevita and Mohander sitting around in shot, having ice lollies or something.

Savita says, "Oh, fucking great plan, Gilligan!"

Gilligan says, "Run!"

She runs, he doesn't, at least until he's sure that the Snake is coming after him. Then he starts to run, toward the left-hand library doors. The Snake pursues him.

Gilligan runs out the back of the library, stops to catch his breath and looks back to see if the Snake is close behind. Out of the shadows steps Veronica.

Veronica says, "Gilligan, here!"

Gilligan says, "Veronica! We thought you were dead!"

Veronica says (stepping toward him), "No, I'm not."

She steps back.

Veronica says, "But you are..."

Gilligan looks down in horror at his stomach, where blood is spreading from a stabbing wound. The Snake slides through the doors, and smiles at Veronica, who smiles back. They stroll off as Gilligan slides to the ground.

Gilligan says (looking at the blood on his hands), "I didn't think it would be like this." (he winces) "Who'd expect it to hurt so much..?"

Savita bursts through the doors, and stops in shock: this is very nearly one trauma too many for her.

Savita says, "Cornelius!"

Gilligan says (losing his strength), "Yeah, they got me... but it isn't as bad as it seems."

Savita says, "You mean you'll be all right?"

Gilligan says (even weaker), "Um, no; can you see all this blood!? I'm going to die, Savita, I'm afraid."

Savita says, "You can't die now; I need you; the world needs you!"

Gilligan says (on the verge of death, but with a smile), "The moment has been prepared for; brave heart, Tegan!" (He reaches into his jacket and gives her Godzilla.)

Savita says, "You can't do this to me..."

Gilligan says (as he dies), "Take him, it'll give you some protection, and might prove useful... Remember our favourite song... play it... one

more... time."

Savita stands looking at him.

The scene changes.

Cornelius Gilligan's grave. Savita is there alone, in black, with some flowers. She puts the flowers down.

Savita says, "They couldn't wait to get you buried, Cornelius ... they said you died from natural causes and Det Vijay said it was safer to let it go... that he would do what he could to protect me..." (she begins to almost cry) "Why did you let them do this? I was relying on you, Cornelius. I trusted you to look after me... .. I guess that's pretty lame... But things aren't looking good..."

The scene changes.

Back at Savita's house. She's just collected the newspaper from the letterbox. She's maudlin and talking to Godzilla again, slumping on the sofa.

Savita says (reading out the headline to Godzilla), "Chaos spreading over the country... They'll come for me any day now... I know Cornelius said you'd protect me, but for how long? Pretty soon they'll be in control."

She switches on the TV, and watches a bit of Captain Mutant's Radioactive Half Hour.

Captain Mutant: "Now is the time, kids! This is the day, this is the hour, this... is this! The apocalypse is here! Soon you will all live in my radioactive world! Isn't that great?!"

There's the sound of kids cheering off-screen. Savita switches off, shaking her head wearily.

Savita says, "There's nothing I can do; I don't have any contacts in the occult world, I have no secret knowledge; I don't even know who I'm fighting! A rubber dinosaur just isn't going to tip the scales in my favour... however handsome it may be..."

She's pretty dejected, and goes over to get a CD. Looking for something to lift her spirits, she remembers Gilligan's last words...

Savita says (smiling sadly), "'Remember our song...'"

She takes the CD from the rack and goes over to put it on. By the stereo, she opens the case and takes out the CD without really looking; she puts it on (the track is Blister in the Sun); it starts to play, as she turns, something falls out of the case. She puts down the case and bends to pick up the thing. It is a note, folded up. She looks at Godzilla (he's not responsible) and begins to open it.

Savita says (puzzled), "It's from Cornelius..." (thinking) "He must have put it in here the other day. 'Dear Savita, Go to Randolph Street, love Cornelius.

ps. Don't worry.' Well that's wonderful. Very helpful. I suppose he was going to meet me there... There's no point going now..." (Savita takes a good look at Godzilla) "Like I have better things to do... Maybe he's set up a meeting for me or something."

Godzilla still has nothing to say; but Savita resolves to go. She grabs the monster, pops him in her pocket, grabs her coat, and leaves in a rush.

The scene changes.

Savita arrives on Randolph Street. Nothing is happening, other than all the usual craziness. She looks around, then notices an occult shop, which she had never noticed before. She steps inside.

The scene changes.

Interior of an occult bookshop. (We can film part of this in Brighton, even if it is set in Birmingham.) Savita enters the shop, looking around aimlessly. But she seems to be drawn to the back of the room.

Cut to: studio shot. Savita coming in through a curtain into a dark and dusty back room. She's drawn to one item. An ancient-looking book, tied up in thick string. Trying to move away from it, she cannot. This is it! She picks it up. Suddenly she is startled by a shopkeeper who enters the back room behind her.

Savita says (a bit panicky and scared), "Sorry! Am I allowed back here? I promise I wasn't going to steal it!"

The shopkeeper says (smiling in a kind way), "Is that all you want? You can have it."

Savita says, "Are you sure? It looks very valuable."

The shopkeeper says, "Nonsense – it's nothing more than scrap paper to us..." (she leans forward and speaks more quietly) "...because we don't have a use for it, and I think you do."

Savita says (stepping back), "What do you mean? What do you know?"

The shopkeeper says, "Look, don't panic... we heard on the grapevine that someone would need the book."

Savita says, "That would be the psychic grapevine, right?"

The shopkeeper says (smiling), "Um, I suppose. Although initiates tend to call it the internet..." (more seriously) "I'm just sorry there isn't more we can do to help..."

Savita says (tucking the book into her bag), "Well, thanks then. I have to go now; not that I know why or where..."

The shopkeeper says, "Let the book do the work..."

Savita says (looking at her oddly), "Right.

Thanks."

Savita dashes out through the curtain, leaving the shopkeeper shaking her head sadly.

The shopkeeper says, "I hope she will be strong enough."

A ghostly Katherine steps out of the shadow.

Katherine says, "She will be. She has to be. For all of us... If she fails, even the dead will suffer."

The scene changes.

Savita's home. She has taken the still bound-up book to her little study. Setting Godzilla on the desk beside it, she takes some scissors and begins to cut the strings which hold the book shut. She's still puzzled, obviously, not knowing what the book holds, but suspecting it might be a weapon she can use. There is no title on the outside. She opens the book once the string is removed. On the first page is the author's name, Howard Phillips, the publication date, and title, all of which are handwritten. She reads out the title.

Savita says, "(In German:) The Souls of the Damned. (In English:) The... something... of the... something..." (she notices the date) "1401!"

She turns the page... there is a single line of German, the rest is blank. She turns another page, then another, and another; all are blank. She slams the book back onto the table.

Savita says, "Damn!"

Not one to give up, she opens the book back onto the page with one line. She tries to read it out.

Savita says (in German), "Which damned soul reads this book?" (she gets to her feet) (in English) "I'm sure I've got a German dictionary around here somewhere, from when I went skiing in Austria as a kid..."

The scene changes.

Savita surrounded by a massive pile of books. She continues to dig through the boxes, and finally, triumphantly, she lifts out a German dictionary.

Savita says (triumphant, but trying to keep her own expectations low), "Like this is going to help anyway..."

She rushes back to the desk and begins to look up the words of the title.

Savita says, "The... Souls... of the... Damned. Lovely." (she turns to the single line again) "Which... damned... soul... reads this book?"

She sits back and thinks for a moment. Then she takes a pen and writes her name at the end of the line. Suddenly she's pushed back and the camera focuses directly on the page: it is writing itself. Words appear in English, beginning with the title: Resurrecting the Dead... There's a diagram, of a man on his back in a

shallow stream. When it is done, Savita returns, and looks at the finished page in astonishment. At first she is just surprised at what has happened; then she notices what the page actually says...

Savita says, "I can bring Cornelius back to life? I don't believe it." (she reads from the text) "If the necessary preparations were made; that is, if part of the soul was left on the material plane as an anchor, arrangements made to conserve the body, and a willing resurrector found, a damned soul, otherwise lost to the pits of hell, may be forced to return..."

Savita says, "I'm going to need help to get the body. And what does it mean, an anchor..." (she trails off, looking at Godzilla) "Ahh, a bit like Star Trek III..." She grabs the monster and dashes for the phone.

The camera looks at what she was reading; the page blows over: there was a part she missed... "But this return will only be temporary, for hell does not give up a trophy fairly won..."

The scene changes.

Near the graveyard, Detective Grimm, carrying a shovel, being led by Savita to the graveyard.

The scene changes.

At a stream in Sutton Coldfield Park. Detective Grimm is dragging a bag in which is Cornelius Gilligan's body. Savita is badgering him to hurry.

Savita says, "Come on, hurry up!"

Detective Grimm says, "I don't know why I'm doing this... if things weren't so desperate..."

They get to the bank of the stream, and Detective Grimm opens the bag, to reveal Cornelius Gilligan's bloody corpse – because no one could see the blood, no one cleaned it off.

Detective Grimm says, "Okay, what now?"

Savita says, "Put him in the water."

Detective Grimm rolls the body into the centre of the stream – it's very shallow, so Cornelius Gilligan's face isn't underwater or anything. If the weather is just too cold for this, we could use one of the little bridges, and have his hands and feet in the water, in a way reminiscent of an electrical connection. Savita tucks the Godzilla figure into his shirt.

Savita says, "It's something to do with the running water... it acts like a gateway to the spirit world... you know like in old King Arthur and Cu Chulainn stories..?"

Detective Grimm says (shaking his head), "Of course not... policemen don't know about things like that." (his phone rings, he answers, listens, then speaks) "Okay." (he puts the phone away) "I've got to go. This thing is escalating everywhere, and they need me firefighting in six different cities at once..."

Will you be okay here?"

Savita says, "I'll be fine. Hopefully he will be too. Thanks for your help, detective."

Detective Grimm says (leaving), "Give me a call when it's time to kick ass!"

Savita laughs and nods.

The scene changes.

Savita sits with Cornelius Gilligan through the night. She isn't sure why. She's desperate, so she's clutching at straws. But is there any love for Gilligan there? Sometimes she takes hold of a hand, and we see the conflicting emotions on her face. Other times she's pacing up and down, or watching out for attackers. It is the long dark night of her soul; pushed to the very brink of sanity, she's still holding it together by a thread. It seems that she does reach a resolution, that she did love him. Eventually she falls asleep, a bit happier through resolving her conflicting emotions. Some time later, we watch as Gilligan, the blood having washed the blood from his shirt, bursts up from the water, gasping his first new breaths. He looks around, a bit puzzled, as he tries to reorientate himself. Savita begins to stir. Gilligan looks a bit uncomfortable, then reaches inside his shirt and pulls out Godzilla.

Gilligan says, "I'm back, Godzilla, and, it seems, not a moment too soon!"

He throws the monster at Savita; it hits her and wakes her up. Gilligan gets up out of the water, and starts to wring out his clothes.

Savita says (overjoyed), "Cornelius Gilligan! You're alive!"

Gilligan says (gingerly allowing her to hug him), "Technically you'd have to say I'm undead, but I feel pretty good... thanks to you."

Savita says, "Gilligan, there are so many things I need to tell you... my feelings -"

Gilligan says (interrupting her: he seems flippant, but he's trying to protect her from getting hurt later on), "Will have to wait, I'm afraid. We have work to do. Come along: the game is afoot!"

He rushes off, and she stumbles after him.

The scene changes.

Savita's living room. Cornelius Gilligan and Savita. Gilligan is flicking through the channels, most are normal, but on one there's Captain Mutant ranting, on another Detective Grimm answering questions...

Gilligan says, "I see things have got worse while I've been away..."

Savita says, "Things are falling apart everywhere; politicians are talking about breaking away from Europe, breaking ties with the US, becoming a

Fortress England... I even heard one saying we should try and get the Suez canal back! The whole country is going mad... Can you stop it?"

Gilligan says, "Well, you know what, Savita? Just for you, I think I can. I've got a little more under the bonnet these days, if you know what I mean..."

Savita says (missing the double entendre), "So how come dying made you more powerful?"

Gilligan says, "Till I put it to the test, it's hard for me to be sure it has worked, but in simple terms the theory is that the other side is a pretty spooky place, and if you know what you're about, you can bring a good chunk of that spookiness back with you. I can feel it within me; there's a link with that place that is feeding me..." (pause) "Anyway, now I know who we're up against. I spoke to the spirits of those he had killed."

Savita says, "Who is it?"

Gilligan says, "An ancient Indian sorcerer, going by the name of Mohander the Terrible. He terrorised the sub-continent for the best part of 13 centuries. Seems he came here in the sixties, following some big setback, and he's been biding his time ever since. Growing stronger, more dangerous..."

Savita says, "Sounds like trouble, Cornelius..."

Gilligan says, "That's right, my kind of trouble!"

Savita says (looking dubious), "Say it often enough you might start to believe it. So what was being dead like?"

Gilligan says, "It was actually kind of uncool... You wouldn't like it and it definitely does not come recommended. Then again, I doubt it would be quite the same for you, not having signed away your soul..."

Savita says, "Signed away..?"

Gilligan says (grabbing Savita by the shoulders), "You didn't sign your name in the Book of Damned Souls, did you?" (Savita nods in a very frightened manner) "My god, that means you'll go straight to the 63rd circle of hell – reserved for those who deface books! You'll have to spend eternity cleaning baby poo off children's books..."

Savita says, "You tit."

Gilligan says, "Ha ha! Have you got the finger?"

Savita says (digging it out of her pockets and holding it up; sarcastically), "Where would you like me to put it?"

Gilligan says, "You know, that's the nicest offer I've had since undying... but there's no time for that right now."

The scene changes.

Savita is outside a sports shop; Cornelius Gilligan is inside. She looks at her watch; he finally comes

out. He shows her a pack of three darts.

Gilligan says, "Made in Birmingham from dead men's fingers!"

Savita just looks puzzled, not quite sure what he is up to.

The scene changes.

Savita outside a newsagents. Cornelius Gilligan runs out brandishing a map of Birmingham.

The scene changes.

Inside Savita's house. Cornelius Gilligan is drawing occult symbols onto the wings of the darts.

The scene changes.

Savita's back garden. They've pinned the map to the fence. Savita is just fixing a blindfold around Gilligan's head.

Savita says, "Will this work?"

Gilligan says, "Should do. You need to understand what's going on. The occult forces at work are actually distorting space and time around the city in the same way gravity does around a black hole. That's the source of the chaos." (he pulls the blindfold back off) "The Terrible Mohander has grasped the heart of the country in his hand and he's twisting for all he's worth. But that will lead us to him... Sympathetic magic is all about using the representation of a thing to affect the thing itself. In this case, we're going to let the thing – the city – affect the representation – the map. We've made darts out of the golem's finger. I'll throw them at the map. The plan is that they will follow the lines of distortion to their epicentre... Do you follow?"

Savita says, "I understand what you're trying to say, but it still sounds like hogwash."

Gilligan says, "Hey, you're talking to a dead man; you have to allow me the benefit of the doubt in these kind of things!"

Savita smiles.

Gilligan says, "The other way this could be explained is that I already know the answer, subconsciously, and that this is the way of digging it up from the murky depths of my soul."

Savita says, "Sounds familiar..."

Gilligan says, "It might do. This is a refinement of a technique I first learnt from Twin Peaks."

Savita says, "Twin Peaks..? You mean when Agent Cooper was throwing stuff at stuff?"

Gilligan says, "It's a good technique; Cooper was a good cop; shame he got stuck down there in the Black Lodge..."

Savita says (trying to put the blindfold back on), "It was tragic. But back to the matter in hand?"

She puts the blindfold on him, and he throws the three darts. He takes the blindfold off and they go up

to look at the map. One dart is stuck in a stream in Sutton Coldfield park; a second is stuck in Handsworth; the third is nowhere to be seen.

Gilligan says (pointing to the first), "Hey look, you did that!"

Savita says, "What's the other?"

Gilligan says, "Must be where the Terrible Mohander is based."

Savita says (looking around on the ground), "Where's the other dart?"

Gilligan says (shrugging), "Dunno... I think it's time to call Detective Grimmert. It's time to make our move..."

The scene changes.

Savita on the phone to Detective Grimmert.

Savita says, "We'll meet you there, then, at 4.00 pm. ... Okay, bye."

She puts the phone down, then notices a photo nearby, of her and her university friends, back when they were all still alive. The third arrow has pierced the image of Cornelius Gilligan. She looks around, but there is no way the dart could have got into the room.

The scene changes.

Outside on the corner of the street. Savita, Cornelius Gilligan and Detective Grimmert together; having just met up. One possibility for this scene might be to use a combination of special video and shaky camera effects to give the impression of reality shuddering...

Gilligan says (to Detective Grimmert), "You don't seem surprised to see me."

Detective Grimmert says, "I've seen weird before. I've seen weirder. It's what I specialise in."

Savita says, "You're kidding, right?"

Detective Grimmert says, "I'll tell you about it sometime. Did you know that until three years ago Halifax was a suburb of London?"

Savita says, "What?"

Gilligan says, "Come on, don't freak her out. We need her steady for this."

Savita says, "I'm steady, don't worry. I want to get the bastard that killed all my friends."

Gilligan says, "Oh, yeah, all your friends. There is something I forgot to mention..."

Savita says, "Yeah?"

Gilligan says, "I never told you who stabbed me; I guess you just assumed it was the golem... it was Veronica."

Savita says, "Veronica is alive?!"

Gilligan says, "Yeah, but she's... gone over to the dark side. She belonged to them completely."

Savita says, "Can we save her?"

Gilligan says, "Only by killing the Terrible Mohander."

Savita says, "Then let's do it."

Detective Grimmert says, "Right, but don't get carried away. I have some latitude in these cases, but we can't just run in there blasting away."

Savita says, "It looks pretty normal from here, but won't there be armed guards and stuff?"

Gilligan says, "Probably not. He doesn't need them. Or at least, he didn't yesterday; hopefully he hasn't realised that today I'm back in town, bigger, badder and tougher than ever!"

Savita says, "You look just as skinny-assed as ever to me..."

The scene changes.

Detective Grimmert knocks on the door, Cornelius Gilligan and Savita hanging back.

Detective Grimmert says, "Remember, play it cool..."

Amardevita answers the door and smiles at them. Amardevita says, "Hello. Mohander was expecting you. Please come in!"

The three adventurers look at each other. This isn't what they expected. Cornelius Gilligan shrugs and indicates they should go in, and the others don't have any better suggestions.

Detective Grimmert says, "Thanks."

Amardevita turns and leads them into the front room, where Ravitraj was held at the beginning.

Amardevita says, "Sit down, please; I'll call Mohander. He'll be glad to see you."

She goes to the bottom of the stairs and calls Mohander; the three adventurers look at each other, and, rather than sitting down, arrange themselves spread out against the far wall. Amardevita returns, seemingly unfazed by their aggressive postures. She stands there smiling at them, saying nothing, creeping them out.

The scene changes.

Same set-up as previous scene. Mohander enters, followed by the Snake and Veronica. Mohander sits in his armchair, his two henchpeople take up positions on either side. Cornelius Gilligan begins to light a cigarette, but Amardevita tells him off (bad tempered), "No smoking, please. What a dirty habit!" (sweet again) "I'll go and make everyone tea, yes?"

Mohander nods and waves for her to go. Mohander and Cornelius Gilligan stare each other out. The Snake starts to make a move forward, but Mohander waves him back.

Mohander says (to Cornelius Gilligan), "I'm surprised to see you are still alive... sometimes I feel

my colleagues do not care about their work enough..." (Snake and Veronica look sheepish) "You were very foolish to come here, though. I am far too powerful for you!"

Mohander waves Snake forward. The assassin moves toward Cornelius Gilligan, but Detective Grimmett leaps to meet him, throwing a punch. The punch connects, but it feels as if he has just punched a block of wood. Nevertheless, Snake turns to deal with Detective Grimmett, and wrestles him to his knees. In the confusion, Veronica gets hold of Savita, getting her arm around Savita's neck. This leaves Cornelius Gilligan and Mohander to face each other.

Mohander gets out of his armchair and steps forward.

Mohander says, "I have lived 1500 years. Your reality is dying at my hands! Soon the way will be opening! The Elder Gods will come! And you will all die! Ha ha ha ha ha! You will die! Ha ha ha!"

Gilligan says, "Been there, done that. Shall we do this the traditional way?"

Mohander says, "Agreed."

Gilligan says, "It's good to know that even megalomaniacal demon wizards still have a sense of honour..."

The two of them clasp hands. They strain, the effort showing in their faces. Occult symbols flare up on their faces (Mohander's matching the ones we saw in the opening scene of the film). Close up on the eyes!

Mohander says (through gritted teeth), "You have too much power!" (shakes head and grins) "But I still have more!"

Gilligan says (also through gritted teeth, but he's weakening), "I died... but I came back... I brought power... and I brought some friends back with me... perhaps you know them..?"

Suddenly, possibly in black or white, the souls of the dead appear: Jason, Samantha, Ravitraj, Katherine... They each lay a hand on Mohander, who is visibly drained by it. The ghosts disappear.

Mohander steps back. Cornelius Gilligan drops to one knee, exhausted by the effort. There is a clatter of wood; deprived of the power that animated him, Snake has returned to his natural state. Amardevita falls to the ground, unconscious. Veronica falls to the ground, unconscious. Savita and Detective Grimmett take a moment to steady themselves.

Mohander says, "You think I'm so easily

defeated?"

Mohander swats Gilligan with the back of one hand, sending Gilligan crashing to the ground. Mohander picks up his favourite axe from beside his armchair and makes to attack Gilligan with it. Detective Grimmett rushes forward, but is pushed back like a feather. Savita is frantically searching Veronica for the knife she killed Gilligan with. We see Mohander raise the axe above his head. We see Gilligan resign himself to his fate. Then Mohander falls back into his armchair, and slumps, rolling forward to reveal the knife in his back, placed there by Savita.

Savita rushes to Gilligan.

Savita says, "Are you all right?"

Gilligan says, "Thanks for saving me... but I'm afraid it's all over now; the reanimation spell you did doesn't last long anyway, and I'm afraid all this excitement has... rather worn it out..."

Savita says, "I can cast it again!"

Gilligan says (slipping away), "I'm afraid it only works the one time... I saw this coming... don't blame yourself..."

Savita says, "Cornelius, I think I might have loved you..."

Gilligan might turn to dust at this point, or something along those lines.

Detective Grimmett says (coming over to her), "I think he's gone now, Savita."

Savita begins to weep. He tries to comfort her.

Veronica says (behind them, just waking up), "Where am I? Savita? Is that Cornelius Gilligan?"

Savita says (rushing to her), "You made it! Are you back to your old self?"

Veronica says, "I think so; was I ever someone else?"

Detective Grimmett says, "You don't want to know. We'd better get her out of here before explaining things..."

Savita says, "You're right. There's nothing left for us to do here. I mean, I've saved the universe... what else is there?"

They help Veronica to her feet and leave the room. We follow them out, and watch them struggle heroically down the street; then we come back inside the house, and watch as Amardevita wakes up, for the first time in decades, really, only to see her husband slumped, dead, in his armchair; the shock shows on her face; she goes over to him, and begins to sob...

The Terrible Trio Dig to the Earth's Core!

Stephen William Theaker
Silver Scribe Emperor

Young Roli got out of bed that morning with a spring in his step and a song in his heart. "Oh la," he sang, "oh la, la la, la la!"

He loved staying at his grandmother's house in Uttar Pradesh each summer. He loved his home in Leningrad, of course, but the times he spent in India were always so magical. It was fortunate that his father's airship made regular trips along the border, making it convenient to drop him off and pick him up, at the beginning and end of summer. When he got back to Russia, his mother would be full of questions as ever; it was so upsetting for her that for security reasons the authorities would not let her return to her home, but that was the price she had chosen to pay when she fell in love with a son of communist Russia.

But none of that was in Roli's mind as he bounded down the stairs for breakfast. His best friends Rano and Amit were already there. He had friends back in Russia, of course, but they never seemed to have quite as much fun together.

After the usual squabble over breakfast, they went outside.

Roli's grandma had been quite well off, her late husband having been reasonably well-to-do, there being even a suggestion that he might have descended from ancient nobility. Upon his death, most of the money had gone to improve the lot of the local villagers. Grandpa, Roli understood, had been a kind man, but one prone to indulgence rather than action, and in contrast grandma had taken practical steps to make things better, paying for running water to be extended to every home, sending a local man to be trained as a doctor, and performing a multitude of such goodnesses that ultimately made it one of the happiest and most comfortable villages in the country.

"What shall we do, Roli?" asked Rano.

Amit punched her in the arm. "Why don't you ask me? I get good ideas too."

"Shut up," she told him. "And don't hit me." She ran off to the nearest field, leaping over the fence like a gazelle. They guessed that she might be crying.

"Amit," said Roli, after getting his friend in a headlock, "do you have to be like that?"

"Yes I do."

Roli twisted his ear, and the younger boy screamed. Roli let him go abruptly, in case the noise had brought his grandmother running.

No one came, and they ambled in the direction Rano had taken.

"She was my friend first," said Amit, kicking up little whirls of dust.

"So?" Roli didn't really know what he was getting at.

"So she's my friend, not yours. Why does she always want to hear your ideas?"

Roli thought carefully about it, since his friend seemed to be upset. He came to a conclusion. "I think it's because I am the best. And you stink, rather like poo."

Amit slapped him on the back of the head and ran off laughing before Roli could react. Despite the aching head, Roli was pleased to see his friend happy again.

When he caught up with the other two, they seemed to be reconciled, and plotting some kind of adventure.

"My idea," said Amit, "is that we should dig a hole in the ground, and see how deep we can get. I have read a book where it said there are dinosaurs underground."

"Fossils?" asked Rano. "I don't want to dig all day to find some boring rocks."

"No, it's not just that," he explained. "It was a book by Edgar Rice Burroughs, and there was a

whole world down there of dinosaurs and fighting.”

Roli made a doubting face. “It doesn’t seem likely.”

Amit shrugged. “It is scientific fact that there are living creatures beneath our feet, such as worms and things. It is only logical that there are larger creatures too. For example, on the surface of a lake, we can see small creatures like flies and snakes, but deeper down there are huge creatures like whales, sharks and giant squid.”

“Wowser,” said Rano. “That would be fabulous. If we found a giant spider or something we could take it to Bombay or London and put it on show. We would be the world-famous Rano Brothers!”

Roli thought that there might be something wrong with Amit’s logic, but he had a great fondness for digging, and so he wasn’t going to dissuade his friends from their project.

And so they started digging, but what they ultimately found was not what any of them expected.

Each of them had a small shovel, and they had to take frequent rests. Roli’s grandmother brought them several glasses of lemonade to keep their strength up in the hot sun. Before long, they had dug a hole the size of a small hut, and they had to consider the issue of what to do with the excavated earth. Roli suggested using it to build a castle, and so soon they had two projects on the go.

After a few days of this, the three children were sitting in their castle, sipping lemonade, and considering what to do next. The hole was now the size of a medium-sized house, and people were beginning to ask questions.

“What do you suggest?” asked Amit.

Roli ruminated a little. He had learnt this important skill from his father, who would always say to him, “Never be afraid to take time to think before speaking, son!” To which his mother would counter, “Remember also that there are times when you need to speak before thinking, Roli, or else important words may never be said.” He tended more towards his father’s point of view, even at that age, though it had yet to develop into the cast-iron trap it was in his later years.

“I think,” interjected Rano, since Roli had left them plenty of time to think for themselves, “that we should continue to dig, but make a tunnel instead of just a hole.”

“Yes,” said Amit. “I believe we should.”

“Yes,” said Rolnikov. “That is exactly what we should do.”

They spent the next few days building a tunnelling device. It proved necessary to engage some of the

other village children in the enterprise, but they were happy to be involved, upon the promise that they would be allowed to play in the mud castle from time to time. The three friends were happy to make that concession.

The first necessity was to abduct an elephant from a nearby timber yard. They left a note explaining their plans, and promised to bring back treasure together with the elephant, one week from that date. The village constable would probably have been engaged nevertheless, were he not Amit’s father.

The next step was to place the elephant, who they decided to call Mr Molephant, upon a gigantic treadmill, made from strong river reeds bound together by the other children, placed upon a framework made from strong but flexible young saplings. Amit and Rano watched the children carefully to make sure that their work was up to scratch, and when they were satisfied, they let them go home to their worried parents.

This apparatus then had to be connected to a large drill head, which the three friends made by bashing away at a large rock with smaller rocks. They considered surreptitiously borrowing hammers from the blacksmith but knew that it was very dangerous to play with real tools. Thus they worked through the night, keeping the whole village awake (though the banging and crashing sounds they made were so alarming that no one ventured outdoors to investigate), until as dawn approached they had virtually completed their digging apparatus.

They quickly ran to their respective homes to have breakfast and tell their families of their plans, because they knew it was very dangerous to leave the house without an adult knowing where they were going.

Roli’s grandma looked at him through her funny little spectacles. “You’re going to the earth’s core, you say?”

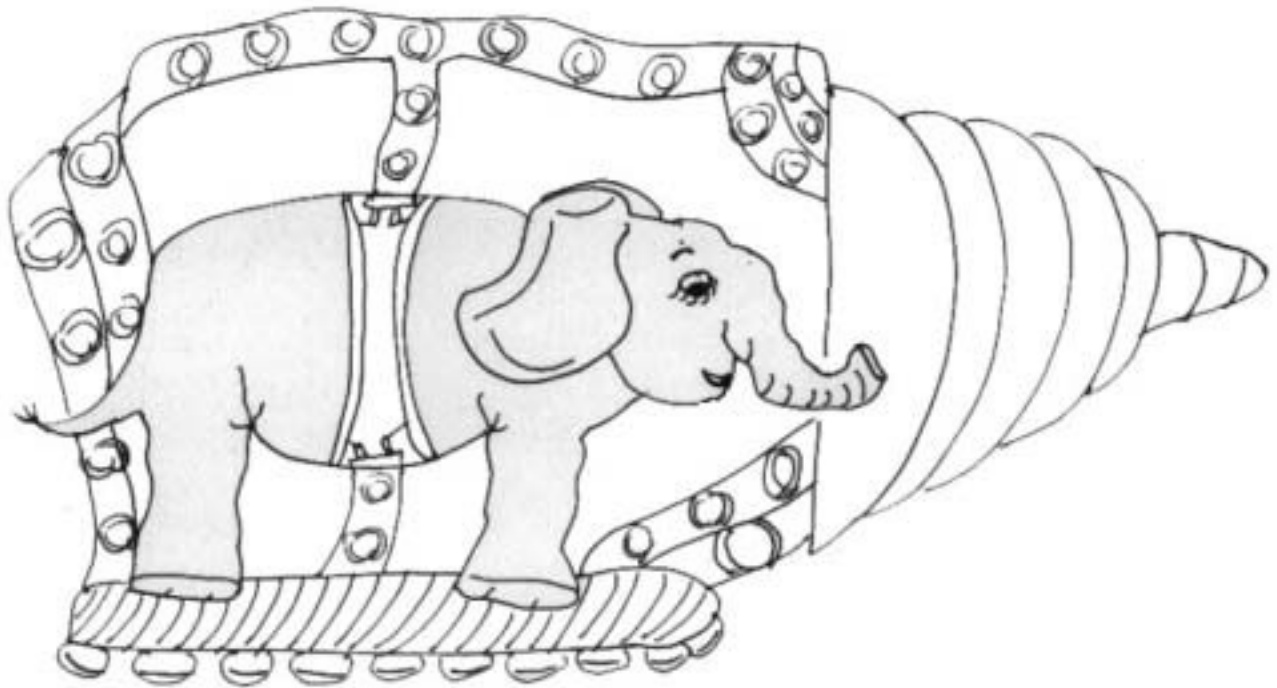
“Yes, grandma. We’ve created a Molephantular digging apparatus.”

“Well, so long as I know where you are. Don’t get your clothes too dirty. You look like a proper little gentleman in your lovely Russian suit, just like your father did when he spirited away my little girl. You’re not going to break any hearts are you?”

“No, grandma. I’m not even sure that there are people in the earth’s core, so breaking hearts will be very difficult.”

His grandma laughed. “Well, what about dear little Rano? She follows you around like a little puppy.”

Roli screwed up his face. “No way, grandma, don’t be so disgusting.”



She laughed. "Have fun at the earth's core, then, and look after your friends."

The conversations which Rano and Amit had with their parents ran along similar lines, and all three met up at the Molephant at 10.00 am. Of course, all three were a bit tired, after staying up all night working on the drill bit, but they had thought of that. Each had pilfered from their homes a padded footstool, and they tied all three to Mr Molephant's back. They were not exactly armchairs, but it would be comfortable enough for them to have a little nap on as they descended through the crust of the Earth.

And that was what they did. They took it in turns to sleep, two at a time, while the third guided the Molephant on its way through the ground. Progress was swift. During Roli's turn at the reins, he wondered where they might end up. Perhaps in an underground mole man's kingdom, or in a land of dinosaurs, in the Christian hell, or by the Greek river Styx, or perhaps, as he had once read in a newspaper, they would find a great fireball of molten lava, which would shrivel their skin and utterly destroy the Molephant the instant they encountered it. This was not a cheerful thought, so Roli tried to think of something else. In those days he loved to sing, something he soon grew out, and so he made up a song. Since Rano and Amit were sleeping through the racket made by the Molephant, he did not think there was any danger of waking them.

*"Off, off, off to the core
Of, of, of the earth,
Here, here, here we go,
To, to, a fiery death!"*

He sang it quite a few times before reflecting on the lyrics. It was a jolly tune, but it seemed his subconscious worries were making themselves felt despite his efforts.

Young Rolnikov reined in the Molephant and tugged on one of his ears to get him to trumpet a bit. He listened carefully to the echoes, and then woke the others up. They stared at him by the light of the four jars of fireflies hung at the corners of the Molephant's cage.

"What is it, Roli?" asked Rano blearily. "Are we there yet?"

Amit looked around. "I don't think so. We're quite a few miles down though. No sign of any subterranean civilisations yet, Roli?"

"I was using the Molephant sounding device—" he began, only for Amit to interrupt.

"What in the name of Uttar Pradesh is that?" He had obviously woken up in a funny mood. He stood up on his footstool and pounded his fists against the tunnel roof. "I demand to know!"

Rano pulled at his sleeve. "He just means the elephant's trunk, jitterbrain."

"Thou thunder gods smite me!" yelled Amit. "I call on thee, mighty Thor, to smash my brains with a

hammer!"

"Are you finished?" asked Roli. "I was just getting to the interesting bit."

"Sorry," said Amit. He sat back down and crossed his arms and legs. "I shall prevail, you know."

Roli gave him a gentle punch on the shoulder. "Of course you will, Amit, there's no doubt of that. But for now please listen. My soundings have shown that not much further into the earth we will find a cavern of some kind."

Rano punched the air. "Wowser!"

Amit kept his arms and legs crossed, but yelled "Yahoo!" with a smile.

"We don't know what will be in there," said Roli, "but I am fully confident of finding dinosaurs, at least, or giant worms. It only stands to reason. Do either of you have any objections, and can you confirm that your parents know where you are?"

"Yes they do," said Amit, "and I understand that there may be dinosaurs. In fact, if there are not at least giant worms, you will be held to account for instigating this boring adventure."

"Oh," said Roli, "it's hardly been boring!"

"Ha ha," laughed Amit, "I was making a joke. Boring, you see!"

They all laughed, but then they had to drink some water because of the dust that got into their throats.

"What about you, Rano?" said Roli once they had pulled themselves back together.

"My parents do know where I am," she confirmed. "They asked that if I were to be eaten by a monster, a telegram should be sent at the earliest opportunity."

"I think we can arrange that, so long as we too are not eaten."

"Right," shouted Amit, "let's go! I am six years old and not getting any younger! Let's do it before we're too old to enjoy it properly!"

"Molephant on!" shouted Roli.

"Forward ho!" shouted Rano.

Within minutes they had broken into the expected cavern – but it was not the cavern they expected. The Molephant rolled into it and came to a stop in front of a shining door. It was at least four metres high, and three wide – easily large enough for the whole Molephant to fit through, and being children, that was the first thought on their minds. It was wooden, at least apparently, and in the style of a English front door. It was white, but its edges glittered with a blue sparkling light that frittered itself into the surrounding darkness. There was no frame, and the door was free-standing in the middle of the cavern, which made it all the more mysterious.

"It's *not* a dinosaur," said Amit grumpily.

"What is up with you today?" asked Rano. "You've been funny ever since you woke up. I think this is very intriguing."

"I think he misses his mummy," laughed Roli. "She's normally there when he wakes up with a cuddle for him."

"I do *not* cuddle my mother!" He set his jaw.

"Well I suppose that explains why you are so grumpy," said Roli. "Whenever you wake up, you are reminded of how your mother does *not* cuddle you in the morning!"

"Shut up," said Amit. "My mother does cuddle me! But I am very grown-up and I just let her cuddle me so that she is happy. At least my mother can stand being in the same country as me."

"Now you just watch it!" said Roli angrily. "We were just having a joke and that is pushing it too far!"

"Well, don't say things about my mother and there won't be a problem, will there?"

Unnoticed by the quarrelling boys, Rano had got off the Molephant and gone to investigate the door. Walking all the way around it, she confirmed her initial suspicions that there was something magical, or at least, she corrected herself, something so scientifically amazing that it took on the appearance of magic to her eyes, about the door. She got as close to it as she dared, and was frightened by the way a few strands of unbound hair began to float up towards it. She quickly retied her topknot.

The boys were still arguing, over something and nothing, but she was able to phase them out, ignoring them to listen intently to the door. It made no overt noise, nothing that she could point to or say, "that, right there, is a noise!", but she felt a tingle in her ears, and a rumble in her feet. It intrigued her, and as a powerful sense of intrigue was one of her guiding motivations in life, she reached out a hand, gingerly, and then poked a finger toward the door. There was no electric shock, no violent alteration in her being, and if she were to be pressed on the matter, she would have confessed to a tiny bit of disappointment in that. She took her finger away and walked back to the boys.

They were staring at her in amazed horror.

"Where did you go?" demanded Amit.

"Oh," she replied, "you finally realised I walked away from your silly argument?"

"That's not what Amit means," said Roli with awe and sincerity in his voice. "You actually disappeared."

"What?"

"For about ten minutes, you were gone," said Amit, rushing to grab her hand. "We saw you

walking over to investigate the door, and then I think you must have touched it. We thought you were dead! Disintegrated!”

“Well I wasn’t,” she said sternly. “And if I were, it would have served you both right for neglecting the spirit of scientific inquiry in favour of petty squabbling. By rights, one of you should have touched it before me. It would only have been polite.”

“I think it is a portal of some kind,” said Amit, quickly recovering and releasing Rano’s hand with a shake. “I think it might take us somewhere.”

“How do we know it is safe?” asked Roli. “It must have been buried for a reason.”

Rano was thoughtful. “When I approached, I felt a kind of rumble. Is it possible that that is what brought us here, that at some level it was guiding the Molephant here, perhaps even guiding our actions on

the planet’s surface? I think we might have been brought here for a reason. I think I didn’t go through the portal, because I only touched it, I didn’t walk through. But touching it was enough to change me somehow, perhaps to an electrical form – if I had then passed through the door, I might have found myself somewhere else, reconverted to human form, as I was when I removed my hand from it.”

Amit clapped his hands. “Those are my thoughts exactly!”

“Well then,” said Roli, climbing back onto the Molephant, “it seems our minds are made up.”

Rano and Amit were back upon their perches in seconds.

“Let’s drive the Molephant through,” said Rano.

Roli started the Molephant moving.

“Forward!” cried Amit. “To adventure!”



The Terrible Trio Meet The Flipstanley Who Moved Too Fast

Stephen William Theaker

Just a man, with man's courage

Having successfully escaped from the authorities, Flipstanley VII was in a quandary as to what to do next. Bobop was only a small town, and returning to it might prove unwise, since there would be so few opportunities to hide himself, not to mention the difficulties of procuring oil and other necessary foodstuffs. But on the other hand, there was nowhere else within easy reach, unless he acquired some means of transportation. Hopton Village was roughly a hundred kilometres away, and though he could make it overnight, with no certainty of finding shelter or supplies there, it was a risk. The villagers might wake in the morning to find him rusted to immobility on the village common.

"You'll never take me alive!" he shouted at Bobop, a speck on the horizon, waving a fist. Then, suddenly feeling foolish, he lifted an hand to shade his eyes, and engaged his mode of optimum opticality, which meant temporarily disengaging his hearing.

There were no signs of pursuit, but he felt sure that it would only be a matter of time. He was a wanted fugitive, after all, a dangerous criminal of the lowest order! If they caught him he would get his gizmos blown, no doubt, and that was something he was keen to avoid.

Suddenly he felt a great rumbling in his feet. He could not hear anything, but then remembered to re-engage his hearing. He couldn't believe his ears! It sounded as if the very earth beneath him was tearing itself apart. Flipstanley staggered back, anxious not to be caught in any imminent cataclysm. Before his very eyes, a huge block of stone rotated up through the surface.

"Astonishing!" he exclaimed. "Do I stand at the birth of a new mountain?"

But his astonishment did not end there.

The stone pushed through the gap it had opened to be followed by the most incredible combination of contraption and monstrosity, beyond anything he might ever have imagined. A flimsy looking framework of, he thought incredulously, grass, harboured a huge grey animal with an arm in the middle of its face and two white horns poking out of its cheeks. It considered Flipstanley with serene black eyes.

And yet, there was more!

Now that the creature was fully emerged, Flipstanley saw three small brown children sitting upon its back.

"Hello," waved a boy, who seemed to be the oldest of them.

"Ho there!" said a younger boy, leaping down from the creature's back to shake his hand.

"Hiya," said a girl, drawing in the reins of the creature and bringing it to rest. She hopped down to meet Flipstanley too.

"Hello," said the android, rather taken aback. "My name is Flipstanley VII."

Roli, Amit and Rano were no less amazed than Flipstanley. They had passed through the door, only to find themselves emerging into the light of this strange new sun, with no intervening digging. If they had been concerned enough, they could have looked behind themselves into a shallow hole to see a second door that was the twin of the one beneath Uttar Pradesh. But they were too excited about the new world they had discovered, and so they did not see the door shimmer one final time and disappear, leaving behind nothing but a muddy patch in a grassy hill.

Flipstanley shook hands with Rano and Roli, and all three children gave their names. "Are you from

Alpha.One?" he asked. "You don't look like the people here."

"No," said Amit, "we are humans from a planet called Earth."

"In that case I should explain, my little human chums, that I am an artificial life form, an android."

The children had thought that he looked odd, but not outrageously so. He had light brown skin, medium length black hair, and brown eyes. The shape of his face was a bit odd, but they had just put that down to him being an alien of some kind, or at least being some kind of future human colonist. Rano said as much to him.

"It is funny you should say that, and you are intuitively very close to the truth," he replied. "Because it is actually due to my android nature that I look as human as I do. Alpha.One is a human colony, though I do not know whether it is in your future, past or present!" He said this very dramatically, and the children looked at each other while he pointed one long spindly finger into the air. He waved it about a bit, and then continued. "The humans of this world, exposed to the odd radiations of our sun, would look strange to your eyes, with their green skins and hair of various colours – orange, purple and joso – a colour created by the light of this sun that would astonish your eyes!"

"How fascinating," said Roli. "That we should find ourselves on a far-off world, yet meet not its denizens, but instead their metallic servant."

The smile fell suddenly from Flipstanley's face and he drew himself up to his full height. "I will have you know that I am a denizen. I may be an artificial man, but there is nothing artificial about my denizenship."

Amit stood on his tiptoes to examine the android's face more carefully. He declared, "I think he is telling the truth."

"There you go!" said Flipstanley. "I am no mere servant! I am self-determining!"

Rano grabbed on of the android's hands and ran around him as if he was an English maypole. She began to sing:

*"Dance, dance, whichever world you're on,
I like to dance, sing, and I like to run!
Ha ha ha, hee hee hee, I love fun!"*

"Stop that!" said Flipstanley, alarmed. He grabbed Rano, gently but firmly, and made her stop dancing. He fearfully scanned the horizon.

Amit narrowed his eyes.

"What is it?" asked Roli. "What made you think he isn't just a servant?"

Amit pulled Rano away from the android and stood in front of her, crossing his arms in a very fierce way for a boy of six. "I believe he is telling the truth when he says he is self-determining because he is something that no menial brainless robot could ever be!"

"What is it?" asked Rano with a shiver, putting a hand on his shoulder to steady her nerves.

"I think I know now," said Roli, his usually trusting eyes developing a steely glint – it was many years before his eyes hardened permanently. He moved to stand by Amit, facing the android with a tough glare.

"He is a criminal!" shouted Amit, pointing an accusing finger. "Look at his shifty eyes, the way he checks the skies every few moments; his scuffed clothes; his being out here without any honest purpose; then his pride, then his boldness in addressing aliens like us so casually!"

"You mean he has nothing to fear!" said Rano. "The most dangerous kind of criminal of all."

"Well," said Roli, summoning all his courage, "what have you to say for yourself, Flipstanley?"

Flipstanley sighed, checked the horizon another time, and then sat on the grass. "It is hard to explain," he said, "but you are clearly very intelligent, despite your tiny size. I am sure you will understand."

The three children sat down too, although Rano jumped up again after a moment and ran to free Mr Molephant from his harness. "Don't eat too much grass at once," she warned him, calling towards one big ear, "we don't know if it will be compatible with our biology. So if you feel sick, just spit it out and wait till we get home!"

Once she was sitting back down, Flipstanley began. "It is true that I am on the run, having escaped from the authorities. But the law I was arrested for breaking was a stupid one."

Roli frowned. Like any good child, he knew that although the rules made by adults often appeared ridiculous or pointless to him, they were made for a reason; usually to protect him. It was for this reason that he was always so careful to let his grandmother know where he was going when he went out to play. (Thinking of his grandmother like that made him remember that they should really try to be back in time for evening tea.)

"What was your crime?" asked Roli, sounding for all the world like a powder-wigged high court judge.

"That is the funny thing," said Flipstanley. "You will really laugh to hear it. My crime was dancing. No one here is allowed to dance."

"So that's why you stopped me?" said Rano. "Because I was breaking the law?"

"That's right," he said.

"Why thank you then," she said. "They say that ignorance of the law is no defence and so you have saved me from a life of crime. Oh, I would have been terrible, robbing banks, forging papers, maybe even assassinating people, who knows." She drifted into a kind of reverie. "Perhaps I shouldn't be thanking you, after all!"

Flipstanley laughed.

Suddenly they heard the wailing of a far-off siren, and Flipstanley leapt to his feet.

"Oh no!" he shouted, this is what I was worried about, they have found me! They will blast all my gizmos from Alpha to Omega! Please, you must help me, I didn't do anything wrong!"

Rano and Amit looked at Roli. He looked at the horizon, noticing for the first time the speck of Bobop. There were now two other specks hovering above it; after a few seconds watching, he was sure that they were the source of the siren noise, but he wondered why they did not appear to be approaching.

"It seems like we have plenty of time to decide," he said to the others.

"Well, that's it," replied Flipstanley, who was still panicky, "the dancing thing is only one manifestation of the main element of the law here – you cannot move quickly at all. If I had danced very, very slowly there probably would not have been any problem."

"But where would be the fun in that?" asked Rano. She was taking quite a shine to their android acquaintance.

"Exactly," said Flipstanley, with a nod. "If you are going to dance, you really do have to put some energy into it. Anyway, that's why the police skycars are moving so slowly, it's all part of the law, no exceptions. I was going a bit doo-lally in Bobop, always having to crawl, slouch and shuffle when I am designed to race, leap and boogie."

"At least we don't have to worry about getting arrested ourselves, given our mode of transport. Old Mr Molephant loves to take his time." asked Roli. "Have you not always lived on this planet?"

"Oh, no, I was built somewhere else, but I had a terrible time of it. Perhaps once we are in safety I could tell you the tale, but suffice to say that society came crashing down about my ears, through no fault of my own, and I was packed up and shipped out to this place. It was fine at first, a nice change of pace after the chaos of my formative years, but lately it just got too much and I felt myself compelled to open a dance school. Little did I know that once again, society would come crashing down!"

Rano was laughing, and so was Amit, despite

himself. "Let's help him," they both said together. "He hasn't done anything wrong, really," said the little girl.

"I suppose there's room at the back of the Molephant," said Roli, "if you can hang on."

"Oh, I will!" said Flipstanley with joy.

So they reharnessed the Molephant, who seemed to be suffering no ill health from eating the grass, and began to dig into the ground again. Their initial plan was to go back through the portal, and return to India, where they were sure that Flipstanley would be able to make himself useful, with all that energy which had been going to waste on this sleepy planet. But as they started to dig, they began to be puzzled. The portal was gone, and what's more, there seemed to be no rock layer under the ground here, just a thin gravel which the Molephant made very short work of.

"This is bizarre," said Roli. "Where is all the crust? It's not like a normal planet at all."

The others shrugged.

"Maybe the portal sank down to a rocky level," suggested Rano.

"Possibly," said Roli, "but it seems very strange. Still, since we don't have any better ideas I suppose we shall have to continue."

Unknown to the three small adventurers and their new friend, the skycars of the police had, by this point, finally reached the place where all the digging had begun. Two officers emerged from them, taking their time, of course. One strolled over to the upset earth left in the wake of the Molephant.

"This could be serious," she said to the other officer. "We shall have to call the relevant authorities and set up a safe perimeter."

"By all that is Alpha, what drove that android to such madness? He's putting every one of us in danger, with this unimaginable behaviour! And although we were a long way off, it looked to me like those were children with him!"

The first officer stretched to her feet and adjusted her visor. "Remember, most people don't know what we know, for their own good, for their own peace of mind."

"I know, but still, moving so quickly, dancing, and now burrowing! It's beyond all thinking!"

"Most people here on Alpha. One simply don't have the energy to do something like this, and our homegrown androids are designed to match. Flipstanley is from another world. He probably has no idea what he's about to discover down there... He's not bad at heart, and I don't think he would take those children into such terrible danger if he knew. If he had even the slightest inkling..."

At that very moment the Molephant slammed into the inner hull of the Alpha.One, and smashed an opening in seconds, before anyone had a chance to react. As the Molephant pushed on through the hole, the jagged metal ripped at the bindings of the framework, and even as they emerged into the gravity-free space between the two hulls the contraption fell apart.

The three children held onto their footstools, through fear rather than because it made any difference, as they started to float free.

"What the heck!" yelled Amit. "This is crazy! Where are we!"

Flipstanley VII was still holding onto the denuded Mr Molephant. "I don't believe it!" he yelled. "Who could ever have guessed?"

Roli looked at the curvature of the two walls of the metal cavern in which they found themselves – he speculated that it was as if they were in the gap between a bowling ball and the snug bag holding it. Their momentum had already carried them five metres or so away from the hole they had created in the wall of the bowling ball, but it would take another few minutes for them to hit the other side.

He turned to look at Flipstanley. "I think I've got it – is Alpha.One a space station, not a planet?"

"Until now," said the android, "I had no idea. Why would they lie about something like that? I never saw any clue."

"How strange that is," said Rano, trying to keep her mind off what was to her quite clearly a predicament, even if none of the others seemed prepared to acknowledge it as such. "I would have expected something like that to be a permeating element in their culture, both their art and literature, and as part of their intellectual make-up."

"Perhaps it is," said Flipstanley, "and I just never noticed. I never knew to look."

"Or perhaps it's a secret!" cried Amit. "Perhaps it's a conspiracy!" He yelled at the top of his voice, "It isn't a planet!"

They all went quiet for a moment to listen to the echoes as they rang around the cavern. Thirty seconds later the echoes had started to die down, but then picked up again from the other side.

"Wowser," said Rano. "This is a big place!" Then she began to apply herself to their problem. She lifted the footstool out from under her bottom and picked away at the weave – soon she had a length of twine a couple of metres long. She showed the others what she had done and then explained her thinking. "We are in danger here, but the most immediate danger is of getting separated – if we are, there won't be any way for us to get back together – we don't have any

kind of propulsion."

"What a shame that Roli hasn't had any beans today," laughed Amit.

Roli scowled while Rano laughed.

"So I thought we might be able to use this twine to keep us all connected," she said.

Everyone agreed that it was a good idea, so Roli and Amit followed her example and disassembled their footstools. Rano carefully tied one end of her twine around her wrist in a safety loop – she knew how terrible it might be if the cord got so tight that it cut off her circulation, or even tighter, so that it cut her hand right off! The safety loop was tied close enough that it wouldn't come over her hand, unless she wanted to, but it couldn't slip any tighter. She threw the other end of the twine in Flipstanley's direction – of course, being an android he did not need to take any precautions, but she talked Amit and Roli through the appropriate knots once they were ready. Then Roli threw the other end of his twine to Amit, and Roli threw the other end of his twine to Rano, and they were all soon linked in a chain.

Amit was looking at Mr Molephant with some concern.

"What's up?" asked Flipstanley. "I'm not hurting him, am I? Do I need to get off the poor grey guy?"

"It's not that," said Amit. "I've just realised that if we arrive at the far wall in this current configuration, we're all going to be crushed when the Molephant lands upon us."

"I was thinking that too," said Roli. "We're going to have to kick away from him."

Rano was horrified. "But that means he'll be sent off on his own. He'll probably die alone, left to starve, remembering forty years of friends, and wondering who brought him here to die. Even if he survives, he will never forgive us!"

"I'm not so sure," said Flipstanley. "From my brief acquaintance with him, I think that Mr Molephant is as possessed of the spirit of adventure as any of you, and he understands what needs to be done."

"Perhaps it's true," said Rano, "look into his eyes. A thousand elephants live and die in timber yards every day, but here is Mr Molephant, the first elephant to die in space! A true adventurer!"

Amit agreed. "We wouldn't have been able to get here if he had simply refused to drill us into the ground."

"If you have convinced yourselves that it is alright to let him die alone," said Roli, "let's do it now before it comes more urgent."

Flipstanley gently reeled in the twine until all four were together, then each at the same time leapt a little

forward, a little to the side, and Mr Molephant began to sail sadly away.

Propelled by their momentum, they continued to float across the void until they crashed against the other wall, which they had long since realised was the outer hull of the Alpha. One space station. No one took the risk of trying to stand – without gravity, the slightest push away from the wall and they might be stranded in mid-air, possibly without the momentum to ever reach the other side.

They were all trying not to look at Mr Molephant, who did not look as if he would be out of sight before he hit the outer wall.

“Look at the hole we made,” said Roli, pointing to it. “It’s moving away from us.”

“Is that just because of the way we jumped away from Mr Molephant?” wondered Amit.

“No, I’ve been watching it. It looks like the inner hull rotates, perhaps to create the earth-like gravity we felt inside the station.”

“That means it’ll be very hard to get back,” said Rano. “We’re going to be stuck out here till someone comes to rescue us.”

“Do you think anyone will?” said Roli, somewhat bitterly. “Flipstanley?”

“I don’t see any bones,” said the android. “So if anyone else has ever got out here, they got rescued.”

“Or cleaned up,” said Roli.

At this point Flipstanley is prepared to make a proposal which may offend the ears of any sensitive or indeed any human readers, so they might wish to skip a page or two, which they can do in all surety of missing no important plot details. (In fact this applies to most pages – you could quite happily skip to the end of the book and miss very little.) “There is no food here,” he said, “and I can see that you have no food with you.”

“That’s true,” said Amit sadly. “We might not even be able to survive long enough to be rescued.”

“I have a proposal to make,” said Flipstanley, “if you have strong stomachs.”

“We are *not* eating Mr Molephant!” shouted Rano. None of them could resist looking his way, and they saw something quite amazing – Mr Molephant was about to hit the outer hull but he twisted around so that he was facing the hull, coiled up his trunk, and once it touched the metal, he let it uncoil and push him back into the air like a grasshopper – or at least like a grasshopper that weighed a tonne and leapt using its nose.

“He’s off the menu anyway,” said Amit. “He must have heard you.”

“Oh, how could you!” she said through stern lips.

“And you, Flipstanley, how could you suggest such a thing? You truly are inhuman.”

“No, dear lady, no! That was not my suggestion at all – Mr Molephant would not have liked that, and one has to respect his wishes.”

“Thank goodness,” said Rano.

“As you must respect mine.”

Amit peered at him. “What do you mean?”

“You are all going to starve out here, with no food to eat. What you may not have realised is that although on the inside I am composed of nuts and bolts, my skin is perfectly organic, and what’s more, you could eat me till there was none left and I wouldn’t feel a thing, so long as I turned off my damage sensors.”

The three children were so disgusted that they had to hold their stomachs and grit their teeth to prevent themselves throwing up.

“Why have you gone so green?” asked Flipstanley. “Aren’t you hungry? Look, it’s really tasty! Damage sensors off!” He pulled a chunk of skin away from his arm and held it up in front of Roli. “Dinnertime!”

Roli vomited, but at least he had the presence of mind to point his mouth in the right direction, and the yellow gunk flew out into the void, away from them. Of course, this triggered Rano and Amit and they both threw up too. Luckily no one was hit.

“I see that my actions have had the opposite effect from that desired. I wanted to put food into your mouths but in fact I have brought it out! I shall not speak on this topic again.” He slapped the skin back onto his arm, and turned his damage sensors back on. It hurt for a moment – or at least his android brain simulated a feeling of pain – and then his automatic repair systems worked to knit the skin back into place. “At least not until your starvation has made you less squeamish.”

The children were fortunate, and Flipstanley’s skin was saved. The authorities arrived shortly in little skycars and took them back to the space station. When they landed back on the obviously less firm than it seemed ground of Alpha. One, they were glad to see that Mr Molephant had got there before them.

“Oh Mr Molephant!” cried Rano. “I’m so glad to see you safe and sound.”

“Whatever he is, you have him to thank for your speedy rescue.” said a visored police officer. She explained, “He managed to grab an outspur of the inner hull with his trunk, and began to batter on the metal with all four feet. The people of Hopton Village thought there was an earthquake going on, and since I had already alerted the authorities as to your actions, following our pursuit of Flipstanley VII from

Bobop Town, they had a good idea as to what the sound might mean. They opened up a service entrance and let us come and get you.”

Roli looked at her warily, with little trust in his eyes. “But why did you need Mr Molephant to get your attention if you already knew we were down here?”

“You were going to let us die!” shouted Amit.

“Not me,” she said. “It was the station authorities. They keep a tight rein on everything here, and they were worried that brought back to the surface, you might blow the whole thing wide open.”

“And why would that be a bad thing?” asked Rano. “Isn’t it better for people to know the truth?”

“Not always,” said the police officer. “Imagine the panic, everyone running around, it would be a disaster!”

“Is there a connection in some way, is that it?” asked Amit. “Is the fact that Alpha.One is a space station somehow related to the prohibition on rapid movement?”

The police officer patted him on the head, to his great discomfort. “That’s right, little boy. The rotation of the inner hull is balanced on a knife edge, and were it to stop in its tracks, we simply don’t have the ability any more to restart it. The authorities are concerned that rapid movement in any direction could act to slow or even halt that rotation.”

Rano was quite happy to find her ideas confirmed. “So living in a space station really does permeate your culture, but in a way so subtle that it was not immediately noticeable.”

Now that Flipstanley VII understood the reasons for not dancing he agreed to take things a bit easier, and the police officer agreed not to arrest him. He had learnt that same lesson that all good children know – that the rules of adults exist for a reason, even if those reasons are somewhat obscure. Flipstanley may have been the size of an adult, but he had been built that way, and by his own estimation he had only been functioning for six years or so, and so one might say that he had just as much left to learn as Roli and his friends. He said as much to them.

“Everyone has to learn,” said Roli, summoning all his years of wisdom. “And it is difficult to do so when for their own reasons adults choose to obfuscate and mislead. None of this would have happened if Flipstanley had known the truth. Perhaps the people of Alpha.One should be treated with a little more respect.”

“At one level I agree,” replied the police officer, “and I feel bad every time I have to cover something like this up. But you have to remember that people

are essentially stupid. Humans have evolved socially, at least here, to the point where self-preservation is no longer their main motivation. They assume that someone else, the authorities, will take care of that for them. And so, that responsibility removed, they would willingly throw themselves into all kinds of danger, and even, in my opinion, put the safety of the entire station at risk, just for the sake of entertaining themselves. Look at the three of you. Did you ever consider the dangers inherent in burrowing to the core of your planet? What if lava had found its way up through your tunnel and a volcano had been born in your back yard?”

The three children looked sheepish.

The authorities then helped the children (from a distance – they instructed the police officer via a communicator in her visor) to find the portal – it was still nearby, but had become temporarily invisible due to a solar flare – and after saying farewell to their new friends they climbed aboard Mr Molephant.

“The authorities have remotely probed the portal,” said the police officer, “and using radio commands they have been able to reset your destination so that you will emerge upon the surface of your world, now that your drilling apparatus has been destroyed.”

“Thank you,” said Roli.

“It still seems very sad to me,” said Rano, “even though we know the reason, to have a whole world of people who cannot dance...”

“Maybe one day,” said Amit, “once we have developed our mechanical skills, we will return here, meet these mysterious authorities, and fix the rotation of the hull.”

“And then everyone will be able to dance!” said Flipstanley.

“So don’t forget how!” ordered Rano.

When they got home they found that the summer was almost over and everyone had assumed they were dead, except for Roli’s grandma. She assumed they would be back eventually and carried on making *olu praunti* for them every Sunday. Happily they arrived back home at 10.45 am Earth time on a Sunday.

After they had all eaten their fill, they returned Mr Molephant to the timber yard.

“Oh, I’m so glad no one ate you,” said Rano, giving one of his legs a hug as they said goodbye. “Thank you for forcing the authorities to save our lives. I’ll never forget you.”

But of course by the time Roli returned from Russia the following summer she had forgotten all about the elephant, in the way children sometimes do.