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# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #9



## ***THE MANTOR STRIKES!***

*Gertrude Saves Mittleville From the Thringrar!*

*Newton Braddell Researches the Bird-People  
of Kadaloor!*

*And Excelsior! Here Comes a Rescuer!*



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# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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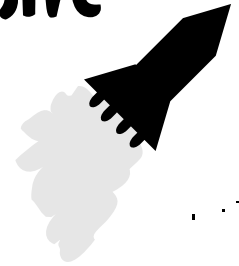
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*No room for a real editorial this issue – we have far too much material to fit in! but in the little space we have here I would like to welcome John Greenwood, one of our consistent contributors, as co-editor, and congratulate Howard Phillips on actually completing a novel. More of His Nerves Extruded will appear next issue. Thanks to all readers and contributors!*

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# Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into the Unknown



## The Bird-People of Kadaloor

John Greenwood  
*Master Raconteur*

The Kadaloorians were a species of highly intelligent, social creatures whom, for want of any better phrase, I must refer to as “bird-people”, in that they resembled nothing more than the large, flightless birds found on Earth. Standing rather taller than a man, they carried their small skulls atop long sinuous necks. The Kadaloorian beak – for there really is no other word to describe that graceful curve – was a highly evolved appendage, which the bird-people had learned to employ with a virtuosity that was breathtaking. Where the beak was a versatile and delicate tool, indispensable for communication, feeding and the manipulation (if one may use such a word) of small objects, the Kadaloorian’s claws, affixed to the giant muscles of the upper leg, were awesome and formidable weapons, but ones rarely used, as the bird-people were a generally peaceable race, resorting to violence only when threatened.

Feathers they shared with the avian species of Earth also, and of course the rudimentary, but quite useless wings which I assumed to be a remnant of their ancestors’ mastery of the skies. No predators lurked in the Kadaloorian forests hungering for the flesh of the bird-people, and one obvious consequence of this was that the species had lost their power of flight. What was more surprising to me was the Kadaloorians’ refusal to accept that their race had ever taken to the air.

This queer notion was communicated to me

through an invaluable device, which I had taken the precaution to carry with me while I stayed as a guest of the bird-people. This was a small metal instrument, resembling a featureless steel box, which is known amongst inveterate space-travellers as a “Dover and Somerset” (or “D & S” for short) named of course after the original manufacturers of the device, although it should be more properly called “Dover and Somerset’s Predictive Conversation Simulator”. The purpose of this ingenious invention is to render one’s own words into the language of one’s interlocutor, and *vice versa*. The two languages of the respective parties are of little relevance, for the “D & S” is not programmed with the vocabulary or the grammar of any language other than English. To the non-technical reader this might appear baffling, but such an attitude rests on a misconception. The device does not in fact translate the words of the opposite party. Instead, using an elegant algorithm, it calculates the most probable utterance under the circumstances, and renders the foreign phrase into its most likely English equivalent. In short, the translation is based on guesswork, but guesswork of a highly sophisticated level. It is more often than not entirely accurate, and there have been very few occasions on which the inherent uncertainty of the mechanism has failed its user to any serious extent. With each prediction, accurate or otherwise, the “D & S” learns from its successes and failures, and rapidly improves its ability to predict what the speaker wishes to communicate. Conversely, the device also learns the language of the foreign party by an identical method of trial and error.

As I said earlier, the Kadaloorians could not accept that any of their ancestors had ever taken to the air, despite what appeared to me to be incontrovertible evidence of feathers, wings and that inimitable avian form which was so suggestive to me of the birds of Earth. At first I confess that I suspected the problem lay in the operation of my “D & S” box, and spent several fruitless hours investigating its circuitry in search of a fault. Eventually however, I

was forced to admit that the translation of the Kadaloorians' language was accurate: they really did not understand the concept of flight, at least with regard to large, heavy animals such as themselves, or myself for that matter.

I attempted to explain to them about my flight to the surface of their planet, the malfunction of my computer, and my subsequent crash-landing (I omitted some unimportant details about the reasons for the computer's malfunction). This description was accompanied by diagrams, which I drew onto the ground with a stick. It was a wasted effort: the Kadaloorians were entirely nonplussed. Insects, they admitted, were capable of flight, but this was only because of their diminutive size and weight. They could not conceive of anything larger than a dragonfly capable of resisting the force of gravity for longer than a few fractions of a second.

It was a pity that my entry into the atmosphere of Kadaloor had taken place unobserved, for had the bird-people been present at my crash-landing, they would have been forced to re-evaluate their irrational prejudices. As the case stood, they simply refused to believe me. Naturally there was a large amount of speculation as to how I had arrived on the surface of their home world and, given that space travel was out of the question, it was suggested by one of them that I might have burrowed through the earth from some kind of subterranean realm. The fact that my craft was clearly incapable of any type of burrowing activity (there was nothing more powerful than a hand-drill on board the *Tanjong Pagar*) was by the by. The crater which my spaceship had flung up on its impact with the planet gave them further evidence for their wrong-headed conclusions. They regarded it in the same manner as a gardener might look at a molehill: the inconvenient by-product of an obscure process of underground tunnelling. Nothing I could say by way of explanation could persuade them otherwise, once this muddled notion had found favour among the bird-people. Quite why I would have chosen to burrow up through the bedrock of the planet of Kadaloor, and from where, was not a question which caused my hosts any great concern, and I must admit that I began to doubt their intellectual capacity.

Subsequently I had reason to dispel some of these doubts, but that is a story for another occasion. During the many weeks I spent as a guest of the bird-people, I had the opportunity to form an adequate picture of their habits and culture. My investigations were eased to no small extent by my earlier decision to don the beak-like air filter, and while my outlandish appearance still caused consternation

amongst some of the more timid inhabitants, I was not the object of outright horror that I might have been had I presented a more human form.

Despite the absence of predators, the Kadaloorians chose to live in a rambling network of underground tunnels and caverns, excavated by the creatures' own spade-like claws. Their dwellings were damp, close and dark, and their standards of habitation were quite opposite to those cherished by mankind. They valued their cramped quarters as though these clammy bolt-holes were palaces of the most extravagant opulence and comfort. The more inaccessible and claustrophobic residences were the most desirable, and while the lower class of Kadaloorians lived in cathedral-like natural caverns near the surface, the Queen of the bird-people and her extended family occupied a squalid hole at the end of a long, twisting passageway over a mile underground. I surmised that to be crammed together in such an obscure hovel gave them a feeling of security, although as I have already stated, they had no reason to fear molestation.

The diet of the bird-people consisted largely of nuts and fruit from the great trees that covered the surface of the planet. Many of the species of nut were large, heavy and hard-shelled, particularly the species known locally as the "bedok", which formed the staple of the Kadaloorian diet. At harvest time, when the winds were strong and windfalls commonplace, only the most foolhardy of Kadaloorians would dare venture into the bedok groves without protective headgear. I accompanied my hosts on several food-gathering expeditions, and witnessed for myself the lethal force of gravity: no less than three of my party lost their lives to abnormally heavy bedok nuts.

The paucity of ingredients had not prevented the Kadaloorians from creating a various and, on the whole, pleasant cuisine. My only difficulty lay in mealtime etiquette, for the Kadaloorians did not employ plates and forks (I should have been greatly astonished if this were the case). Instead they employed a ceramic vessel of roughly spherical shape, hollow and pierced with half a dozen neat round holes on the uppermost surface. The inside of the vessel was separated into discrete chambers, and into each of these sections a different dish would be poured. The Kadaloorians used their graceful beaks to draw out each dish one at a time, but I was unwilling to copy them for fear that the tube of my air-filter might become blocked and inoperable. The Kadaloorians, who never questioned their first assumption that my filter tube was a rudimentary beak, were perplexed by my difficulties. It caused



great amusement when I attempted to feed myself by raising the vessel to my lips, successfully tasting one dish, but spilling all the others down my chin.

The origins of this item of alien crockery are interesting in themselves. It appears that the Kadaloorians of ancient times were in the habit of drilling holes in the nuts with their beaks and directly drinking the juice within. As the civilisation developed and tastes became more refined, this simple method was replaced by the elaborate vessel I have just described. So ubiquitous was this means of nourishment, that my hosts could not contemplate the sight of their own food laid in front of them without revulsion, as was made clear to me when I attempted to decant my meal into a more familiar bowl scavenged from the *Tanjong Pagar*.

As I have already stated, my craft had been rendered inoperable by the force of my landing, and for several weeks I put the question of its repair out of my mind. It proved far pleasanter to engage myself in a study of the society of the bird-people than to uselessly scratch my head over the wreckage of my vehicle. The disabled *Tanjong Pagar* proved an object of curiosity, particularly among the young Kadaloorians. I felt no anxiety for the safety of my ship, for its security systems remained intact, and the bird-people were a trenchantly honest race. Nevertheless, some well-meaning officials removed

the craft to a location underground, and it is an indication of my state of mind during this period that I did not trouble to enquire of its whereabouts.

In short, despite their irrational fears and prejudices, the Kadaloorians had both charmed and intrigued me, and all thoughts of my elusive mission fled in the face of such hospitable and endlessly fascinating hosts.

For most of my stay among the Kadaloorians, I was the guest of a family called Aljunied. This is an inadequate transliteration of their name, but my study of the Kadaloorian language, while fascinating in itself, was interrupted by events that could not have been foreseen, as will be explained below. In brief, the Kadaloorians employ distinct syllabaries, one for each class of words. Thus nouns are written with one set of letters, verbs with another, and there are yet seven more categories having no exact corollary in our own tongue.

I digress. The Aljunied family, in common with all Kadaloorian families, had no need for any personal names. What saved the bird-people from abject confusion was a strict series of identifiers, rigidly applied to all individuals in this matrilinear society. At the core of the Aljunied family was the Aljunied Elder Mother, followed by the Elder Mother's Sons, Daughters and Husbands (they were not a monogamous race, but their polygamy was strictly codified: to wed two or three partners was considered laudable, a fourth was frowned upon, a sixth merely eccentric, but a female with five husbands was an unthinkable taboo carrying the harshest penalty of Kadaloorian law: ostracism). My closest friend during my time among the bird people was a young female of the species, known to me as the Aljunied Secondary Mother's Eighth Daughter. This title, which to our ears sounds convoluted, was sufficient to distinguish her from every other individual on the planet. The inevitable drawback was that every time somebody died, whole titular structure of their family was upturned, and a Kadaloorian could be expected to change her name up to a dozen times during her lifetime. Another peculiar consequence of this system was that the bird-people gave up their names at the same time that they gave up their lives. This caused less confusion than might be imagined, for the Kadaloorians observed the strictest taboo against speaking of the dead.

It was while in the company of the Aljunied Second Mother's Eighth Daughter (who for the sake of convenience I shall henceforth refer to by her acronym, Smed) that I witnessed a singular and puzzling phenomenon. While in the family's communal chambers I happened upon a stray shard

of bedok shell. The outer casing of the bedok is tough and fine-grained – a good material for carving – and the piece I held in my hands that day was an elegant crescent with an irregular curved section missing from one side. It had been deliberately and carefully fashioned, but to what purpose? The shape was uncannily familiar, but for several moments I could not recall from where. Smed's first words were enough to trigger recognition: "What have you there?" she asked. "Oh – it is a piece from the children's game. Perhaps the Seventh Mother's First Grandson has dropped it."

For many months now, ever since the *Tanjong Pagar* had crash-landed on this wooded planet, I had not given a single thought to the wretched game, the game that had once ruled my every waking hour. Yet here was a piece of that same puzzle, on an alien world, in the burrow of an alien race. My mind refused to contemplate such an absurd coincidence. Was this the same game that I had played so many thousands of times against the ship's computer? I twirled the simple sliver of nutshell in my fingers. There was something not quite right about it, but it was not until the Seventh Mother's First Grandson was ordered, at my urgent request, to produce the rest of the puzzle that I understood how the Kadaloorians' game differed from my own. The game I had failed at so miserably and so frequently aboard the *Tanjong Pagar* took place on a flat screen and dealt with a two dimensional circle, but the pieces of the nutshell were curved in three dimensions, and when completed formed a sphere.

These differences notwithstanding, the rules of the game, known to all Kadaloorians as Bedoki, were essentially the same as those of the nameless puzzle found lurking amongst the subdirectories of my ship's computer. The Seventh Mother's First Grandson challenged me to a game, and it was with some trepidation that I agreed, as the reformed alcoholic accepts the offer of a drink after many years of determined abstinence. I could pretend that I had been unprepared for the exponential increase in complexity caused by the addition of a third dimension, but this would be disingenuous. In the event, my hatchling opponent beat me soundly and swiftly, but Smed assured me that this was entirely normal. "The young always win at Bedoki," she told me. "But the older they get, the more often they lose."

"But how is this possible?" I asked, for her explanation seemed to defy logic. "Surely with any game of skill, one's aptitude increases with experience."

"I do not know exactly," replied Smed. "I suppose it must be that the hatchlings don't give too much thought to their strategy. They don't try to figure out

their moves in advance, but simply play the game according to their intuition. When we adults play, we think about it too much, and always end up wrong-footing ourselves. In many ways it is a curious game."

I found that my pulse was racing: if what Smed told me was true, then was this the solution to the mysterious game I had discovered on the *Tanjong Pagar*? Had I merely overthought myself? I demanded a rematch from my infant opponent, and decided this time to give as little thought as possible to each of my moves, playing each piece indiscriminately. Still, the Seventh Mother's First Grandson gained an easy victory, and I explained to Smed that her explanation must be flawed.

"You have missed the point," she told me. "It is not that the children play the game at random. You lost because you were deliberately trying to avoid thinking about Bedoki as you were playing it. You cannot win this way. It is only by existing entirely in the present moment, concentrating wholly on the current state of play without a thought for your past mistakes or your future strategy, that you can succeed at Bedoki."

"How can I do that?" I asked desperately.

"You must forget that you have ever played the game before," was my host's answer. "Play each game as if it were your first, and you had only just



learned how to play. That is how the very young play it. And occasionally the very old.”

For the first time in many weeks my mind turned to the *Tanjong Pagar*, and I confess that I was thinking once more of the game, and whether the ship's computer might be defeated by intuition where logic and forethought had failed. Anxious to test out this new approach, I made some enquiries, and was taken to a spacious natural cavern where the *Tanjong Pagar* had been housed. To my great surprise and embarrassment, I learned that while I had dwelt in idleness, the Kadaloorians had been working day and night to repair my vessel. They had hoped to keep this knowledge from me, so as to surprise me when the repairs were finally completed. As it was, I interrupted this scheme when work on the spaceship was very nearly complete. When I was first told that the *Tanjong Pagar* would be operational in a matter of days, my joy was unbounded, but doubts soon crept in. Had not the Kadaloorians firmly refused to believe in the possibility of space flight? How then could they have acquired the technical skill necessary to repair a spaceship?

When I finally caught sight of my craft, all my suspicions were confirmed. The *Tanjong Pagar* was barely recognisable. The Kadaloorian engineers had made radical alterations to the craft's design and it was clear at once that the enormous hunk of metal before me would never again take to the skies. Initially I hid my disappointment from my hosts. They had worked so hard to please me, and I thought it churlish to reproach their efforts. I tried to smile and express my gratitude, but as I inspected the modified spacecraft, my bemusement grew. For what purpose was the *Tanjong Pagar* now fit, if not for scrap metal?

The answer came to me as I inspected the nose cone. I could not disguise a sharp intake of breath when I first beheld the immense metal drill which had been fitted to the front of the vehicle. The *Tanjong Pagar* had been transformed from a graceful bird of the air into a scarred and brutish burrower. A giant metal mole was now my mode of transport. I was utterly mortified. The unpleasant surprises continued when I was invited to examine the interior of the cockpit: the entire dashboard had been ripped out and replaced with a single mechanism. A series of long, narrow shafts penetrated the control panel and into these, so I was informed by the Kadaloorian engineers, I should insert my beak, by which they referred to the long tube of my air filtration mask. In hindsight it seems only natural that the bird-people would design their machines to be managed by that most nimble aspect of their anatomy. At the time I

could not have been more astonished by this innovation. Only by the subtlest movements of a beak or similar long, tapering stick, slotted into one of the unlabelled shafts on the dashboard, could the *Tanjong Pagar* now be managed. It seemed an impossibly finicky skill to master, but the Kadaloorians assured me that it would soon be second nature to me. “As simple,” they said, “as sucking the juice from a bedok nut.” I suspect the bird-people never really grasped the physical differences between us. They invited me to test out the newly refurbished craft and, despite my complete ignorance of its operation, perhaps in desperation, I agreed. Alone once more in the cockpit and full of the gravest misgivings, I leant awkwardly over the control panel and attempted to insert my “beak” into one of the pipes.

It is doubtful that I will ever be able to return to the land of the bird-people, and if by some freak chance I were to find myself amongst them again, I have many reasons to believe that my appearance would not be wholly welcome. It has always been my fervent hope that none of the Kadaloorians perished during those few chaotic seconds, as the *Tanjong Pagar* rumbled immediately into life and began to churn up tons of rubble and earth as it ground its way through the walls of the chamber, destroying all in its path as it wound a muddled path through the underground city of the Kadaloorians. As a result of the meddling of the Kadaloorian engineers, the cockpit was now windowless, and I was driving blind, but perhaps this was a happy mischance, for I was spared the sight of the devastation of which I was the hapless cause.

Almost immediately I realised that my prosthetic beak was stuck fast in the control mechanism. In a panic I began to adjust the controls of the *Tanjong Pagar* at random, but to no avail. My ears were full of that terrible grinding sound, as the sharp bit of the drill tore through one chamber after another. At last I managed to disengage myself from the dashboard and tore off my helmet, careless now of the danger of infection, and seized by despair at the havoc I had wrought. In what direction was I travelling? Apparently the Kadaloorians had not thought it necessary to install any instruments by which I could monitor my progress. For all I knew I was being dragged down into the molten core of the planet. The burrowing monster continued regardless on its haphazard path, and I could only sit helplessly and wonder when the beast might run out of fuel. Even that thought brought me little comfort, for what chance did I have of escaping this self-created subterranean labyrinth?



# THE SATURATION POINT SAGA

## His Nerves Extruded

Howard Phillips  
*Novelist, at last*

## The Beautiful Beautiful Palanquinettes

After my previous adventure, I was in the mood for a break. I decided to take myself off to a different country, where I might recuperate from the trials I had endured during my procurement of the mountain drummer for the band. Money was no object, nor was time, and so I resolved to travel in the most luxurious way I could imagine. After a few days' thought, I decided upon a palanquin carried by beautiful women. None of them were very strong, which did not concern me in the slightest, as it excused my hiring slightly more of them than was perhaps necessary. I had had a particular yearning for brown women with jet black hair, large chests, and wide hips, and although there was a shortage of such palanquin carriers in Britain at the time, I placed a call to a casting agency and explained that the journey would be filmed, thus guaranteeing myself a steady stream of willing young actresses.

And by Jove, they were willing!

I'm sorry about that.

I had hoped to avoid that kind of talk in this part of my tale, but it appears I cannot help myself. I am a lusty man, and when my mind ranges across the luscious curves of those adorable actresses, my

fingers are forced to follow, the typewriter at my hands serving as paltry replacement for the sweet tender flesh they were able to caress, from time to time, during the opening portion of that wonderful journey.

I met my first set of palanquinettes in London – others would jet out to meet us at waypoints across Europe – and as they lifted my palanquin up onto their shoulders I was taken with the kind of feeling usually experienced only in dreams, and lost upon waking, to leave only ineffable sadness. It was as if I were the king of the world, as if I had conquered all, but without violence, simply with love.

And how I did love on that trip! Each day brought new delights. Soft new lips greeted me each day I woke.

Of course, I still had a degree of fame from the release of my album, *The Fear Man*, recorded with *The Sound of Howard Phillips*, and that might have played a part. It was still selling steadily, and the copyists had swooped in on my brave new world of music with an eagerness that had shocked even me. When I thought back to when electroclash and Fischerspooner were first hailed as the next big things, and how it had taken a couple of years for other artists to plunder their ideas, I realised just how influential I had become, in that the knock-offs of my music had begun the year the album came out, and showed no sign of abating these few years later.

The band themselves were very happy. Upon my return from the East I had found their picture in every newspaper, in every magazine. They had had a new album ready for release, *Cold Hand Hank*, and once out, it had outsold everything else in the top ten put together. I had been happy to see it do so, despite what you might think. I bore them no malice – far from it. I felt guilty, if anything, for the year of hell I had put them through recording *The Fear Man*. Add that to the way I had then left the band, before disappearing for years on a quest to only God knew where, and you can see that, if anything, I owed them one. But I had left them a valuable gift – the ideas on which to build – and they had taken that gift like the gang of troopers they were, and run with it all the way to the recording studio. They might not have me writing the songs any more, but they had the memory



of all the sounds I had encouraged them to make in the studio, and they had in their possession all the tracks we had worked on during that year. Some of our alternative approaches to the songs had differed so much from their eventually released versions that all they had had to do was slap a new set of lyrics on the track and they were laughing.

As a result, they had been good enough to pay me a royalty on the new album, which had been very sweet. I had not the heart to tell them, the one brief time we met up before I began to travel again, that the money they offered me was as a gnat to an elephant, when compared to the treasure I had discovered in the Himalayas.

My chat with the guys had gone well. Naturally I had not told them a thing about why I had disappeared. I did not want to hurt their feelings. If you were the drummer in a band, would you want to hear that someone had gone to the mountains near India in an effort to find your replacement? I just told them that I was still searching for my muse, and they simply put it down to the creatively damaging eccentricity that afflicts so many musical geniuses.

As to the mountain drummer himself, I had installed him, prior to my departure from Birmingham, in a suite at the Novotel, where he entertained himself with television, food and drink. It was all new to him, and I don't know what the staff

would make of such a being, but everyone had seemed very happy when I left. Naturally, he had practically unlimited funds at his disposal, and should not have had any problems, but I had not realised just how long my overseas sojourn would last.

So, was it my fame, physical beauty or outrageous wealth that brought those women to my bed every night? Perhaps a combination of all three, but I had achieved a measure of wisdom during my previous adventure, and one of the things I had come to realise was that women, despite all their delectable differences from men, are not so different when it comes to physical pleasure. Most men, at least when single, will gladly undertake the act of congress with any reasonably good-looking woman that chooses to offer, and they do not generally mind if women know this. The fairer sex, on the other hand, though they might be open to the idea of copulation, can imagine no greater horror than offering their bodies, and having the offer declined. Knowing, as she does, that men will make love with any reasonably good-looking woman who offers, the only conclusion a declined woman can come to is that she does not even reach reasonable, on a scale of attractiveness.

What I had come to realise, in the course of my quest for the mountain drummer, was that if I could reassure a woman – for this fear lies in the breast of even the most attractive of them – that I would under no circumstances ever decline her offer, then the offers would come thick and fast, and so it had proved. They fell at my feet wherever I went.

It was not a matter of louche suggestiveness. Far from it, even if my lustiness seems to take that turn from time to time in my writing. It was much more subtle than that – a question of meeting a glance at just the right moment, letting my eyelids dip in excitement when her eyelashes fluttered in interest, and always holding my hands in such a way as to invite contact. In short, it was a matter of ensuring my body language said exactly what I wanted it to say, and what I wanted it to say was: come to me and let us love.

I should return to my journey – an adventure awaits in this narrative, an adventure no less exciting than that of *The Ghastly Mountain*, but if I spend much more time discussing my palanquinettes it may have to be deferred to another novel, and I would not want to put my readers to that trouble. Some of you, I know, would like nothing better than for me to continue to write about my amours with those warm-skinned Aphrodites, but this is not that kind of book, and I don't necessarily want that kind of reader.

From London we set off for Dover, where the plan was that we would take the ferry to France.

The weather was generally good – it was the middle of summer – and the nights were mostly warm. A small truck followed us, carrying camping equipment for the girls (I slept in my palacious palanquin, of course), supplies, and whichever of the palanquinettes were taking their turn to rest their feet. Ahead of us ran a young man on a moped, on the back of which was mounted a digital video camera. I owed it to my bearers, I felt, to make the film I had promised them. The resulting film, I reasoned, might well be dull, but on the other hand there would be no shortage of gentlemen willing to pay money to watch a film of beautiful young women doing nothing but walking, for mile after mile. It is in a man's nature. And compared to some of Andy Warhol's work, it would be absolutely riveting. Little did I know just how riveting the resulting film would actually be!

## A Struggle to Breathe

There was but one of the palanquinettes who was impervious to my charms, and naturally as the days went by she increasingly drew my attention. She went by the name of Arelline Bonny. As beautiful as any of the others, she added to that a firmness in her jaw, and steel in her eye. It was not as if I had approached any of the other women – I had merely made myself available to be approached by them – and so I did not make any move upon her, or try to engage her in conversation, but I did try to ensure that when it was her turn to be among those carrying my palanquin, she was at a station in front of me, rather than behind, that I might let an eye look her over from time to time. She had firm lean muscles, and I would not have liked to wrestle her, even in jest. She would have sprained me all over, I supposed. Like all the others, she had jet black hair – to my specifications – and hers was shoulder-length – the perfect length, I have always felt, for a woman's hair. Just long enough to be feminine, and to drape over one's chest during relations, but not long enough to be a pest, or require excessive maintenance.

(Please bear in mind, though, that my preferences are just that – what I prefer might not always be what I desire, or need. No woman should ever feel slighted when I speak of my ideal, because tomorrow my ideal might well be quite the reverse. There are some

women who look better with short hair, and I would never encourage them to change their style. On some people it would look foolish, like long hair did on Clark Kent. But why should women waste time on looking boyish? Is that not what young men are for? Is every man who finds himself attracted to a woman with short hair simply repressing his homosexual desires? We all have them, after all, when we are lonely enough, and for those of us who have a more healthy approach to sexuality, it does not take loneliness – just the right pair of eyes or the right pair of lips.)

She intrigued me. And once intrigued, I tend quickly to passion, and so I soon became as passionate about her as if we had spent every night together. Of course, I continued to dally with the other actresses, but when I ran my hands over the curves of their buttocks, I closed my eyes and imagined it was Arelline's rear I was about to squeeze. I would at first press lightly with the tips of my fingers, then with the flat of my hands, and finally, at the summit of my delight, I would knead, slap and spin them like an Italian chef would a pizza base. But my thoughts remained with Arelline. I dallied with her in my mind, and wondered what she thought about, as she carried me along in my magnificent palanquin. I felt like a prince up there, but, pleasant as they were, my concubines were dulling my senses.

I should mention how we dealt with the occasions when it did rain upon our parade. It being England through which we travelled, this was not an infrequent occurrence. The van carried an enormous canvas, and upon the roof of my palanquin was a small heater, which for most of the journey concerned itself with keeping myself and my companions warm. However, when it rained, we would turn it upside down, attach the canvas to the shoes of the palanquinettes, and let hot air billow it out, creating a wonderful shelter for us all.

Eventually this strange assembly – I do not know what took me over during those days – doubtless an extreme reaction to the occasional privation I had suffered on my quest to the ghastly mountain – arrived at Dover.

The sea!

There is nothing to compare with it.

The smell takes your mind swimming, at one and the same time making you think of pirates, naval battles, blockade runs, on the one hand, and death, drowning, and scurvy on the other. It's a call to adventure, a demand to manhood, and an affront to humanity. In its face we are almost nothing: specks of dust that drift across its surface like dragonflies in a pond. Yet at the same time we damage it, poison it,

and pour our excrement into it, letting our neighbours live in the muck we create. We have no power against it. It has no power against us.

The sea!

Both my grandfathers were sailors – what luck that they made it back! This novel would not have been written – this adventure would not have taken place! Would someone else have made the journey in my stead? Would fate have thrown up another hero (to the extent that I can be so described)? Or would mankind have seen its final day, unknowing of its imminent doom until the first horrors struck?

There was still an hour to go before the ferry was due to depart, but I sent my palanquinettes and the truck ahead, while I went off to have a look at the ocean. I took with me my cameraman. It would be interesting to have a word with him, I thought. His name was Johnny Quondam. I don't know if that was his real name, but it suited it as well as any other.

We walked to the distant end of the Brobdingnagian car park, and looked out at the sea together, the cars filing onto the ferry a distant hum.

He busied himself with his camera and accoutrements while I pondered the ocean. He seemed a fine strong lad, in his early twenties, I would have guessed – I had not gone over the CVs sent my way with a fine toothcomb, given the makeweight nature of the job – and seemed to know his stuff. He had something of the air of an enthusiastic amateur, but had come to us directly from film school, where he had apparently astonished the faculty with a series of films on the natures of reality, horror, poetry and love. In short, his idea of what was important in life was quite similar to mine.

He wore a sturdy green jacket, blue denim jeans, and a red sweater. His clothes had been less practical when we had first left London – I believe a silk shirt had come into play at one point – but a few days on the road riding a moped into the wind had brought out a less fashion-conscious side of his nature.

“How do you feel about all this?” I asked him, one man to another.

He shrugged. “It's your money, I suppose. You should spend it however you think best.”

“Does it seem wise to you?”

“Definitely not,” he said sternly. “My palanquinettes would all have been blonde. It's only sensible.”

I laughed. “Your taste in women is clearly abominable. The dark-haired woman is all woman can be – strong, beautiful, determined!”

He laughed too, though not as freely as he might have with friends. I was his paymaster, after all, and he was reliant on my good will. This saddened me,

and made me wonder if I was on the wrong course after all. Why had I chosen to surround myself with paid flunkies? It had seemed like such a good idea at first, but now my depression began to return. If only my quest could have stopped upon finding the mountain drummer. If only we could have made music alone, the two of us, if drums, keyboards and vocals alone could have been enough to realise my heady dreams. But no – the quest had to go on, and if that was to be the case, I needed to relax – chill, even – or chillax, as I once heard Stephen Fry say on a television talk show.

“They're all the same in the end,” I said sadly. “With the lights off there's no difference between one and the other.”

“Only two kinds of people think that,” he replied. “Men who have slept with too many women, and those who have not slept with enough.”

I turned to look at him. “You are a wise young man, it seems. Perhaps you should ride in the palanquin while I take the moped. Does the wind clear out your head?”

“I don't think wisdom has much to do with where you ride, boss.”

“Maybe not. Probably the reverse. I was wise once, I think. It was not just luck that brought me here. It was luck that gave me money. It was a dream that gave me inspiration. It was a drug that sent me in the right direction. But I worked hard to follow my dream. I need some time to be stupid, and irresponsible, and this came to mind. My first choice was for us all to ride upon Segways, but the power points along the way were too infrequent, and I worried that on the roads we would look too temptingly like ninepins.”

“As it is, people slow down to look at us, rather than speed up.”

“We do make quite a sight. If your footage turns out all right, we might be able to put it to some good use. But every day I question myself. I am unable to rest, yet I need to recuperate before I set off again, in search of my next band member.”

“Band member?” he asked, his freckled forehead wrinkling querulously.

“I've already said too much. Let's go and catch the ferry.”

“No problem,” he said. He hefted his bag and we set off on our way. “Must be odd, having to walk again. Would you like me to carry you?”

“You cheeky fellow,” I retorted. “I have climbed mountains on these legs. They have carried me across continents and into places and situations you could not imagine – even if you had seen them with

your own eyes you would attempt to rationalise them into some paltry notion of everyday reality!”

“Whatever you say, Howard – you’re the boss.”

Thirty-five minutes into our trip across the English Channel (*La Manche* to our Gallic cousins), the summer sky was suddenly riven by lightning, crashing across the sky!

## Ferry Worrying

I had spent the time on the ferry in the usual ways – a little walking, a bit of staggering, a short period of time looking in the onboard shop and a longer while taking a drink in the bar. That had accounted for thirty-two of the thirty-five minutes. At that point, during the thirty-third minute, I had been intrigued to see a small puppy run across the floor, apparently on its own. I wondered who the owner might be, and, though as my readers must know I detest the animals, I was concerned that, left to its own devices, it might simply leap over the side.

I put my drink down and followed the fluffy little chap out of the bar. I exited the door just in time to see him scamper down a flight of stairs, and so I followed him.

This part of the ship was quieter than the rest, and it was easy for me to see the way he ran – off along the corridor, and then down a second flight of steps. I followed, but a sign hung on a chain across the stairwell gave me pause – entry to that deck was forbidden during the crossing – presumably, I guessed, because it would not be a good place to be were the boat to begin to sink, but also, I should think, to prevent ruffians from doing their worst with holidaymakers’ luggage.

Still, I had a duty to do, and though it might well get me into trouble were I discovered, did I have any choice?

I am no real kind of hero, as I mentioned in an earlier chapter, but I have a small store of bravery which I can make use of – I almost have to unearth it, it lies so deeply buried! – in the gravest emergencies. This was one of those times! There was a small animal, detestable as it was, that needed my help, and I could but serve.

I am no Buddhist, despite the reverence for life you might read into my words above. Neither am I Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Hindu. In fact, I am a man of no faith. How can one have faith when our fate is but to die? “I’m hoping for the best,” you might say to me. “But you are going to die,” I would

reply. “That much is sure. Only the worst is sure to happen.”

I moved the chain aside, passed across the threshold, replaced the final link upon its hook, and tiptoed down, down, into the lower reaches, the very bowels of the ship.

“Puppy? Puppy? Where are you?”

The place was empty of human life, but full of cars. How I hate the car, with all its pathetic demands upon us. I would rant upon the subject, but I have probably already done enough of that for one chapter.

I looked around, peered under a car or two, and whistled a few times. There was no sign of the creature, and the sound of the waves the ship was breaking through was making it hard for me to be sure, when I heard a noise, if it was my quarry, or just an echo.

Then, for a second, the waves fell silent, and I heard the scurrying of the dog, and I ran to its location. It sat there, between a red car and a blue car (don’t dare expect me to have bothered to learn the names and categories of my bugbears – you might as well expect me to explain the intricacies of water polo – the cars were red and blue, and to the rest you can apply your imaginations).

This was no puppy.

It was, in fact, no dog.

It was fluffy, but, I would hazard, only because it had passed through an air-conditioning system at some point.

Its teeth were narrow and pointed. Its eyes were small and black. It did not have the long, thin tail usual to its kind, which must have encouraged my misidentification – at some point the beast must have met with misfortune, leaving it with just a horribly stiff-looking stub at its rear.

It was a rat. A cold-hearted, scheming, scurrying, meddlesome, disease-spreading, terrifying rat – and it might well have saved my life.

Suddenly the noise of the waves was back, and there was a flash of lightning across the sky. As I looked away, the rat saw its chance to escape, and dashed away through the cars.

I was annoyed, of course, that I had risked so much to come down to that level for the sake of a mere rodent, but then I heard the screams begin.

Few in number for a few seconds, the screams were at first just those of frightened women, caught by the unexpected, but then I heard the screams too of men, and I realised that something unpleasant was afoot. I reached down to slide the knife from my boot – it was made of wood, and thus undetectable by normal means, but I had found its blade sharp

enough to save my skin more than once during my travels in the East.

"Action is mine!" I shouted with all the conviction I could muster. Much of my bravery had already been wasted upon the pursuit of the fluffy rat, but if I yelled hard enough perhaps more would make itself felt. "I am Howard – my name is war!"

I ran up the stairs, two at a time – on the first floor there was nothing – no sign of trouble – and so I ran back along the corridor I had previously traversed at a more leisurely rate. At the base of the second flight of stairs I paused, to listen. Whatever was happening up there, preparation could not hurt. Delay might be fatal – I realised this – especially if I left it so long that all potential allies, against whatever calamity awaited me at the top of those stairs, had already perished. But it was not a matter of choice, it was one of necessity. I had a musician's ear – what's more, a poet's ear! And if I did not put those resources to good use I might just as well have thrown myself out of a portal on the bottom floor.

I heard: screaming, whimpering, tears, LIGHTNING, shouts, GUNFIRE, laughter, EXPLOSIONS, Arelline...

*Arelline?*

It was time to step into action. I ran up the steps, eyes darting in one direction and another, ears listening as hard as they could, every one of my senses reaching out to establish the situation, even as I threw myself into it. My sense of balance tried to tell me what was happening to the ferry. My heat sense fed me information on the rising temperature – despite the stormy weather? Even as my legs pounded the stairs I made note of that important fact. My sense of smell told me more – it brought to my attention the acrid burning of air and flesh by heat weapons. And taste? All I could taste was fear.

I stood at the top of the staircase outside the bar, and inside the bar I could see Arelline and many other passengers, including my other surviving palanquinettes and a pair of families with small children, three sailors, and the bar staff. They had nothing to defend themselves with except the contents of the bar, and so they held bottles of wine in their hands, incongruously in so many ways – almost as if the ferry were about to be launched, rather than sunk.

Between them and me were a trio of loutish men. I would have thought them to have come from a costume party, if their costumes had been a little further out there. As it was, they seemed positively mundane – dull silver helmets, featureless, black, tight-fitting overalls, and metal belts from which they had unslung primitive-looking blaster weapons.

It seems funny to call them primitive, when they were so far beyond what anyone on Earth could have produced, but if you had set them down next to an iPod or a tablet Pronto any observer taking a guess would have pegged Earthlings as the star-spanning race. On the other hand, if you had asked who would be most warlike, that observer might have guessed correctly. Humanity is a vile and aggressive species, that much is certain, but in these space brutes, so nearly our cousins in looks, we had met our match and more.

If they had turned to face me, they might have had a chance to demonstrate their worth in combat, but they were indisposed by their glee in picking off, one by one, the occupants of the bar.

I sliced the neck of the first before he had a chance to add to his tally, wrestled the blaster from his hands and turned it on his fellows. When both were dead I stamped on each of their faces, as a symbolic gesture of defiance. I don't know what had gotten into me. I am normally non-violent – a little tetchy at times, cantankerous even, despite my relatively youthful age – but to see the focus of my passion threatened by such brutes as they had awakened something primal in me.

I took the other two blasters and took them into the bar, handing one to a sailor and the other to Arelline.

"How do you use it?" asked the sailor. Arelline was looking carefully at hers, and had already worked it out.

I raised a sarcastic eyebrow. "You just pull your fingers together, and it blows..."

"Why does she get one?" asked one of the other sailors.

"Because I won them in combat, and they are mine to dispose of in the way I think best. I know this woman, and I know that she will not hesitate to use this weapon when fate demands it. You should take the weapon I've given you, and try to secure either the ship or the lifeboats. Make your own decision, but you have to place the safety of these families above all. The palanquinettes are my concern. With luck the actions we take will make your job all the easier."

He looked at me queerly, then went off to consult with the other sailors, the bar staff, and the families.

"Thanks for the gun, Howard," said Arelline. "I'm really glad to see you." The other palanquinettes echoed her feelings. "But what do you want us to do?"

"First, I want you to tell me what has happened. Second, I want you to follow me onto the field of battle. We will take the fight to the enemy!"

# We Fight Back. For Love, For Victory, For Honour!

Arelline began to explain to me what had happened, as quickly as she could. There was clearly no time to waste, but whatever few scraps she could give me in the next few minutes might be the difference between life and death.

She and the other palanquinettes had been wandering around the boat in twos and threes, laughing at the double-takes they attracted – both from men stunned by their beauty, and from others who thought they were seeing double, triple and quadruple as they saw these similarly attired dark-haired, brown-skinned beauties wandering the ship.

That had given the crossing something of a theatrical atmosphere, and so when the lightning struck, many of the passengers doubtless thought nothing of it. When they saw a ship, gun-metal grey, appear in the sky above their heads, they probably thought it related to whatever endeavour had brought those beautiful women on board, who they now deduced to be actresses. When an airlock opened, and men who were not men began to leap out to drop ten metres to the deck of the ship, they probably thought they were stuntmen. And when the blasters began to splash blood from their chests, it would have been a horrifying few seconds before they realised that it was not theatre, or television, or film, or a video game, but real life – and real death!

The palanquinettes, perhaps more attuned to reality as a result of their walk to Dover – I but speculate, but they had not seen any television for a number of days, and so perhaps were more firmly struck by the oddness of what was happening – had run as fast as their lovely legs could take them, dragging adults and children along in their wake whenever possible. Holed up inside the bar, they had waited for their inevitable fate, and prepared to sell their lives as dearly as possible, which in fact had turned out to be well under the market rate, the aggressors having just picked them off from outside. At that point I had arrived and delivered them from their doom.

“Okay, girls,” I said once Arelline had finished her explanation. “It is as I surmised upon seeing the men. Either we are faced with an attack by a foreign power or criminal organisation in possession of incredible technology, unknown by anyone else on Earth, even

if a little behind the times in design terms, or our enemies have come here from another world, and are merely the vanguard of some greater invasion force.”

“Do you think they are testing us?” asked one of the girls quietly. Her name was Helena. We had shared a few quiet moments of our own a couple of nights before, but I put that quite out of my mind and considered her question seriously.

“It is hard to tell,” I said to her. “But it would make sense. They might be attacking several targets at once, but if they were, why attack a ferry? It would hardly be a prime target during an invasion. Yes, more likely they are just testing us out – a short incursion to test the mettle of the average Earthman.”

Arelline held up her hands. “Hold on a minute, Howard. We don’t know that they are aliens yet.” She walked over to the doorway, peering out at the bodies of those I had killed. “They look pretty much like us, apart from their skin being a bit grey.”

“Be assured I am not assuming anything. Hence my determination to take the fight to them. We could wait here, try to ambush them, one by one, or threaten to blow up the ferry, and so on, and try to drive them away in some fashion – I doubt they will have the stomach for a real fight, if we show we are willing to get our hands dirty – but if we let them get away we lose our chance to find out more about them. I want to get on board their ship, take control of it if possible, and get to the bottom of this.”

One of the other girls, Jenny, spoke up. “Howard, just because we all signed on to carry you around the country doesn’t make us your own private army! You can’t expect us to fight – we will be massacred!” There were a few hear, hears (figuratively speaking) from the other palanquinettes. “Why don’t you take the sailors? They will be able to use a weapon better than us.”

“No,” said Arelline, before I could respond. “If we get into that ship we don’t know where we will end up. We could be on another planet within hours, or trapped in an evil genius’s lair in a dormant volcano! If the sailors were stuck there instead of us, how would any of the survivors get home on the ferry? Do you know how to pilot one? I know I don’t.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” I said to Arelline, patting her on the shoulder.

“Take your hand off my shoulder,” she said sternly. “Despite what these others might think, we are here as actresses, not your personal playthings. Actress stopped being a synonym for whore a century or two ago – or perhaps you hadn’t heard?”

The other girls responded angrily. I had to hold my arm out to stop them physically reproaching her.

“Money did not come into it,” I told her. “I can

assure you of that. There was no question of these other actresses prostituting themselves to me. I merely have something that women want.”

“Yes,” she replied tartly. “Money.”

“No. It isn’t that.”

“What, then?”

“Perhaps I misspoke. It is something that women want – except those women who prefer the company of other women after dark. But we have to set this useless bickering aside. We have work to do.”

“I don’t understand you, Howard,” Arelline said with a shake of the head. “Are you from the nineteenth century or something? Your attitudes would suggest so. And then at other times I hear your music on the radio and think you were born a hundred years before your time.”

I was about to ask her more about what she thought of my music, but then remembered my own words concerning our situation – there was work to do – and it would be dirty. I got the girls to help me drag the bodies into the bar.

“Let’s get these soldiers out of their uniforms, and see if we can clean them up a bit. There’s only a few minutes to spare, but what you can do in that time might make the difference. Arelline and Helena, you are the tallest of the palanquinettes, and so you will join me in the uniforms. I will make use of my knife, which has yet to let me down, and you can have the second of our guns, Helena.” I gave it to her, and she handled it gingerly, but with interest. “While the other palanquinettes get our uniforms ready, I will give you a few pointers on shooting these weapons. I only used mine the once, but noticed it had quite a kick, and tended to move to the left after a shot.”

I continued to talk them through my plans as our outfits were prepared. Mine did not fit well across the shoulders, and those of the girls were somewhat constricted across the chest, but in general we made out quite well. Under close examination of course we would not pass for members of the attackers’ race, but from the air, or at a distance, we might get by long enough to make our play.

I took a bottle of whiskey from the bar, and passed it around, each of the palanquinettes taking a single swig for bravery. I went last, and then quietly said, “For the people!” Everyone else in the bar echoed my whisper, and then I went to consult with the sailors.

“Are you ready to make your move?” I asked. “I take it you heard some of my plans?”

“You are insane,” said the one to whom I had given the gun. “You are going to get all of those girls killed.”

“That’s as may be,” I said, “but in doing so I might

save your life, and the lives of everyone else in this room.”

“We’re ready,” he said. “As soon as you set off we’ll head for the bottom level and get the people into their cars. If we’re going to sink, we’ll die wherever we are, but at least that will provide us with a bit of cover if need be.”

“Good thinking.” I looked around the room at my band of beautiful brothers. “At least if I die, I will die surrounded by beauty. If with my last motion I could place a kiss upon the lips of any one of those girls I would judge my life well spent.”

I shook it off and went to the doorway.

“Girls! To me! We have a battle to win! You are now prisoners of whoever Helena, Arelline and I are pretending to be. Look dejected, despondent and desperate – but most of all, look for your chance to strike!”

I grabbed a half dozen large bottles from the bar and smashed the ends off them against a table. As the glass shattered around me I refused to blink, even as chips bounced off my spectacles.

“Take a bottle each, girls, and hide it well if you can. If not, bear it low, and wait for the opportunity to press it deep into the heart of an enemy!”

I led the way out of the bar, while Helena and Arelline brought up the rear.

It was do or die time. If we had to die, we would make sure we did for as many of the invaders as possible. They would fall at our hands, at our feet, at our blasters, at our broken bottles. We would scratch, claw and bite our way – but to victory, or to defeat?

I had never felt so alive!

## Heist You Later

We turned left, and from the interior of the ferry we moved onto the open deck. The sounds of gunfire and screaming came less frequently than before, and I fervently hoped that was because the survivors were well-hidden, and not because there weren’t any.

I led the march along the deck – we were heading for the steps that would take us to the upper deck, which was as close as I thought we might be able to get to the attacking ship. I could not look up to check, though, since anyone looking down who saw my face could not fail to identify me as an imposter. I could hear shouted orders above, called out in rusty, throaty voices, but I had to keep my head down and pray that none of the orders were for us.

We reached the steps without encountering the



enemy face to face, but as I was halfway up one appeared at the top. There was no time to think about it further – I dashed up the few steps remaining before he had a chance to react, burying my wooden blade in his throat, and tossing him over the guard rail. If luck had really been on my side, he would have gone into the sea, but the fact that he was dead and not me meant I really had no cause to complain, even as a rabble of his co-soldiers gathered around his body, and turned to open fire upon us.

“Onto the upper deck, quickly!” I yelled behind me after looking around to check the area was clear.

Most of the girls got up the stairs unscathed, the railings and iron steps catching the brunt of the attack, but just as Helena reached me, a blast caught her in one leg. It buckled beneath her, and she fell. I tried to grab her, to pull her up to safety, but blaster fire buzzed horribly about my head.

She held out her gun. It was just within my reach. “Take it,” she said. “You can have it, so long as the first thing you do with it is put me out of my misery. I can’t fall into the hands of those creatures, I simply can’t.”

“Pish tosh,” I told her sternly, keeping my head well down, but taking hold of one end of the gun. “Nobody will be staying behind. I might need you wherever we are going. You know how these things work – ow!” A blaster shot had just clipped the top of my head. It stung like heck. “If we are captured, our captor will fall in love with one of you, and we can use that against him. What if you are the one with whom he is destined to fall in love? We will be sunk! Now hang on tight to this gun, and I’ll drag you up here.”

She did as I had said, and I lay flat on the deck. I told the other girls to take hold of my feet, and drag me along. They performed their duty admirably, and in a few seconds we were all safely on deck. It was just in time, as the attackers had given up on shooting at us from a distance and had begun to charge up the steps, calling their fellows to hie from the rest of the ferry as they went, in whatever guttural tongue it was that they used. (Later, of course, I would find out what their language was, but at that point in time it sounded utterly unfamiliar to me, apart from that you could easily discern the characteristic intonations of the aggressive brute, the bully, the ne’er-do-well – though they probably were doing *quite* well, I supposed, to have been sent on this mission. There must have been a lot of responsibility riding on it, which made me take all the more glee in ordering Helena and Arelline to join with me in focusing our fire upon the top of the flight of steps. The metal had been tough enough to resist the ranged attacks of the

men from below, but at this range it blistered and buckled with each shot, until at last I was able to kick at the steps, and watch them swing away, out towards, and then down into, the sea, taking with them at least a dozen of the murderers.

“Let’s hope the sailors can take advantage of this diversion and get any survivors to relative safety,” I said urgently. “The best thing we can do now, having come this far, is take control of the ship they arrived in and leave them stranded, else they will just return with reinforcements to attack other ships. We need to follow this sickness back to its source, and make sure that, even if we can’t stop it ourselves, we are able to give the information to someone who can.”

“That’s fine, Howard,” replied Arelline, “but how do you propose we get up there?”

I turned to look at the attackers’ ship. It was hovering a dozen metres in the air above our heads, with no visible means of reaching it.

Have I described it yet? I suppose this is the first time I got a really good look at the thing, so this is as good a place as any, if you don’t mind a small interruption to the action.

I think I said earlier that it was gun-metal grey, which was how Arelline had described the thing to me, and that was indeed an apt way to put it. It had the manner of a loaded pistol. It was shaped like an angry zeppelin, but much smaller – the troops we battled must have been packed into it like matches in a box. Unlike a zeppelin, I could not imagine this thing being lighter than air, regardless of what gases filled it. Despite that, no rockets belched fire, no engines whirred – it hung there, so quietly it would have been drowned out by a tivo in standby mode.

That was why I had not envisaged any problems with my plan, standing with my back to it, problems that had been immediately apparent to the palanquinettes. I had assumed it would be resting on the upper deck, having disgorged its violent cargo, especially once I had not heard the noise of any engine maintaining it in the air.

“Interesting,” I said. “There must be a way to get up there. If there were men inside they would simply have flown it down and sat the ship upon us, squashing us like insects, but they haven’t. Of course it’s possible that they have had a look at you ladies and have suddenly developed an intense respect for the sanctity of life, but I think it’s more likely that they just parked it up here and poured out to battle.”

“It might even be under remote control,” said Helena, as one of the other girls bandaged her leg with a piece of torn cloth. I did my best not to look at that which the torn clothing revealed, but danger does not change the man – it might bring out aspects

of himself he never suspected to exist, but only rarely will it lead him to forget his basic nature.

"It might well be," I agreed. "We must hope that any control, if there is one, has gone into the sea, or the remainder of our assailants will soon find a way to use it against us. I bet there's some way to get into it from down here."

Arelline spoke up, thoughtfully. "If these brutes can leap ten metres from the ship onto the deck without a bit of trouble, perhaps they could just leap back up again in the same way."

I thought about it a moment, but shook my head. "I don't think so. These men are not so different from us. I was able to kill them with a normal knife. If they had some special physical capabilities I think we would not have made it this far."

She was a little exasperated with me. "So how do you explain the way they jumped down?"

"It is not beyond the realms of reason to imagine some special material that could be included in the men's boots, some material that could absorb almost any shock."

"Like Captain America's shield?" she asked.

"Exactly – though obviously not to such an exaggerated extent. But knowing that doesn't help us get up there, does it?"

One of the palanquinettes – her name was Judy – was keeping watch at the edge of the deck, peering out from time to time to see what our enemies were up to. She was a very sweet girl, full of energy, and easily pleased. Now she called my name one last time.

"Howard!"

She turned to see if she had my attention, and I saw her head explode as blaster fire caught it full on. Blood splashed over all of us. That just left nine palanquinettes and me to save the world.

## Action Is Mine!

I screamed, long and hard. For thirty seconds, at least, I gave full voice to the horror that assaulted my senses. After the first twenty seconds the girls joined in, and began to scream too. I took a breath, then screamed harder, and harder and harder. The girls did the same, then, one by one, we ran out of breath, fell to the ground, and began to laugh, a demented, high-pitched giggle that would have made you wonder as to our sanity. You would have not have wondered if we were sane – you would have wondered if we ever had been, if we ever could be – you would wonder if

sanity had ever strayed within sight of our madness, if we had ever done anything reasonable, said anything understandable, or thought anything thinkable.

"Glad we got that out of our system," I said with a snarl. "I loved Judy, as I love all of you, and I'll wear her blood like a badge of honour. When I lack courage, I will look to my chest and find it there, her sacrifice a reminder of why I have to persist, survive, and finally win out."

I clenched a fist, set my spectacles straight, and nodded my head firmly.

The next order of business was to get into that ship. From where I stood I could see no means of ingress, but I would not let that stop us.

After giving the matter some thought, I was left with only one option. There was nothing here on the deck which we could use to make a ramp or ladder – everything was screwed down tight, and our two blasters were already very nearly spent. A hot air balloon would have let one of us get up there, but the materials were not available, even though I had at my disposal more than enough hot air to power a dozen such balloons. Waiting for someone else to access the ship would be suicidal, since, even if they were able to get into it, it would leave us entirely at their mercy, defeating the object of the exercise.

No, there was but one option.

I cast my mind back to certain techniques I had learnt in the East, during my time spent living in the village of Ban, when I had all but given up on my search for the perfect drummer. Had I a dozen trained villagers, there would be no question of it – I would have been inside the ship faster than tea down an Englishman's throat – but would there be time enough to instruct the palanquinettes in those self-same techniques?

I would see. My life was already staked on it.

"Girls, gather round." They did as I asked. "Remain seated on the deck, but watch what I do carefully. After I have done it once, and you have watched it once, I will ask you to do it. It will hurt to try, and you will be unable to do it. Then, I will do it a second time, and you will watch me a second time. Then I will ask you to do it a second time. It will hurt to try, but this time you might be successful. We will repeat the process a third, fourth and fifth time, until all have managed it. At that point we shall proceed to the next stage of the plan. Is that clear?"

They all nodded.

"Okay. Now watch."

I span on the spot three times, punched my left leg out, thrust out my right, swung my right arm left, and swung my left arm right. Finally, I upped my neck

and squinted, hard. This left me unable to move any part of my body, other than my facial features. I was utterly rigid.

“Did you all get that?” I asked, gritting my teeth from the pain, but trying not to let it show.

They nodded, and many of them winced.

“You bring it to an end like this.”

I raised both eyebrows, and brought them down hard. My limbs unlocked, and my movement was unrestricted once more.

“Now you try, ladies.”

They got gingerly to their feet, and gave it a try. Legs were punched out, arms were swung, and necks were upped. It was not a bad effort, but as I walked among them I could see that none were truly rigid. Odd arms and legs here and there were locked, but none had achieved the perfect stiffness. It was a technique that had been developed by the Ban villagers to combat an ancient enemy, an awful tiger, extinct throughout the rest of the world, that could not bear to eat dead flesh, and so had had to adapt when its prey realised that playing dead was a way to survive.

Of course, I say that the tiger had to adapt, and that the prey realised, but you should understand that this is but a poetic way of describing these evolutionary events. If I were to write a literal account, what happened was that animals that had a tendency to play dead thrived despite the tigers, while those that did not tended to die out. In response, the tigers that by luck were able to combat this crafty (again with the non-literal descriptions!) behaviour tended to do better than those that did not.

Thus it was that the tiger of that area developed immensely long whiskers, that drooped right down to the ground on either side of its nose. The beast would use those whiskers to tickle any prey it found, and if the animal responded in any way, it would soon find itself snapped up.

The men and women of Ban had noted the results of this evolutionary argy-bargy with interest, and, one day, when a hunter became lost on the mountains, and had been discovered by a tiger out in the open, he had forced himself into the utmost rigidity, and survived, taking the secret back to the other villagers. Each of them had learnt how to do this, and during my long stay there they had passed the secret on to me. It was rarely of any use to them, but they did not have a huge variety of ways to pass the time there, isolated by the high, high mountains as they were, and learning that skill had effectively been the closest thing they had to martial arts lessons.

“Okay,” I said. “Bring your eyebrows down, hard. You might not have got quite there, but you still need to unlock anything that got locked.” They did as I

said, and all then let out huge groans. I let them have a second or two, then bade them sit down. “Watch again. This time, look especially for anything you did not pay attention to the first time. I will go at the same speed.”

I repeated the procedure, and this time when the palanquinettes tried it about half of them succeeded, which astonished me. Despite what I had said, in my heart I thought this a foolish endeavour. But perhaps the way that the palanquinettes were used to following my orders helped. And remember they were all actresses – their very job was to pick up on, and learn to pass off as their own, ways of behaving, ways of holding themselves. They were the perfect class for this lesson.

After that second attempt I had them all remove their clothes. This was not, as you might think, for my pleasure, though pleasurable it indeed was, but rather so that we could twist and bind those clothes into a thick strong rope.

The third time all were successful, though they shivered in their underwear. I choose the seven best, the firmest, stiffest and tallest, and had them repeat the procedure. The other two helped me stack the seven of them together, threading their arms and legs together to create a human chain. Finally we tied our rope to the end of this ladder of flesh, wound it through the railing to create a pulley, and dragged it up into the air, where the top girl – Arelline, as it happens – banged her head against the ship. We had done it!

I scrambled up the girls, using their brassieres as convenient rungs, and reached the ship. There was a simple button to press to gain entry – probably confirming my view that the ship operated under some kind of remote control, and that that control had gone overboard with the men on the steps – and I pressed it firmly, hefting my blaster in the other hand, letting Arelline bear my weight and support my balance through my knees, which I imagine was not very nice for her.

The door opened, and I leapt inside. I looked from left to right, but though the hold was unlit, I was sure it was empty. I hung out from the door and waved for the two girls that were at liberty to lower my lady ladder.

I ducked back inside to avoid another volley of shots, though the attackers seemed to be finding it hard to get a line on us. If only Judy had not stuck her head out at that moment... But I had not let that death affect my decisions – after all, I had known there was a fair to even chance that one or more of the girls in the ladder would take a shot, and yet I had encouraged them to do it. I regret to say that if being

shot would have made their body lose its rigidity, spoiling the plan, I would not have gone ahead. I had made them do it, knowing that any additional deaths would only be minor annoyances, so far as the plan went. Later, of course, I would have grieved for their loss, and I would have borne the burden of that responsibility forever, but that is the kind of decision a leader must be ready to make. True, no one had appointed me the leader of these women. I had hired them, but that contract had been void, irrelevant and ridiculous from the moment we found ourselves in a life-threatening situation. They had looked to me, and I felt I might be able to help them through, and that made me their leader, in fact if not in title.

Once they were back on the ground and unlocked, I had them ball up an end of the clothes rope and throw it up to me. I tied one end to the firmest thing I could find in the bay, an iron strut, and ordered the girls to climb up. All of them made it safely, and I pulled the rope up after them, and after closing the door enjoyed the view for a few minutes as they unknotted it and clothed themselves again.

What would be the next step? I needed time to think, but for the time being we seemed to be safe, and I felt justified in wasting a few moments in the contemplation of beauty. After all, in the end, women and children are the only important things men fight for, and it would not hurt to remind myself why I was fighting.

## Eggshell in the Void

The bay in which we found ourselves was not large, but there was room for twenty or so of the attackers to have stood there. Posters bearing words in a language unknown to me adorned the bulkheads. The posters were vaguely reminiscent of Soviet propaganda in their lines and shapes, but where many of the Russian posters would have been in theory inspirational in nature, if not in effect, the purpose of these was clearly only to deaden, harden and dishearten. At the top of each poster could be seen a vague figure, a man, I imagined, though so highly stylised I could not be sure. I wondered if this was their leader.

More interestingly, there were also weapons racks on each wall. Most of the slots were of course empty, but there was enough for each of my girls to get their own gun.

It was time now to explore the rest of the ship, but I was to be surprised, as there was in fact very little

to explore – a pair of toilet cubicles, a small rations cupboard, and that was it. No flight deck, no windows, no bunks – none of that.

“This is very interesting,” I said to Arelline, as we sat to rest, there being nothing else to do. The other palanquinettes busied themselves with tending their wounds, and tucking into the rations. They might have been actresses, but they had been working hard, and had they not eaten they would have been likely to faint at the next sign of trouble. I had got them into good habits during our palanquinade. Casting directors would probably be impressed enough upon seeing this adventure on a CV to overlook any slight paunchiness brought on by the need for sustenance.

“Why’s that?” she asked. “Do you not just think the whole ship is remote controlled, that whoever sends these creatures to do their dirty work doesn’t actually want to spend any time in close quarters with them, and that the rest of the ship is given over to enormous engines, so that it can get about very quickly?”

I raised an eyebrow. “You are very sharp, Arelline. That is indeed what I think – but I thought it was interesting. Clearly you do not!”

She tipped a hand from side to side to show her ambivalence. “It’s not so much interesting, Howard, as worrying. If we could have gained control of the ship, we would have been golden. We could have flown off for help, then perhaps tried to infiltrate the enemy base, were we still up for it. If any of us had chickened out, you could have just taken a bunch of real soldiers to help you out. Now you’re just stuck with us, and we’re stuck with you, and we’re all stuck in here. We don’t know where it’s going, or when it will leave, or when it will arrive. Whoever built it might just fly us into a volcano, or into the sun.”

“That is a danger,” I agreed.

“Some of these girls would follow you anywhere, Howard, especially since you rescued us from the bar, but even before then. You seem to have a hold on them, and I don’t understand it fully. It isn’t love – it almost seems to transcend such ordinary day-to-day feelings. But whatever it is, you must not take advantage of it.”

“I fear I already have,” I said sheepishly.

“Oh, I don’t mean like that.” She rolled her eyes. “I mean, if you get to a point where there’s a choice of going on to danger, or running away to safety, you have to send them to safety, even if they don’t want to go. So far, you haven’t had much of a choice. I accept that. But when you do have a choice, you have to make the right choice for everyone.”

I said nothing for a moment. When it came down to it, I could not promise to do that.

“I wish I could say I would, Arelline. I love all these women dearly. Each one of them falls firmly within the parameters that define my ideal woman – when I saw each one for the first time I lost my heart and had to search for another to give to the next of them.” I bowed my head a little, embarrassed and almost ashamed of what I would say next. I spoke quietly. “But I am on a quest. I have had a vision, of the greatest band that ever played a note.”

“Are you serious? What has that got to do with this?”

“I don’t know – yet! But I believe that fate led me here. I let chance play its part, and it brought us all down here, just at the right time to encounter these people, this ship. It could all be coincidence, but that doesn’t matter. I can already feel a vibe. Something is in the wind. And if it came down to it, and I had to choose between sacrificing one of the girls to find the next member of my band...” Words failed me for a moment.

“You would let her die?” She was outraged, but spoke in a hard little whisper, for my ears only.

“Of course not,” I replied, my brow furrowed deeply. “How could you think that? I would sacrifice my dream, and save the girl, but then, how could I live? I would in all likelihood fall to the floor at that moment, the universe having stricken me dead if I had not done it myself. The cosmos needs me to bring this music into being, and thus it guides me – imagine its anger if I turn away from it all, for the sake of a beautiful woman.”

“It wouldn’t be for her sake, Howard,” she said gently. “It would be for your own. It would be for your dream. How could you ever play again, having paid such a price for it? If the cosmos wants to hear that music, it will make sure you can play it without destroying all that makes you human.”

I looked up, and gave her a thin smile. “I hope you are right. I hope we never find out.”

Neither of us spoke for a few moments, but I could not let this chance to talk with the object of my passion go by in silence.

“Why is it that you find me so resistable?” I asked. “Why do you not feel the same way about me that the others do?”

She tossed her hair angrily. “I am promised to another.”

I blinked. “Really? Do people still do that? The promising business?”

She slapped me on the shoulder. “I am engaged to be married.”

“Have you met him?”

Arelline was even angrier now, but her frown was just another aspect of her beauty, and so I felt no urge to disengage her from it. “You just assume that, just because my family is Indian? You assume it’s an arranged marriage? That’s so cheap, Howard.”

She was lovely when enflamed!

“You are right. I have no cause to pry. If you do not want to talk about it, I should not press you. I expect it is not an arranged marriage, that it is some smart young chap that you’ve met at university, and that he’s waiting for you right now, wondering why it is taking so long for you to phone him.”

“If you must know, Howard, it is an Indian man, and I chose him myself, and you can just get your nose out of it. A nose which, I think, is just out of joint because one of the harem didn’t fall for your charms!”

“Ah, so you admit I have charms! I am making some progress with you, then. Your gentleman will have to watch himself!”

We were quiet another moment, listening to the other girls chatting away, about jobs they had lined up, auditions they would be going to over the next few weeks, agents honest and otherwise, and so on. Finally I decided to give her another prod.

“The thing with such an arrangement, hypothetically speaking, is that it is only well into living with a woman that you truly know her. It is the details that matter – how often does she shave her legs, or bathe? Does she pick her nose outside the bathroom? Is she careful about where her nail clippings fall? I hope that your gentleman is not in for a series of unpleasant surprises.”

“Shut up, Howard,” she said, in a resigned tone of voice.

At that very moment, the engines of the ship started up, and we were off!

## Tears in Transit

“Howard, what’s happening?” It was Helena that I heard asking the question, but I do not think that she was the only one. There was a concerned hubbub from all of the palanquinettes, and I moved quickly to assuage their fears.

“Do not worry, girls,” I said, taking to my feet. “This is just what we expected. It is all part of our cunning plan to unseat the villains who perpetrated this assault upon our ferry and the brave people upon it.”

To my surprise, Arelline stood up beside me.

“Howard is right – this is just what we were waiting for. It’s a shame that this isn’t a ship we could steer to safety ourselves, but this is the next best thing. We will wait here – wait, rest, prepare and train – and when that door opens again, we will take the operators by surprise and make our way to some kind of radio apparatus. From there we will signal the authorities and then hide till they arrive. If we are discovered in the meantime, between the nine of us we have rather a large stock of feminine wiles.”

I was very grateful for her intervention. “Arelline could not have put the plan better. When we arrive, I will still be wearing this outfit I took from the man I killed, and I will herd you out, as if you were booty, in both senses of the word, that I had brought back from Earth. If this is a military establishment without women – and I saw none in the attack – then they will be glad enough to see you that they will not think to wonder what is concealed in the hand behind your back. That is when you will strike!”

There was one flaw with my plan, which many readers will already have noted. If we were not in fact moving to a location on Earth, but were on our way into space, help would be unlikely to respond to radio signals for thousands of years! That would of course be no good to us, unless we were able to commandeer some kind of suspended animation apparatus... I did not exactly put the thought out of my head, though I sequestered it somewhat. It was ridiculous, but then we were in a ridiculous situation, the kind of situation only a total idiot would have got themselves into – I began to berate myself – I had reacted to danger as if I were one of the Three Stooges, rather than as the man of action I had lately fancied myself to be.

I sank back to the ground, my head in my hands. “Foolish, foolish, Howard!” I cried. “All these girls will die for your idiocy! My palanquinade will end in suffering for all! Why did I not just hire an apartment, and fill my living room with fine prime grizzle?”

Tears began to fall from my eyes, and the girls looked at each other in consternation. Even Arelline seemed shaken. You probably wonder, from the safety of your favourite couch, why these women – intelligent, strong and beautiful as they were – looked to me for leadership. What did I have to offer them, aside from the pleasures of the flesh? Reading my account so far, you probably wonder why others have such high opinions of me that they are willing to follow me into trials and dangers. At this moment, you see both my strength and my weakness. My greatest strength as a leader was that *I did not fear to show my weakness*. Almost all great leaders have this

quality – they will show a front of strength to the enemy, but to their friends they are honest, that plans may be made more effectively.

I began to mutter to myself, thoughts of despair breaking over me like waves on a breakwater that nears its end. “What to do... what to do...?”

Looking up to Arelline, I held up a desperate hand. “Lend me your strength, pretty lady. Help me, please, I beg. I am nothing to any of you, who have followed me into this.”

She reached out and took my hand. I pulled hers towards me and examined it closely. The back of it was as brown as the rest of her gorgeous skin. The outline of her bones lightly protuded, but they took nothing away from its smoothness.

I placed a kiss upon it, and she did not take it away.

I turned the hand over. This side was lighter, somewhere between pink and a yellowish brown, depending on which part of it you were looking at. The grooves in the palm and across the top part of the hand were deep, and were a dark, dark brown, contrasting strongly with the rest to create the illusion of another hand behind the one visible to the eye, as if you could peel off the lighter skin to see the true hand beneath. I buried my face in it, and let more of my tears out.

“I am a weak man,” I mumbled, struggling to speak through the sobbing and her hand. “I don’t deserve the respect of any of you.”

“Howard,” said Arelline gently. “Get to your feet. We need you to lead us. Any of us could lead in theory, we have the strength, we have the will, we have the intelligence. What we lack is your recklessness, your view of the big picture, your imagination, and your experience in these matters.”

I lifted my head from her hand, pursed my lips and laughed. I reached inside the attacker’s outfit I wore to my real clothes, and took out a handkerchief with which I wiped first her hand, and then my face.

“Am I being played by a Hollywood star in this film?” I asked. “This is one of those scenes where everyone has to say how great and special he is, and that only he can do it?”

“I guess it is,” she said, laughing so prettily it almost pushed me over.

But I kept my balance, and got back to my feet. I took a short walk around the bay to get my bearings and composure back.

“I am really, truly sorry, ladies,” I said, taking a moment to make eye contact with each and every one of them. “I have my doubts, and I let them get the better of me. What brought on this embarrassing little episode was the thought that this ship might be

taking us off Earth, in which case I would not be able to guarantee your safe return home. I might have condemned you to slavery. You might have been better off jumping into the sea.”

Arelline pumped her fist in the air. “Better to die on an alien planet, fighting for Earth, than to die underwater, fighting for air. Even if we cannot win out, wherever we find ourselves, we can do everything possible to convince these aggressors that our world will not fall easily. That not only every man will fight back, but every woman too!”

The other eight palanquinettes gave a cheer.

“We’re with you, Arelline!”

“Howard and Arelline, for Earth!”

“Okay,” I said, holding up a hand. “This could get a bit soppy if we’re not careful. You don’t want to see me cry twice in one day. But I think it was good to get it out of my system. There might not be time to cry later.”

Suddenly, the engines came to a stop.

“So soon?” asked Helena.

“It seems that there is no time to cry now, either,” I said wryly, all business now that it came to the crunch. “Everyone take your weapons, put your hands behind your back, and arrange yourselves in front of the door. I’ll stand off to the side here, in darkness, so that they can’t see me clearly, but can see that I am here.”

They took their positions, and I took mine.

## First Steps on a Far-Off World

Three men waited for us. Their eyes went wide as the girls filed out, but before they could call their thanks to me they had received their just desserts, their bodies disintegrating under a hail of blaster fire.

“Good work, girls,” I said, stepping out after them. They were a sight to behold. A miniature army, but a perfect miniature. If only all armies could be like that, and all wars fought with hard stares and catcalls, but the enemy had brought their guns to the battle and so we had to bring ours too (or rather we had to steal theirs).

We were in a small dark chamber, bereft of windows. The nose of the ship we had arrived in, it seemed, had nuzzled neatly through a gate of some kind, just far enough to allow us to step from the ship straight onto the platform, just as we would have done from an Underground train in London. When I

say the chamber was small, I suppose I mean the part of the chamber unoccupied by the ship. Take out the ship and it would have been quite huge! But the platform was narrow, just large enough for the ten of us to stand single file (though a control panel crowded us a bit), which meant the soldiers must have filed in from somewhere else – there it was, a sliding door off at the end of the chamber opposite to the gate through which our ship had entered.

I had not seen it at first – the lighting was murky, everything indistinct and moody. It was not that the lights were dim, more that the colour they shone was not the bright yellow or white I was used to – it had a slight purplish tinge that created shadows even where none were cast. The lines of the door were not such as to stand out from the wall – it faded at the edges, let you forget it was there. This was a subtle nation we had found, but not, I deduced, a happy one.

“Where are we, Howard?” asked one of the girls. Perhaps it was the stress of the moment, but I could not remember her name. I quickly came up with a way to get around that.

“We will soon find out. But first, let us all introduce ourselves, over the bodies of our foes! I had hoped to do this during our approach in the ship, but time was not on our side.”

“You were too busy crying, you mean,” said another girl, quite cruelly, I felt. Some women, sad to say, do not appreciate displays of weakness in a man. Some women would prefer a violent man to one who cries before them, simply because they will respect a man for his violence – is that not what the entirety of popular entertainment persuades them to do? – but despise him for any show of weakness. If men learnt not to fear the laughter of women, they would fear little else.

Most of the other palanquinettes laughed, but I stood my ground.

“If I decided to cry, you can rest assured it was for your own good! Okay,” I said, “you go first, joker – name and a sentence or two about yourself.”

She sighed. “Right then. I’m Nina. I have been married for three years, but my husband has been in jail for bank fraud for two of those. I’ve been acting for five years, and I got my start in Grange Hill. Happy?”

“I won’t ask your age, but since I chose you all, I know the range within which you all fall. Bear in mind this is for each other’s benefit as much as mine. I read your biogs when you applied for this job, but you all need to know just who has got your back. Next.”

I will not take the time to describe each of them as they spoke, since you already know that they were all

chosen to fit my criteria – brown-skinned, black-haired, plenty jumping in their shirts. All had British passports (we had been heading to France, and possibly beyond, and I had not wanted to have to make any special visa arrangements, but their ethnicity was as wide-ranging as the number of ethnicities that produce women with brown skin).

“I am Sasha,” said the next. “I have been in Spooks as a diplomat’s wife, and my ambition is to be a Bond girl. I slept with Howard in Aylesbury.”

I winced.

“My name is Benny. I slept with Howard in Bury St Edmonds. I am not really an actress – I’m a model – but I thought I would be able to handle this job. Right now I’m wishing I had a bit of training in stunt work.”

I held up a hand. “There is no need to say where you slept with me. I realise it might have been a bonding experience for all of us, Arelline aside, but it is a little embarrassing to hear it said out loud. Let us keep those beautiful memories in a special place in our minds for the moment.”

“I’m Sela. I like kittens and ecology. I have a degree in food science, but decided to act instead.” She shrugged.

“Bas. I do kung fu and I’m a vegetarian. I feel very badly about the men we have had to kill, and wish there had been a better way.”

“So do we all,” I said sadly, putting an arm on her shoulder. “But sometimes the scum have to pay.”

“Arelline. I like fast food and science fiction. I’m engaged to be married.”

“Science fiction, hmm? Have you read any of my novels?”

“No.”

“Helena. I was recently injured, but I think I can make it. I am acting because the opportunities came my way – I’ve been doing it since I was a little kid. But I do want to go back to my education at some point. Having to squeeze it in between shoots really made me value it.”

“It did the opposite for me,” said the next girl. “My name is Parveen. I have played every role in *The Bill* and *Casualty* from baby, to little sister, to rebellious teenager, to arranged marriage victim, to nurse. I hated the lessons – I just wanted to get back out there again, and show them I could do so much more.”

“That’s exactly what you are doing right now,” I said. “When we get back home, none of you will ever be typecast again, unless it’s in the role of beautiful leading lady of action. You will pick and choose your roles, and if you find you can’t, I will dip into my

bank account and we make ourselves the film you all deserve!”

“That just leaves me – I’m Juanita. My parents served in the Brazillian embassy in London for twenty years, and I was born and grew up here, eventually taking British citizenship. I always wanted to act, but this is my first big break.”

“So that’s Juanita, Bas, Nina, Parveen, Arelline, Helena, Sela, Benny and Sasha. My little troop. My beautiful band. My arresting army. I do not know what is through this door, but we are going to step through it and find out. It might be death. It might be life. But we will face it together, and if I die, it will be with your names on my lips.”

As I approached the door it slid open to the right. I had not been sure whether to expect a flood of light, or more murkiness, but in fact in was neither – through the door flashed laser fire – quick, harsh and bright – and Sasha and Benny fell to the ground, instantly burnt beyond recognition.

I swore, let out a scream, and forward-rolled through the door. I felt hot hot heat across my back, but ignored the pain – my anger let me. On the other side, aware of nothing but the dim silhouettes that turned to send laser fire in my direction, I sprawled out upon the ground, threw my hand forward, and slashed my wooden knife against a grey leg. A man fell upon me – I twisted the gun from his hands and stuck fingers into each of his eyes. My thumbs jammed into his mouth, I threw him up against one of his fellows.

That one stepped aside adroitly, but then fell, the side of his helmet exploding through his head.

My remaining girls had charged through, taking advantage of the distraction I had caused.

I rolled around, spinning my legs beneath me, checking the room for other enemies. The only silhouette visible was the one now falling slowly to the ground, a laser gun falling away from its hand, the other hand stretched out in surprise.

I got to my feet, and held out a hand to my palanquinettes. Sela took my hand, Arelline took hers, and so on, till we all stood there in a chain, looking at the sky.

We stood outside what in medieval times would have been called a fort. What was it here? A research station? It was not large – its body only perhaps as large as that of the ship docked with it.

The land about us was red and dusty, scrub brush here and there doing its best to mask a harsh landscape. Rocky outcrops on the summits of hills dominated the horizon, none of them more than five hundred metres away from us.

But as I said, we were looking up, not around, and



we held one another's hands tightly. Our guts revolted against what our eyes were telling us. We all needed reassurance that we were not insane. We needed reassurance that there was still hope.

Three moons shone down on us from a violet sky.

## The Mantor Strikes!

"It seems we are on another world, after all, and in the middle of nowhere, with no one else to fight," I said to the actresses. "Having discovered this, I no longer feel I can drag you all along on this expedition. Two more of you have died, and the rest probably will too if we go on. I had thought we might emerge from the ship into an enemy base, and so we did, but it seems we are not close to the centre of events – this is perhaps a minor outpost of some kind."

I explained that it would probably take me a couple of days to learn how to program the ship to return them to Earth, and until then they should try to relax, not stray too far from the base.

"Once you are safely home, and can warn Earth of the aggressive spacefarers we have encountered, I will strike off across this rugged landscape, and make my way to somewhere a man can do some damage, and possibly find a musician to join his band."

I chose not to hear any debate on the matter, leaving immediately to begin my task.

Arelline followed me, and irritatingly would not stop talking while I examined the controls on the panel. They were quite alien, naturally enough, to anything I had seen before, but certain logical principles had to apply, and by following a process of deduction I felt certain I would be able to master them – with luck that would be before I damaged or destroyed the ship with my tinkering.

"I think you are doing the right thing, and being very brave to go on alone, if it means anything, Howard."

I grunted, refusing to take my eyes from the controls.

"I guess it doesn't," she said, and ran from the room.

I turned to look after her – had she been suppressing a sob? I reminded myself that she was engaged, but then another part of me reminded myself that more than one of the other palanquinettes had been married, stopping none of us!

In the end, it took me less than a day to get the ship

under my exact control. I did not know where we were, but I had been able to access a list of the most recent voyages of the ship, and by comparing others with the one by which we had come to this planet I was able to gain some idea of the settings required to drop the girls off in London. Just out of showmanship I decided to have them alight in Trafalgar Square, ensuring plenty of tourists with video cameras, and thus lots and lots of media exposure. The papers and news channels would be full of them for weeks to come, then the magazines would run features, and then, if there was any justice in the world, they would fight it out over who became the biggest star.

I *hoped* for their dignity that the boom in celebrity-led reality shows would somehow have evaporated during our absence, but in my heart I knew there was every chance one of them would be eating insects on live television within the year.

During that day, a hasty funeral had been arranged for the two who had died, and I had left my work to say a few, brief words, which felt all the more empty for being so heartfelt.

"If it seems appropriate to the rest of you, I would like to express my feelings through a poem, as follows:

*Low, low Lord, that ties this cord,  
And cuts it where he pleases.  
Take these girls to you,  
And make them happy,  
With many fine wines and cheeses."*

All were overcome, and it was with great difficulty that I managed to finish the last line. My emotions very nearly got the better of me, as they had in the ship, but I pinched myself, hard, on the chin, and remembered that I had to send the rest of them to safety before I could indulge my weakness once again. The girls busied themselves burying the four men we had killed upon our arrival, though that was done without ceremony.

Shortly afterwards, I got them all to file into the ship, and said goodbye. "I love you all, and wish each of you the best in life. Please give my commiserations to the families of those who died, and assure them that upon my return I will do all I can to cement their place in history, for they gave their lives all the more bravely for never having been expected to risk them at all."

As the door to the ship closed on them, Arelline hopped out.

"Get back in, you little fool," I said angrily.

"No," she said, and that was that.

I made the final adjustments to the controls, and

the palanquinettes, all save beautiful, proud Arelline, flew back to Earth. Behind them an iris closed to shut off the sky.

“We should take a nap,” I said to her.

She agreed, and the two of us dropped to the floor and fell asleep.

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The noise of a roaring beast awoke me. At first I thought I was back in the hotel room with the mountain drummer, but then I awoke fully to see I was still in the enemy outpost. The terrifying braying came from outside, but from the way the iris was wobbling I wondered how long that would continue to be the case.

I quickly tried to wake Arelline and Johnny. Both were fast asleep still, and it was hard to rouse them. I resorted to shouting their names.

“Johnny! Arelline! Get up – a monster attacks!”

We had been curiously complacent about our safety on this alien world, you might think. We had taken no precautions against being attacked, whether by animals, monsters, or the fellows of the men we had killed, and I cannot adequately explain why. We were tired, that is for sure, and at the end of our tethers, which could explain a lot, but there was also a false sense of security in numbers. When there were so many of us, we felt safe, even though a single man with a blaster could have finished the lot of us in seconds, had he taken us unawares.

Now that there was just the three of us, oddly enough I felt much happier, and freer, even if less safe. Much of the responsibility was lifted from my shoulders – no longer a commander, I was now a trooper – not exactly a lone wolf, but no longer the head of a pack, who had been looking to me for leadership and guidance. Now I could relax a little, and enjoy being scared, because if I fell victim to whatever threatened me, there were no ramifications other than for myself. Of course, Johnny Quondam and Arelline looked up to me, but I had no responsibility for them, other than that which every human being owes to his or her fellows.

“Let’s see what it is!” I said with glee. “Johnny – make sure you do not forget that camera of yours! Get it turned on and pointing at the iris. I think we may have a treat on our hands!”

I gave him a moment to set himself up, while Arelline grabbed herself a laser gun and pointed it in the right direction.

A button was pressed, the iris opened, to reveal the broad orange shoulders and head of the most ferocious creature I had met (to that point – worse was to come later in my adventures, if you can believe it).

Its head seemed to be made entirely of teeth, almost like the inside of a shark’s mouth, but facing outwards. Having since given it some thought, I believe the purpose of those external teeth could well have been decorative, to terrify its victims, or to attract mates, which would have accounted for their almost baroque over-elaboration – it was like looking at a pine cone soaked in blood. On the other hand, once it had killed its prey, they would have allowed it to rend the flesh in seconds, simply by digging its face into its meal and twisting its head about.

Its every aspect spoke to its viciousness. Sharp ridges criss-crossed its neck, its claws, when it raised them to the gap, were as long as a man, and its eyes, though only barely visible through all those teeth, were the colour of blood. As the monster pressed its attack on this unexpectedly open way into the outpost, its chest heaved and fell like a damnable piston, and its putrid breath poured into the chamber, stinging our eyes, and leaving us gagging for breath.

I started to wonder if perhaps I had let my curiosity get the better of me, and I could see that the others were already wondering the same thing, despite the incredible footage Johnny must have known he was getting.

They both looked at me with intense fear in their eyes, but I held up a hand and gave them a wink. By her motions (she could not make herself heard above the racket of the monster) Arelline made it known that she desperately wanted to start shooting, but I shook my head.

The monster then seemed to falter in its attack a little, almost as if it was giving up. (I later found out that this beast was called a mantor, as you might have guessed from this chapter’s title.) I frowned, pursed my lips, and waved at Arelline to let off a shot or two. She was puzzled – why would I want her to anger it now that it was about to leave? I gave her another wink and pointed to the mantor again.

She let off a shot, hitting the creature in its face, or its mouth – the two were practically synonymous. The laser seared off a tooth, just above the scarlet green of the gums (whatever colour things were on that planet, they were a shade of purple – if I were to stick with traditional ways of describing colours, my narrative would be full of purple, purple, and purple, so you may find that I stretch the English language in my descriptions from time to time).

The mantor howled in agony, a scream that rattled everything in the building, from the steel ceilings to my very bones, and leapt up at the gap in the wall, frenzied in its new determination to get at us. I waved Arelline and Johnny back, just for safety, but stayed in my position, waiting for the right moment.

Then, it was there! The mantor was halfway through the hole, legs on one side, arms on the other, and I brought the iris shut around it. It was trapped! There were a few nervous moments where I worried if the trap would hold, but after only half an hour the monster gave up its struggles, and I knew we had won. Eventually it fell asleep, for want of anything better to do.

Johnny and Arelline returned to my side.

“So what did you do that for, boss?” asked Johnny.

“That, my friends, will be our steed!”

## Laugh While the Iron’s Hot!

Arelline looked at me with a measure of disbelief. “You think we are going to be able to ride that thing? Have you lost your mind, Howard? It would sooner eat us than let us smile at it!”

“She’s right, Howard,” said Johnny. “There’s no way that we will be able to tame it.”

“My friends,” I said with some smugness, “you do not reckon with the power of poetry!”

Both of them sighed, but I did not sag. I pushed my chest out further. “Music might sooth the savage breast (or is it beast? – it is one of those things that I feel I ought to know, but have never cared enough to investigate), but it takes poetry to bend the savage breast to your will!”

“Are you sure you aren’t taking yourself a bit seriously?” asked Johnny. “I have read some of your poetry. I thought it might be a good idea when I was applying for a job with you. But, man, it isn’t good. There’s a reason it took a tune to make you famous.”

I ignored his cheekiness. “You will see. But that is not for you to worry about. While I get on with making friends with our monstrous morning alarm, the two of you will have your own tasks to get on with.”

They looked at each other and shrugged.

“As long as you don’t risk our lives,” said Arelline. “I respect you, Howard, up to a point, but you have to keep our safety in mind.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I said. “I keep my own safety in mind at all times, and if you see me sitting upon the creature’s back, you will know I have determined it to be safe to do so.”

I set them to packing the foodstuffs from the ship, and any others they could find, into any suitable bags they could find. There was not a lot to this outpost,

but after circumnavigating it (being careful to avoid the rear end of the sleeping carnivore) they discovered a couple of storage areas, accessible with the help of a blaster and a large rock. It was an odd building. There was nowhere for anyone to stay, no sleeping quarters, no recreation area, nowhere to eat. I got the impression that the soldiers were just dropped off there, probably from a nearby city, and sent on their way to Earth. That gave me some hope that such attacks could be stopped, and would not escalate, because it seemed to imply that they were being launched in secret. Whoever sent those scum to ruin my holiday was not doing it proudly, sending his or her men out from the town square with a fanfare at their backs. The troops were being shipped off to an outpost in the wilds where they could not even spend the night.

That made me think for a minute. If there was nowhere here to spend the night, then the soldiers would have been expected to return to the city upon landing back on this planet, wherever it was. That meant someone would soon be missing them, and probably sending more troops out to investigate. (That meant the graves of my two dead palanquinettes would almost certainly be desecrated by investigators. I decided not to mention that to the others. I felt awful about keeping that ugly secret, but there would have been no way to avoid it happening, other than to take the bodies with us, and that simply was not practical. One sour part of me suggested disinterring the bodies and feeding them to the mantor, but I did not even get so far as considering the practicality of that before dismissing it.) If we made an effort not to leave any trace of ourselves other than those bodies, perhaps the investigators would come to the conclusion that all the Earthlings had returned to their own planet, and we might escape detection for a little while.

It all added up to one thing – we needed to get moving quickly.

Fortunately my work with the mantor had gone well.

My first step had been to kill a small animal to feed him – I found a suitable candidate hiding in some shrubbery twenty metres or so from the outpost. I had developed some hunting skills during my time in the village of Ban, though they had been a predominantly agrarian people. On this planet I had an additional advantage – the wildlife were not alert to my scent! This meant I was able to sneak up on the furry little fellow without his twitching a single time. However, when I drew my wooden knife from its sheath the first time he had reacted furiously, and dashed away from me as if the devil himself were on

his tail. I quickly guessed the problem, and used sand to wash away the blood of the various soldiers I had tangled with.

The second time I approached my prey, he was totally oblivious to his impending death, and fell to my blade as if it had been his life's very goal.

I took the corpse into the outpost, and slowly, carefully, approached the mantor with it.

First, he sniffed, and did not wake, probably happy for the time being to dream about food, a dream where it would be plentiful and he would not be restricted in how much he could eat of it, but I swung the dead critter around my head, casting its scent all about the room, and eventually the mantor's stomach (assuming its biology was anything at all like that of Earth animals) forced it to wake. Dream food was fine for the mind, more than enough to sustain the imagination, but monsters cannot live on dreams.

It awoke, and screamed.

I dropped to my knees. It was the most soul-rendering noise I had ever heard.

But I tried to hold firm.

I held the creature out in my hand, and began to recite some poetry – though recite might not be the correct word, as this was not pre-written poetry – it was brand new, composed on the fly to fit the moment, to engage the beast's heart, and tie it to me. So it might be better to say I extemporised poetry; created it, made it, and performed it, all at once.

I shall reproduce a sample of it here, but bear in mind it was never intended for human consumption. I merely offer it to you to give a flavour of the moment.

*"Mighty monster oh so high  
You might wish to rule the sky  
You live for death  
And have bad breath  
But you have never told a lie.*

*Lord of the beasts, oh deadly threat  
Would that we had never met  
You have no love  
Push comes to shove  
And now our joined fates must be set.*

*Oh tooth-faced monster, standing there  
I hope you will become my chair  
We will ride far  
You, my car,  
Will become a transport rare."*

As I said, that was not intended for an intelligent readership, but it seemed to do the job. I would perform my extempore poetry, give the creature his

food, and then repeat the process every hour or so. By the third or fourth iteration the creature did not even bother to scream at me – the poetry brought it instant calm, and so my work was almost done.

All that remained was to rig a means of riding upon it. I had Arelline and Johnny (when he was not too busy filming my poetry sessions) search for branches, vines and the like, but they could find nothing so large, and so I was left with no option but to burn handholds for ourselves in the beast's torso. It was not something that made me happy, but we had to ride, and we had to ride soon.

A direct blaster or laser hit had next to no effect up on the mantor's hide, but I found it was possible to burn out a hole by using the laser guns to superheat a piece of steel railing that the three of us managed to wrestle from the outpost wall, and then stabbing the end of that railing into the creature.

I allowed time for the wounds to cool – they were instantly cauterised, so there was no risk of infection – and then, after catching some small scaly creature, went into the outpost to talk to the mantor face to face again.

*"I am sorry  
For your pain  
I say*

*I am sorry  
For the stain  
I say*

*I am sorry  
That we must  
I say*

*I am sorry  
So I bluster."*

He seemed to take it well, and in just an hour or two the three of us were riding on his back, being carried across the landscape in almost as much comfort as I had been in my palanquin just a day or two before. That is as long as you define comfort as being free from the threat of imminent death – if you are the kind of weakling who asks for more than that, shame on you, and shame on me, for feeling the same way!

In point of fact, we were quite miserable, hanging on for dear life as the mantor loped across the land, being thrown from one side to the other by his mighty lopes, our meagre baggage slung under his fierce belly, subject to being scattered across the ground should he decide to rid himself of it. Should he ever tire of my poetry, we would probably fall victim to the same fate, but for now we were free, and we were flying!

# Gertrude and the Thringrar

## A Short Story

Ranjna Theaker

*Artist and novelist*

Most of the town knew that Gertrude was special, but it was only after the Thringrar invasion of our small town, Mittleville, that we all really acknowledged how special Gertrude truly was.

Gertrude lived alone in a large house with three bedrooms. She had no pets, relatives, or friends to entertain in her home. Instead, Gertrude chose to spend most of her time alone painting and drawing pictures of all sorts of objects from her house. The smallest room in her house was filled with sketches of her favourite red-spotted mug and her favourite blue-spotted plate. There were 150 sketches, of all sizes, of her blue-spotted plate; and 1,272 of her red-spotted mug. This was because Gertrude liked her red-spotted mug more than her blue-spotted plate. The reason I know this, and the exact number of Gertrude's sketches held in the smallest room in her house, is because often she would visit my newsagents, purchase a small six-pack of multi-coloured crayons, and inform me of the number of sketches that she had created (without me asking her I might like to add). Sometimes I would not see her for month – at other times she would come in five times in one day.

The number of boxes of crayons I ordered had increased ten-fold because of Gertrude. She was just about the only person who bought those crayons. Every now and then a mother would come in and purchase a packet to keep their child company until their chicken pox or measles had passed, but it was Gertrude who desired them the most. Once I had forgotten to place a new order of crayons and I explained the situation to Gertrude but she stared strangely at me with her small but piercing light brown eyes. She could not fathom that there were no crayons available to purchase. Gertrude spent three days sitting in the corner on the stool in my shop and only left when the crayons had been delivered. She sipped from her flask; did not eat; did not speak; and

closed her eyes only once in a while, during the three whole days. It was as if she were a zombie, making quiet and sluggish movements at times. I was terrified. Being relatively new to the town of Mittleville, I had not totally been convinced by the talk in the town that Gertrude was not quite sound in the mind and perhaps had gone insane from living alone in her house for over fifty years, but after watching Gertrude, nervously, sitting on that stool for three days, awaiting the arrival of a packet of crayons, I began to understand why most of the townspeople crossed to the other side of the street whenever they saw her. It was the mere fact that she was so unpredictable that frightened most of the townspeople. Even the young children made no attempt to tease her; she made everyone feel so uncomfortable, that they all stayed away from her.

Out of curiosity after the three-day incident with Gertrude, I decided to make an attempt to delve into her history. I discovered that she was an only child. That was all I discovered. There were no records in the town hall of any of her family. There was nothing. I did not stop there, though. I decided to interview a few of the older members of the town. Most of them had all their faculties intact and the interviews were very pleasant. I thoroughly enjoyed the homemade carrot cakes and flapjacks that I consumed at those interviews. However, I did not discover any extra information about Gertrude. The only conclusion I came to was that Gertrude was about ninety years old. And that was it. Yet that information puzzled me because Gertrude looked closer to forty than ninety.

I left my investigation of Gertrude at that – mainly because I knew that the only way I was going to find more details about Gertrude was to go straight to the source, Gertrude. And I knew after only a few conversations with Gertrude that no one could ever really have a sane conversation with her. Here is an

example of one conversation I had with her. It was about a year ago, when I decided not to cross to the other side of the road as I saw Gertrude approaching. This conversation clearly illustrates the point I am making:

Me: "Good afternoon, Gertrude."

Gertrude: "10,000 steps."

Me: "I'm sorry, what did you say Gertrude?"

Gertrude: "Up the stairs and down the stairs. Tomorrow."

Me: "That's nice. Um... I suppose I might see you tomorrow for your usual packet of crayons."

Gertrude: "The hedgehog was slow yesterday. Thank you. Bob-bye."

I did try for several days to decipher the code in the conversation. But it was futile. After discussing the conversation with other townspeople, I realised there was no code. A number of people reiterated similar conversations they had had with her and I noticed that there was a pattern of incomprehension. Every now and then when things are a bit quiet I wonder if perhaps there is a code and that I should I try to crack it. I would imagine having my name published in many science journals as "The Man Who Cracked the Gertrude Code". Oh, what a feat it would be! But then I'd just decide to have a cup of tea instead and watch some television. It was obvious that Gertrude truly was unique. Neither I nor the townspeople could ever have imagined that this uniqueness was going to save our lives and our town, Mittleville.

It all started on a quiet Sunday afternoon as I was having a delightful conversation with Miss Longbottom in my newsagents. She was a very pretty young woman. She had soft-flowing locks of black hair which bounced gently on her shoulders every time she giggled. I often thought of becoming more closely acquainted with Miss Longbottom but I knew that Mr Wagstaff, who was at least ten years older than her, had let the whole town know of his romantic intentions towards her. So I had buried my feelings for her – the main reason being that, despite being a good few years older than me, Mr Wagstaff was about a foot taller and a foot wider.

As she giggled at one of my fine jokes and her hair bounced wonderfully on her petite shoulders, little Alfred Simkins came running into the shop. He was covered with mud.

"Oh my goodness, Alfie, what have you been doing?" shouted Miss Longbottom.

I came out from behind my counter and knelt down beside little Alfred. I wiped his face with my handkerchief and then placed my hands on his shoulders in an attempt to stop him shaking.

"Alfred! Alfie, what happened?" I said calmly.

Alfred Simkins looked straight at me and held his arms out. I put my arms around him and then Alfred cried and cried and cried.

It was about three hours before we knew what had happened. After we had taken him home, Alfred's mother had tucked him up safely in bed and cuddled next to him for a while, till he fell asleep. Mrs Simkins came downstairs and told me, the Mayor, Mrs Maplestaff and Doctor Randall what Alfred had seen. (Mittleville was a small town so it had not taken long for the more important members of the town to rally round to the Simkin's household. I was only there because I had seen Alfred in his petrified state before any of the others.) Mrs Simkins did not look at any of us. We all waited nervously and then Mrs Simkins sat down in her largest green armchair and looked up at her living room ceiling. She looked at all of us and said:

"The aliens have landed. The invasion has begun."

Nobody said anything for a few minutes. And then I asked, "Which aliens?"

"The Thringrar," answered Mrs Simkins.

I opened my mouth to respond but Mrs Simkins resumed. "They have no legs, they are blue, their skin is as strong as steel, they have two arms, they carry laser guns and only answer to their king, King Thringrar the Greatest. They are here to invade our town Mittleville. They are here to enslave us all."

A town meeting was convened straight away. Nobody questioned what Mrs Simkins had said. It was too bizarre to ignore or laugh at. The town was terrified. The Mayor told all the townspeople that they must not panic. He insisted that other towns would come to their rescue and that was there was no need for violence. Mrs Maplestaff, a very strong-willed and energetic woman, on the other hand, demanded that the town break off into small groups, weaponize immediately and launch a massive counter-attack against the Thringrar, and then try to ascertain the whereabouts of King Thringrar the Greatest, capture him, torture him and take their town back. The town was split as to which way to go.

That was when the town meeting was broken up by a group of Thringrar. They had come to the meeting and demanded the allegiance of the town to King Thringrar the Greatest. Whoever disobeyed would be punished severely – "by being zapped into a million smithereens", they said. And they also mentioned that they had enveloped the town of Mittleville in a huge force field. No one could get in and no one could get out without the authorisation of a high-level member of the Thringrar government.

Most of the town succumbed to the Thringrar. It

was going to be difficult to oppose them as they had implanted a small metallic device into the back of every townspeople's neck. If anyone disobeyed any order given by a Thringrar, no matter how insignificant, they would instantly receive a painful jolt of electricity to their body. Each time they disobeyed, they received this jolt, which would actually weaken their eyesight. Eventually, after at least ten to fifteen jolts at most, a townspeople would be blinded for life. I was one of the first of the townspeople to lose my eyesight; it took fourteen jolts in all. The Thringrar often dragged me out of my shop to use me as an example of the power they yielded over us. Yet losing my sight seemed only to strengthen my resolve to defeat the Thringrar. The Thringrar underestimated our will to be free.

There was only one human resident who did not have a device in the back of the neck. It was Gertrude. The Thringrar regarded her as harmless as she was oblivious to the goings-on of the town. Gertrude had even spoken on occasion to the members of the Thringrar race and not even bothered to take a second glance. She just saw them as new townsfolk and that was that. This infuriated the rest of Mittleville. There were a few townspeople (who became known as the Mittleville Underground Movement – MUM; the head of the group being Mrs Maplestaff), however, who made several attempts to approach Gertrude and gain her services for the movement. Exactly what services Gertrude could supply to the movement were unknown, but Mrs Maplestaff strongly came to believe as time went by that Gertrude was their only hope of defeating the Thringrar, and that she would have to help, one way – or another.

I remember one evening I was lying in bed, almost asleep. It was difficult to fall asleep with a metallic device in the back of your neck. There were in fact a good number of townspeople who had developed an allergic reaction to it. The only way to stop the rash spreading was to apply shoe polish to the back of the neck.

I turned onto my left side and almost jumped out of bed when I felt (from out of nowhere) Rodney Maplestaff, Mrs Maplestaff's Number Two.

He put his hand over my mouth and whispered into my ear, "Give this to Gertrude."

Within seconds he had disappeared. I hoped he would make it home safely – the Thringrar had made it perfectly clear that there was a curfew after

9.00 pm. The curfew was created to put a spanner in the works of the activities of MUM. But we all knew that the curfew would never make Mrs Maplestaff and her courageous team give up.

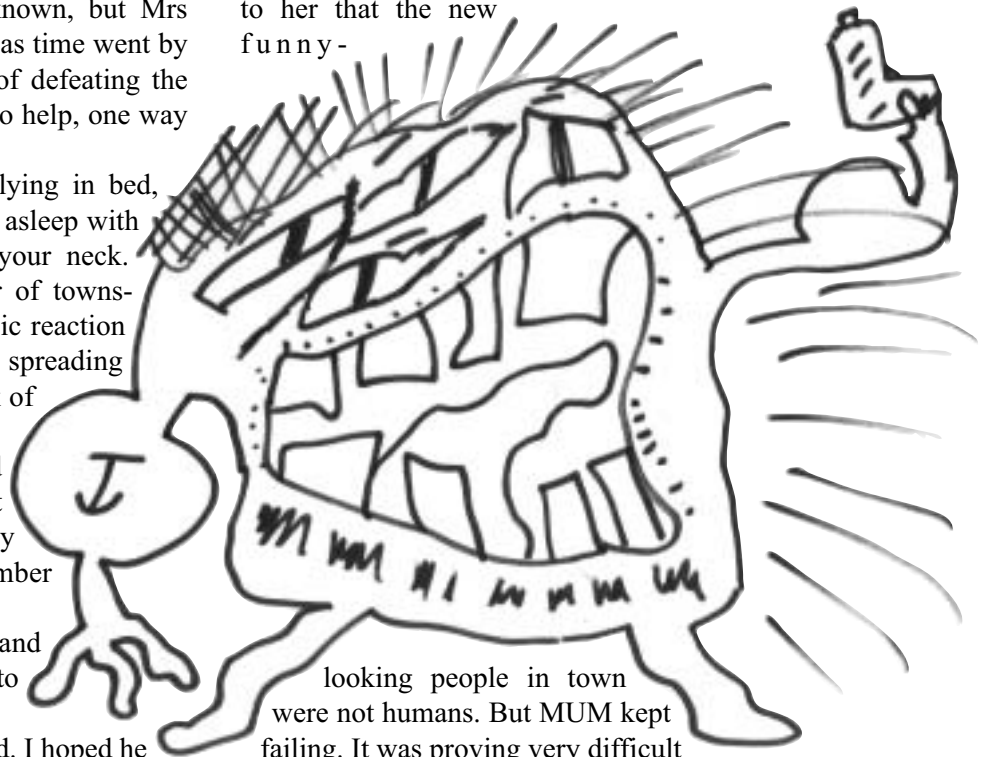
Gertrude entered the newsagents at about 11.00 am the following morning. It was a very nerve-racking time for me. I had not been sure when Gertrude would come to my establishment as she was very unpredictable. I could not wait to give Gertrude what MUM had given me for fear of being found out by any one of the Thringrar who roamed the town with their laser guns, zapping our townspeople just for kicks and later pretending that the unfortunate Mittleville resident was a member of MUM.

"Hello Gertrude," I said.

"Here are your crayons."

Gertrude left the shop. She did not speak to me at all. I watched her from the window. She opened the bag I had given her and took out her crayons. I watched attentively as did various members of MUM who were placed strategically around my building and Gertrude's route home. Gertrude then threw the bag into a bin. I saw several members of MUM place their heads into their hands.

It took several attempts by MUM to get the attention of Gertrude. Some of these attempts involved hiding out in Gertrude's house and leaving her messages telling her all about the alien invasion. Some members tried to speak to Gertrude explaining to her that the new  
funny -



looking people in town were not humans. But MUM kept failing. It was proving very difficult to get Gertrude on-side and aware of the invasion. Then one day Alfred Simkins, the first member of the

town to be face to face with the Thringrar, suggested that MUM were wasting time and effort trying to explain what the mission was to Gertrude. Alfred said that they should just put the means of destroying the Thringrar into her hands and find a way to send her (unknowingly) into action.

Mrs Maplestaff thought that Alfred's plan was genius. In fact she made Alfred Simkins her Number Three in command. All MUM had to do was direct Gertrude to the right place and the right time with the right device to defeat the Thringrar. It could be done, she hoped. The only problem MUM envisaged would be if Gertrude were to start questioning anything and be too terrified to enter King Thringrar the Greatest's spaceship. But that was very unlikely as Gertrude never questioned anything, she just did not need to or want to. And Gertrude was never scared as she never could comprehend anyone's desire to harm her or anyone else. In fact most people thought that Gertrude was not even aware of the fact that evil existed. That was the genius part of the plan, I thought (as well as its most morally objectionable, but we had an alien invasion to deal with).

The mission had begun. I was to tell Gertrude that her crayons were at King Thringrar's spaceship. The only problem with this idea was that Gertrude might have turned into a zombie and stayed for several days in my shop, and so, as I informed Gertrude that her crayons were not here today, Alfred Simkins shouted from outside the newsagents, "Crayons this way, crayons this way. Get your crayons at the car boot sale on Leyton Street."

Gertrude walked out of the newsagents and immediately began to follow Alfred Simkins. This was brilliant. The Thringrar, stationed around the town, were a little bewildered by these goings-on but came to the conclusion that a car boot sale on Leyton Street was going to be pretty harmless, especially if the main item for sale was going to be crayons.

As Gertrude followed Alfred all the way to Leyton Street, Rodney Maplestaff, who was standing behind a stall, called to her.

"Hello Gertrude", said he. "The crayons are at the end of the street." He pointed.

Gertrude looked at Rodney, but did not look in the direction that Rodney was pointing. Instead she turned in the other direction. Rodney began to panic. It was at this moment that the Thringrar noticed Rodney reaching into his pocket and taking out a walkie-talkie. They immediately knocked Rodney to the floor and zapped him into a million tiny specks of dust.

During all the commotion, part of the mission had to be moved forward. Instead of placing a glass tube containing mercury into Gertrude's possession when she was only a few feet away from King Thringrar's spaceship, also known to be the Thringrar base, I had to come out of my hiding place and put the tube into Gertrude's hands now. Mrs Maplestaff banked on the fact that as I was blind (from being jolted too many times by the Thringrar) the Thringrar would not watch me very closely, so I could place the mercury tube safely into Gertrude's hand.

Also, cleverly, as a diversion, Mrs Maplestaff came out of hiding from behind a car at the pretend car boot sale, and started spouting expletives at the Thringrar and also chanted over and over again, "Death to the Thringrar, Death to the Thringrar!" Mrs Maplestaff fell to the floor. She stopped moving.

Gertrude was not really meant have the tube of mercury in her hands so soon. It was too risky, as once she became aware of it she might have decided to throw it away. But the mission was almost over; she just had to keep hold of the mercury a few minutes longer...

And she did. Our special hero entered King Thringrar's spaceship, Thringrar headquarters, and I can only imagine what happened next. Perhaps she looked at King Thringrar as she walked in; perhaps he looked at Gertrude and stared in shock. At first he the King would not have known what to do, but maybe when the guards gathered around Gertrude he waved them away. Did she say something to make him smile? Was he intrigued and amused by her innocent insanity? She probably walked around a bit, before noticing there was something in her hands and letting go of it. I assume the tube of mercury rolled down the table and then smashed onto a set of important switches or the like.

Whatever happened within, those townsfolk who had not been blinded by the Thringrar saw a large explosion, followed by several smaller explosions all over the ship.

Mittleville's townspeople covered their eyes as the sparks, fire and smoke sprouted from King Thringrar's spaceship. And then to their astonishment the force field fell. Mittleville was no longer isolated. It was time for the Thringrar to admit defeat.

Gertrude had saved Mittleville from the Thringrar without even knowing it. Her name would live on – and a statue was even built, to honour her, and to remind us of how we had let her down.



# Excelsior

## Rescuer

Steven Gilligan

*A writer*

Not long after the disastrous discovery of the wrecked corridor, Adam found himself being deposited in a large recess at the top of a smooth marble wall in the corner of a vast room, that Excelsior had chosen for reasons of his own. The alcove looked as if it had been a crack in the marble masonry that had slowly widened over time.

Adam sat down and looked around. It seemed like it would be fairly comfortable, at least for a little while. The stone was hard, but not so hard that he would be unable to sit peacefully, and the space was considerably warmer than the cell that he had started out in. The huge room that he was now in the top corner of was pretty featureless apart from the ceiling and the floor. The ceiling had a massive round window in it, like a lens with a spiral pattern built into it with lead piping. Outside, he could see that the sky was mostly clear, with only a few white clouds, and he guessed that it might have been mid-afternoon, but there was no way he could be sure. The floor was even more impressive than the window in the ceiling. An elaborate mosaic pattern mirrored the spiral of the window, but with an even more elaborate design. It was coloured with reds, oranges, ochres and yellows. So effective was the design that it looked to Adam as if the sun had been embedded in the floor.

“Wait here,” said Excelsior.

Adam looked up from the mesmerising pattern on

the floor and stared at the silver machine with a wry smile. “Where could I possibly go?” he said.

Excelsior paused and then said, “Yes, I understand. My concern was unwarranted.”

Adam laughed. “Yes!”

“I will go now,” said the robot.

“Wait!” said Adam.

“Yes?”

“You said that you would answer my questions.”

“I said that there would be plenty of time for questions, but I also told you that I might not be able to give you the answers you seek. You may ask whatever you like.”

“Why did you come for me? Who sent you?”

“I do not know.”

“What?”

“I do not know why I am here. All I know is that I was activated and that my programming was to come here for you.”

“Well, where did you come from?”

“I understand that I was already inside this prison, but access to my memories about that particular time and place is unclear. It would seem that my data has been altered, but I am unable to ascertain when, how and why. My primary memory is of standing above the bars to your cell and tearing them out with my hands. So, it is possible that I might have come from somewhere else.”

“I don’t understand.”

“To be honest, neither do I.”

“Where are you going to take me?”

“That is an interesting query. From what I can retrieve, it would seem that I will receive instruction once we have exited the prison. Either some latent memory will become active or I will receive instruction from an external source unclear to me presently.”

"Oh." Adam was clearly more confused that he had been before he had asked the question.

"Yes."

"Why are there no other people here? This whole place is massive, but it's empty."

"Yes. Your observation is astute." Excelsior paused to consider this, but answered, "I do not know."

"But it is a prison, right?"

"Are you a prisoner?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

"Then it is a prison. Now, may I ask you one question?"

Adam was started. "Of course!" he said.

"Why were you imprisoned here? What was your crime?"

"Oh," said Adam. "I, I, er... I stole."

Excelsior eyes seemed to redden even more. "What did you steal?" it demanded.

"It was nothing," said Adam, defensively.

"Tell me."

"I stole an apple."

Excelsior seemed to consider this for a moment. "Apple," it said. "The fruit of a tree of the genus *Malus*, rounded in form and with a crisp flesh."

"I guess," said Adam.

"Why did you take an apple?"

"I was hungry. I didn't mean to do it, but I couldn't help myself. I hadn't really taken anything before and I don't know why I did it. At first the stall holder at the market didn't seem to care, but he was really angry afterwards. But, it was days ago and nothing happened. The police weren't called or anything. Miss Aeolia from Indigo House paid him a shilling for it and I thought it was all right after that." Adam paused for breath before continuing. "So, I think I was brought here because of that, but I don't really know. The men who came and took me didn't say anything at all. They took me right from my bed at the house. It was the middle of the bloody night!

They were really rough and it took them hours to bring me here. I think I was in a carriage or something, but I could see because they put a rough, old over my head. It stank of oil and they tied my hands and feet up so when they got me out of the carriage and shoved me along, I just kept falling over and hurting myself, but they just picked me up and shoved me along again." Tears were about to form in Adam's eyes, but he managed to hold them back. He was tired and angry and afraid. "I stole the rotten apple because I was hungry and I'm hungry now."

"There are no apples here for you to steal, thief. I have seen no trees at all, neither genus *Malus* nor any other."

"No," said Adam. "Back in my cell I found a little bag stuffed into a hole in the wall. There was a bottle of water in it and a box and a coin. If you could get me the sack I would be grateful. It'll be still in the cell if the rubble you dropped when you freed me didn't break it."

"I move quickly, Adam. In my search for an alternative exit I will also retrieve your bottle and sack. I will scan for sources of nourishment for you too."

"And the coin and the box please."

"Yes," said Excelsior and he disappeared away down a corridor leading away from one of the many exits from the sun-decorated chamber. Adam listened as the sound of its pounding metal feet slowly petered away into silence. Alone in the huge room, he eased himself into the most comfortable position he could manage. With his back against the inside edge of the large crack in the wall, he would have been almost completely hidden from view had someone been standing on the floor below and looking up.

This though made Adam feel safe, the safest he had felt since he had been abducted from his home. Although hunger was gnawing at his empty belly, he was able to relax a little.

He closed his eyes.

## Submission Guidelines

Submissions are always welcome, but they can only be accepted in electronic form, by email, to [silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk).

Contributors will receive no payment, not even a free copy of the magazine – we're keeping it cheap to keep it going...

Length: at your discretion. TQF will publish

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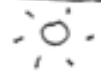
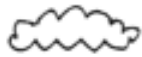
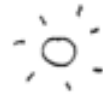
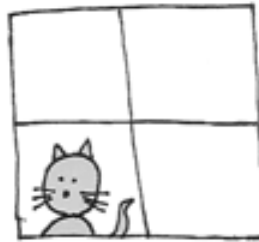
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# CRAZY IVAW

AND THE  
FORGOTTEN  
CAT



GODDAMIT!  
I'VE FORGOTTEN  
MY CAT. I'VE LEFT  
IT AT HOME UPSTAIRS!



ISSN 1746-6075 (ONLINE) ISSN 1746-6083 (PRINT)

# LIVING WITH MISTER ROBOT



**THEAKER'S QUARTERLY FICTION #10**

INCLUDES THE CONTINUATION OF THE SATURATION POINT SAGA IN  
HIS NERVES EXTRUDED PART 2 ///SUMMER 2006



# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 10

Summer

2006

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*Once again we find ourselves without room for a longer editorial, but thanks for dropping by! In this issue, we present in its entirety John Greenwood's exciting novella of mechanical co-habitation, Living with Mister Robot, together with another lengthy and thrilling instalment of Howard Phillips' Saturation Point Saga – the serialisation of His Nerves Extruded, the first novel in the sequence to be actually written, continues.*

SWT

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# Living with Mister Robot

## A Short Story

John Greenwood  
*Wordsmith*

The first thing he noticed was that the microwave had gone missing. All that was left were four circles of clean Formica ringed by congealed grease and toast crumbs. For a second, Michael just stared at the new space on the kitchen worktop without a thought in his head. Then he shouted, "Jordan, what's happened to the fucking microwave?"

Jordan ran in from the living room and fired off a rapid burst of shots from his laser pistol.

"Jordan, what's happened to the fucking microwave?"

Jordan looked up at the space where the microwave should have been and said nothing. It was no use asking him about anything. He was only four years old.

Michael went round the house and checked all the doors and windows. No sign of a break in. Local kids, probably. He'd fucking murder them if he ever caught them. No point calling the police. They never did anything even when they did bother to turn up. What a neighbourhood. Why was he still living here? It wasn't even his town. It was hers. He'd moved here to be with her, like a mug. And now she'd pissed off, leaving him to look after the kid.

At least the fridge was still there. He opened it and found a beer. The last one. That gave him pause. His Jobseeker's Allowance wouldn't be paid in for another week. He had a tenner to last him until then. There seemed to be only one way of avoiding that unhappy thought, so he took the beer into the living room and switched on the TV.

Jordan followed him in. "Can I watch Mister Robot?"

"No, I'm watching the football." Michael cracked open the beer and shifted himself in the saggy armchair.

"There's no football on. It's too early. It's break-fast time."

"Smartarse. Anyway, you watched Mister Robot yesterday."

Jordan was still looking at him. "I'm hungry."

Michael threw down the TV listings magazine. "Oh for fuck's sake. Go and make yourself some cereal then."

"I want you to make it. You do it better than me."

Michael went into the kitchen and washed up a bowl. He grabbed the milk from the fridge door, unscrewed the top, and sniffed. Seemed okay. He came back in carrying the bowl of chocolate cereal to find Jordan holding the remote control, watching Mister Robot with the sound on mute.

"What the fuck is going on here?"

Jordan didn't say anything.

"Here," said Michael, putting the cereal down on the carpet next to him.

Jordan glanced at it. "You didn't put the milk in first."

"So?"

"I only like it with the milk in first."

"Tough shit. Just mix it in. It all comes out the same way."

Jordan frowned. He turned the TV up loud.

"Jesus Christ, Jordan. Pack it in," said Michael.

Jordan turned down the volume a fractional amount.

Michael was looking for an ashtray. Where did all the ashtrays go to in this house?

Eventually he found an empty bottle for an ashtray. He settled down and they both watched Mister Robot together. It was a kids show. Mister



Robot was some moron wearing a robot suit. Blue corrugated plastic tubes covered his arms and legs. His head was a kind of yellow dome with flashing red lights in his eyes, and a metal grille for a mouth, which lit up when he talked. His voice was flat and staccato the way you imagined a robot's voice to be. A yellow crate enclosed his torso, with dials and more flashing lights on his chest.

Michael couldn't see what the kid liked about it. It didn't even look like a proper robot. Just a guy in a costume. And the show didn't make any sense either. Mister Robot's best friend was a giant crow called Isabella. A giant crow. Where the fuck did that come from? And why would a robot be friends with a crow? Mister Robot and Isabella lived in a gaudy little house together, and every week they did some lame thing or other, like making biscuits or flying a kite. There was a rat who lived in a hole in the wall too, and came out occasionally. His name was Walter Whiskers and he was supposed to be the naughty one who messed things up.

Some lazy, arrogant TV executive had probably found a few costumes lying around in the wardrobe department and decided to churn out a cheap bit of TV. Michael could have done better in his sleep. But Mister Robot had really taken the country by storm. Jordan had both the Mister Robot and Isabella Crow action figures: Mister Robot flashed his eyes when you pressed a button on his back although Jordan had broken this feature months ago. Isabella Crow flapped her wings. The kid was pretty desperate to get his hands on the remote control Walter Whiskers, which appeared in every advert break while the show was on.

This week Mister Robot was singing a song with Walter Whiskers about cheese. It was called "Cheese Please". Michael closed his eyes. He was going to go crazy watching this mindless crap. Every day it was just him and the kid, sat in front of the TV with the curtains drawn. Nobody came to see him. He'd gradually lost touch with all his old mates back in his home town. Of course when he moved in with Natasha they'd all promised to come and visit him, but none of the bastards ever had. And his parents hadn't rung him since that big bust-up last Christmas. He didn't know anybody who lived round here apart from Natasha's parents, and he wasn't about to go crawling to them. Most likely she'd poisoned them against him anyway, telling them all sorts of lies, blowing everything up out of proportion. She was probably shackled up with some smarmy fucker right now, while he was stuck here, waiting hand and foot on this ungrateful little bastard. He wasn't even sure it was really his kid.

The credits finally rolled, and Jordan ran upstairs to his room, clutching his Mister Robot action figure to his chest. Michael grabbed the remote and switched over to a daytime talk show. He always enjoyed having a good laugh at the ignorant sods who appeared on these programmes, mouthy couples in tracksuits bawling at each other about DNA tests. This morning they were talking about single mothers whose estranged partners were robbing the child benefit money.

What *about* that child benefit money? Had she been claiming it all along, while Michael was paying for the kid's food out of his own pocket? Even if she hadn't, Michael could claim it himself. It was only fair. Perhaps the beer situation wasn't as bad as he'd feared.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs and shouted up. "Jordan, get your coat on. We're going out."

No reply.

"Jordan, get your arse down here."

Nothing.

He was just about to run upstairs when he heard a door shut in the kitchen, and Jordan's voice saying, "Bye then." That door led down to the cellar.

"Where the fuck have you been?" asked Michael when the kid appeared.

"Nowhere."

"Have you been in the cellar?"

"No. Where are we going?"

"Get some money. You know you're not allowed in the cellar, don't you?"

"Yeah. Can we go to Conrads?"

"Depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On whether you've been bullshitting me."

"I'm not bullshitting you."

"So that wasn't you closing the cellar door then."

"No. It was Mister Robot."

"Okay," said Michael. "Let's go, bullshitter."

Jordan dragged his coat down from the end of the banister. "I'm not a bullshitter. When's mum coming back?"

"At the end of her holiday."

"When's that?"

Michael opened the front door and hustled the kid out into the overgrown front yard. "Depends," he said.

"Okay, let's go, bullshitter," said Jordan.

"Watch the fucking language," said Michael. He had to admit it: the boy was bright. Maybe it was his after all. He was going to have to put a bolt on that cellar door.

At the Jobcentre, Michael took a pink, arrow-shaped ticket from the ticket dispenser. He was

number one hundred and forty nine. He looked up at the display board: they were only on eighty nine. Jordan got down on his hands and knees and made the Mister Robot action figure walk about in between the display boards while Michael sat on a metal chair and looked at the patch of blue-grey carpet between his feet. He had wasted too much of his life in this place already. The Jobcentre was air-conditioned and whitewashed. Optimistic people in brightly coloured shirts smiled down at him from boards that hung by chains from the ceiling. There was a woman wearing a hard-hat brandishing a spirit level. "Who do you want to be?" ran the logo. Radio 1 was being pumped out of the speakers. An old black guy in a grimy sheepskin coat was causing a scene at the counter, banging on about his human rights. The woman behind the counter looked right through him.

Michael looked at his watch. Not that he had any pressing engagements but this place was doing his head in. He tried to look at the ticket of the bloke with the gold chains and baseball cap sat two seats down from him. He had a carrier bag full of tinnies under his chair, and he kept sneaking a sip whenever he thought the security guards aren't looking. As if they'd give a shit. They were probably all tanked up too. How else could you get through the day in this place? The baseball cap guy had number one hundred and fifty. Michael heard the kid's voice, and looked round to see Jordan chatting away to an Asian woman with a couple of her own kids in tow. The lad wasn't shy. He'd probably go straight off with the first person who promised him a trip to Conrads. You had to watch him.

"Tony Hockey?" said the woman behind the desk, when one hundred and forty nine came around. Michael recognised her from the day before. She was pretty young. A small woman with a mousy face, not bad looking when she smiled. Did she fancy him?

"No," said Michael. "It's Michael Squires."

The baseball cap guy was hovering behind Michael's right shoulder. "It's about this child support thing," he said. "It's all fucked up, I told them on the phone, they've fucked it all up."

The mousey woman looked up as if she was ready to listen to Tony Hockey's complaint. "Hey!" said Michael, holding up the ticket. "It's one four nine, alright mate? Do you mind?"

"kin hell," said Tony Hockey, and sat back down to his beers.

"I've come about the child benefit payments," Michael explained. "For my lad." He pointed at Jordan, who was pulling handfuls of leaflets out of a display rack.

"What's the name? Tony Hockey?"

"No, I'm Michael Squires. I was in here yesterday, remember? I spoke to you about my Housing Benefit. Jesus."

"Sorry, sir, we see a lot of different people every day." It sounded like a trained response.

There were some forms to fill out. Michael had to bring them back next week. But he could probably afford a trip to the office. From what the woman had said, it looked like the money would come through in a few days.

"Are we going to Conrads now?" said Jordan, pulling on Michael's hand.

"Go on then. But you're not having anything. And don't start pissing me off."

Conrads was a big toyshop in town. Actually, it was the only toyshop in town. Mid-morning on a weekday wasn't the best time to go in: the place was practically deserted, and Michael felt conspicuous. The staff were more likely to notice if Jordan broke anything. Michael looked at his watch as they went in through the automatic doors. "Five minutes," he said, as Jordan bounded off towards a big display of Mister Robot figures.

Michael hung around near the entrance with his hands in his pockets. He picked up a rubber snake from a wire basket, then put it down again.

"Can I help you?" said a shop assistant in a shirt and tie. His enamelled tiepin bore the store's logo.

"No, I'm just looking," said Michael. "Just looking at these snakes."

How dodgy did that sound? When was the last time he'd had a shave?

"Can I have this Dad?" said Jordan, running up with a box in his hand.

Michael didn't look at him. "What did I say?"

"Can I have it, though?"

"I said you're not having anything."

"Please."

It had been a mistake coming here.

"Let's have a look at that." Michael took the box from Jordan's outstretched hands, but he had already guessed what it was: the Walter Whiskers remote control toy. Thirty quid.

"Please, please, please."

Michael threw the box into the basket of rubber snakes and grabbed Jordan by the upper arm. "Come on, we're going."

Straight away the boy started to throw a tantrum. Michael had to grip his arm pretty hard to stop him running away. "I told you you couldn't fucking have anything," said Michael, as Jordan continued yelling, his face screwed up in frustration and rage. Michael brought the palm of his hand down hard on the back of the boy's head. It didn't shut him up.

“You know, there are some cheaper Walter Whiskers toys available,” said the shop assistant, coming over.

Michael glowered at him. What the fuck was it to do with him?

“Oh?” he said, but kept hold of Jordan’s arm.

The shop assistant returned with an armful of toys. “These beanbag toys are just six ninety five.”

Michael inspected the mouse. Basically it was just a fabric bag full of dried rice. “Seven quid for this?”

“Well, six ninety five actually. They’re official merchandise, you know.”

“I don’t give a shit. I’m not paying seven quid for it.”

The shopkeeper had anticipated him. “This one’s only three ninety five,” he said, producing a smaller version of the same thing from his pocket.

“I want Walter Whiskers!” screamed Jordan, dragging on Michael’s arm.

What a fucking nightmare, thought Michael. That was the last time they would ever come in here.

“I could always discount the item, sir,” said the shop assistant. “We might have some shop-soiled units.”

“No thanks,” he said bitterly. “I’ll take that one. The small one.”

The shopkeeper rang up the sale while Jordan snatched the beanbag rat and turned away, his bottom lip still trembling, completely absorbed in his new possession.

Neither of them said a word on the bus home. They got off early so Michael could nip into Drinkmart and stock up. Drinkmart had metal grills over its windows, which were plastered with posters advertising multi-purchase offers. Michael guessed they did most of their business selling super strength cider to alkies.

Who should be in front of him in the queue but the guy from the Jobcentre with the baseball cap: Tony Hockey. Michael hoped he wouldn’t spot them, but he was out of luck. “Alright, bud,” said Hockey.

Bud?

Michael nodded back.

“You want to push in front of me again, or what?” Hockey flashed him a smile full of gold teeth.

“No thanks,” said Michael. He looked at the gold ring on the guy’s knuckle. It covered all four fingers and spelt out “TONY”. Tony bought a packet of fags and some rolling papers, Michael noticed.

“See you around, bud,” said Hockey as he turned to leave.

For some reason Michael did a thumbs up. “Yeah. See you.”

He handed over his last fiver to the old Asian

woman behind the counter. “You’d better give us a pint of milk as well,” he said. “I think the stuff in our fridge has just about turned to yoghurt.”

The old woman put the milk in a thin carrier bag without a word.

He always tried to be friendly to the family who ran this shop, but they never responded. You’d have thought they would be glad of a bit of chitchat. Most of the neighbourhood was white and poor, and there weren’t too many of them who were fond of Asians.

He had to push past a gang of shifty looking teenagers who were standing round the entrance to Drinkmart.

“Here mate, can you get us twenty fags?” A kid in a football top approached Michael with a stack of pound coins in the palm of his hand. Michael thought about it.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“What’s that got to do with it?” asked the boy.

“He wants to know if it’s legal to suck your cock,” said a girl from the doorway.

“Piss off,” said Michael, shouldering the boy aside. He held on tightly to Jordan’s arm and strode away, dragging his son behind him. Jordan had started crying but Michael barely noticed. Sweat was breaking out on his forehead and his heart was going like nobody’s business.

He had to get out of this shithole. He didn’t belong here. These weren’t his people. There was nothing to keep him here, now that Natasha was gone, apart from the kid.

As soon as Michael had opened the door Jordan scuttled past him and ran upstairs with the new toy. Later on, when Michael was watching the football, he could hear the kid talking to himself in the kitchen. “Mister Robot, come with me, we are all going to go to the park,” said Jordan. “Where is your coat, Walter Whiskers? I haven’t got one, I’m just a rat.”

Did the kid ever think about anything else? He was obsessed. Maybe there was something wrong with him. Well, the teachers could work that one out when he started school. His mother had put him on a waiting list for the one down the road when he was born. Less than a year now and he’d be off Michael’s hands. It was something to look forward to.

Michael told himself that his life had stalled, and he didn’t really know how to get it started again. He was waiting for somebody to come along and give him a kick-start. Meanwhile everything was on hold. Natasha had walked out before, but she’d always come back, usually the next morning after spending the night at her parents’ house. But it had been three weeks now, and not a peep. Meanwhile he just sat

here every day in front of the TV, drinking until he passed out or ran out of beer, whichever happened first. Michael had a distant sense that this routine couldn't go on forever, that sooner or later he would have dug himself too far down, and wouldn't have the strength to climb back out. But that day looked a long way off.

A couple of days later Michael did run out of beer and was down to his last few scraps of tobacco. Jordan had already scribbled on Walter Whiskers' head. The beanbag toy lay abandoned underneath the radiator in the living room. That was the last time Michael was going to waste money on him.

Standing in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil, Michael noticed the cellar door was open.

"Jordan!" he shouted upstairs.

But Jordan appeared in the open doorway and made a dash for the hallway. Michael grabbed him by the back of his t-shirt. "Get back here."

Jordan had the Isabella Crow action figure in his pocket.

"What have I told you about going in there?"

The boy shrugged. He seemed distracted and kept glancing behind him down the steps into the darkness of the cellar.

"It's dangerous down there. That's where your dad's tools and stuff are. What do you think you're doing?"

"Playing with Mister Robot," he said.

Michael had to give him a clip round the head. Of course that set him off screaming, but he had to be taught. Then Michael reached down and grabbed the Isabella Crow toy. "Right then, I'll look after this until you've learnt to do as you're told."

Jordan didn't seem too bothered about this hardship, and just carried on whimpering and holding his head in his hands. "I may have to throw Isabella Crow away if you can't stay out of that cellar," said Michael.

"I don't care!" shouted Jordan. Michael put the toy in a cupboard out of the kid's reach. It would be interesting to see how long this bout of defiance lasted.

Strangely enough, Jordan didn't seem to miss Isabella Crow, and stayed out of Michael's way for a few days, playing quietly on his own in his bedroom, while Michael stayed in the living room with the TV. The Jobseeker's Allowance money came through, and for a couple of days he was solvent again. It looked like smooth sailing for the time being. Michael cheered up, and even let Jordan watch Mister Robot. They were watching the show one morning together when the phone rang. Michael stubbed out a cigarette and got up to answer it. The

line was silent. Michael couldn't even hear anyone breathing. He replaced the receiver gently, and then dialled 1471: number withheld. Probably one of those telesales calls, he thought, and went back into the living room. Jordan was glued to the screen. This week Mister Robot was flipping pancakes. But every time he flipped one, it fell behind him, and Walter Whiskers scooted out from his hole in the wall and grabbed it.

"Uh oh! Where did that one go?" said Mister Robot, in his distorted, metallic voice.

"Where are those pancakes?" said Isabella Crow, flapping into shot. "I'm hungry!"

Jordan was killing himself laughing. There was definitely something wrong with the kid. What was so funny about that?

The guy in the plastic robot outfit was probably getting paid thousands for flipping those pancakes. Michael wondered how you ended up with a cushy number like that. Probably by fucking the producer. They were all queers in the media anyway, weren't they? That's what somebody had told him once.

"Can we make pancakes?" said Jordan, when the programme was over.

"Sure," said Michael. "Maybe next week."

There were more silent phone calls. Michael felt sure that it was Natasha, trying to mess with his head. After the first few times, he started shouting abuse at her down the phone, but there was never any response. The calls got more frequent. Whoever it was had a lot of time on their hands: they were ringing two or three times a day. One time it even happened in the middle of the night. After that one, Michael considered phoning the police, but what could he tell them? That he was being stalked by his ex-girlfriend? They'd laugh in his face. He began to wonder if Natasha was, in her own twisted way, trying to make up with him. Perhaps she just didn't have the courage to apologise to him, so she just kept ringing. Who knew what went on inside her tiny mind?

Michael knew that eventually she'd slip up, and she did. After about the hundredth silent call, he dialled "identify caller" and heard a familiar number being read out to him. It was Natasha's parents. So that was her game. He decided to go round there. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he was going to put a stop to these phone calls. What to do with Jordan? Michael didn't really want to take him along. Things could get unpleasant, and he didn't want the kid getting in the way of it. Not that Michael planned for it to get ugly, but you never knew with Natasha how things would turn out. She was unpredictable that way.

"I'm going out for a little while," said Michael, appearing in the bedroom doorway.

Jordan was sitting on the floor, making Mister Robot fight it out with a plastic dinosaur and a fluffy ducking. "Can I come?" he said.

"No, I want you to stay here," said Michael. "I won't be long."

He knew he shouldn't be doing this. You read about people getting arrested for leaving their kids at home on their own. But these were exceptional circumstances. He couldn't be expected to just sit there and take this kind of shit. And he wasn't going to be gone for long: Natasha's mum and dad only lived a few streets away. He could run there in ten minutes.

"Where are you going?" said Jordan.

Michael looked round the room gloomily. The wallpaper next to Jordan's cot was a frenzy of crayon and felt-tip pen scribbling. What was he going to tell the landlord about that?

"Just out," he said. "I want you to stay in here. I'm going to shut this door, and lock it. Do you need a slash?"

"No, just been," said Jordan.

"Good, because you'll have to go in your potty if you need to go while I'm out."

The child nodded absently, absorbed in some conversation between the two plastic combatants.

"I'm going to lock this door," said Michael. "I'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

"Okie dokie," said Jordan.

Michael shut the door with a sense of foreboding. He almost changed his mind, but that felt too much like giving in to Natasha. She must think she can get away with murder, thought Michael. But he would show her. He wasn't handcuffed to the child, after all. He had his own life to lead. He looked at the ceramic sign nailed to the door that said, "Jordan's room", accompanied by a picture of a formula one racing car. Natasha's mum had bought it last Christmas. Then Michael brought a chair from his own bedroom and leant it up against the door, just underneath the handle. He'd seen people doing this on films, and assumed it worked. At least it would probably work with a four year old. Then he jogged downstairs and went out, locking the door behind him.

When he got back, forty-five minutes later, he stood at the bottom of the stairs feeling breathless and anxious.

"Jordan!" he called up. He didn't wait for an answer but went up to his son's room. The chair was still there, but he couldn't hear anything going on inside the room. As he pulled the chair out of the way, a strange thought went through his mind, but he

didn't have time to think about it properly until later. Inside the bedroom, Jordan was lying on the floor looking at a colouring book.

"Jordan," said Michael. The kid looked up, unconcerned.

"Do you need to go to the toilet now?"

"No," said Jordan. "I already went."

Michael looked at the potty, which was sticking out from under the cot. "Oh fuck. You didn't do it in your pants, did you?"

Jordan looked mildly offended. "No. I went to the toilet," he insisted.

"And how did you manage that?" asked Michael, folding his arms and leaning against the doorframe.

"Mister Robot came to let me out," said Jordan.

"Okay, okay. Mister Robot did it," said Michael. "I suppose he's been pissing in our toilet too, has he?"

"No, he hasn't," said Jordan with a frown. "He doesn't do dirty things like that."

Michael felt all the stress and worry escaping from him like a deflating balloon. He laughed, and Jordan chuckled too, as he always did when grown-ups shared a joke he didn't understand.

"I'm going to make something to eat. Do you want beans on toast?" said Michael.

Jordan nodded. Michael left the room and closed the door with a sense of relief, but the strange thought returned to him like an echo. Hadn't he put that chair up against the door the other way around? He looked at the chair, and could not now remember with any certainty which way he'd found it. It wasn't worth bothering about.

Michael dug out a tin of beans, and had got as far as emptying them into a plastic bowl to put in the microwave before he remembered about the burglary. He would have to wash up a pan from the unsteady pile of dirty crockery in the sink.

Nobody had been in when Michael had called round at Natasha's mum and dad's house. All the lights were off. He'd banged on the door and rung the bell a few times, then peered in through the letterbox, only to see a large pile of letters and leaflets on the hall carpet. It was then that he remembered: Natasha's parents always went away on holiday at this time of year. They went to the same place year after year: a huge caravan site in Wales. It was still possible that Natasha was housesitting while they were away, but why would she have left all those letters on the doormat? The fact remained that the silent calls had come from that house. It was impossible that he'd misheard the number.

There were no more silent calls after that, which clinched it for Michael. Natasha was definitely

fucking with him. Why remained to be seen, but he was not going to take it lying down. Whatever pathetic little game she was playing, he was ready for her.

Jordan started acting weird too, Michael noticed. One morning, Michael woke to a worse than usual hangover. He heard Jordan's voice, and dragging on his dressing gown, he came out onto the landing. Jordan was standing at the bottom of the stairs in his pyjamas, talking on the telephone.

"Yes," he was saying earnestly. "Yes, I will."

He put the receiver down quickly when he noticed his father standing behind him.

"Who were you talking to?"

Jordan shrugged.

"Jordan, who were you talking to?"

"Mister Robot."

"Oh? Well, I don't want you messing about with the phone anymore. It's not a toy. Do you understand?"

Jordan smirked and dodged away into the kitchen.

The kid stopped taking an interest in the TV, but if anything his obsession with the Mister Robot character was getting worse.

"Don't you want to watch your favourite programme?" said Michael one morning when he was in a better mood. The child benefit money had come through, and he had restocked the fridge.

Jordan was hovering in the doorway, eating a packet of crisps. He'd suddenly gone mad for crisps. "No," he said. "It's stupid."

That was a surprise. Oddly enough, Michael felt disappointed. Watching that programme was the only thing the two of them did together.

Mister Robot was doing aerobics in the garden., and the flowers behind him were dancing along with the music. It must get hot as hell in that suit, thought Michael.

"Look," said Michael. "Mister Robot is outside his house."

"Silly," said Jordan. "Mister Robot doesn't live there."

"Where does he live, then?"

"It's a secret," said Jordan, smiling and moving out of sight.

Michael turned off the TV set and got up. He went into the kitchen and opened the cellar door. Chilly, damp air. Michael flicked the light switch and illuminated the concrete steps leading down. There were some old tins of paint on a shelf above the steps, and a broom handle leaning against the wall at the bottom. He couldn't see properly into the cellar from where he stood. It didn't look as if anything had been disturbed.

Had Jordan been messing about down there again, even though Michael had told him not to? It was impossible to say for sure: Jordan was a sly child. Michael reminded himself that he would have to put a bolt on the door, out of Jordan's reach. That entailed a trip to the DIY superstore out of town, two bus journeys away. He would do it later.

A week later Michael had to go and sign on again. He didn't feel like dragging the kid all over town. He wondered whether he could get away with leaving Jordan in his room again. Nothing had happened the last time, had it? And the chair against the bedroom door seemed to have done the trick. Michael had spent weeks cooped up in that house with the kid. It was only fair. If he didn't get some time on his own, he was going to lose it.

This time, after Michael had finished with the Jobcentre, he ducked into a quiet pub for a couple of pints while he read the paper. He did most of the crossword. It felt nice to be out of the house, away from all the mess that needed cleaning up, all the jobs that needed doing. On his way out, Michael spotted a hardware store across the street. That was a stroke of luck, he thought, and went in to buy a bolt.

On his way home, he took a detour past Natasha's parents' house again. It was a neat, unpretentious redbrick semi with a tiny, well-trimmed lawn in front. It was one of the nicer streets in the area. People here still took pride in the appearance of their houses. Their car was in the drive now. It looked newly washed. Michael stood at the end of the cul-de-sac, watching the front window, but it was difficult to see if anybody was in there.

Michael walked over and rang the doorbell. The radio was on in the kitchen. When he heard footsteps approaching, he had a sudden impulse to run away. What was he doing here? Natasha's mum opened the door. Carol was wearing a striped blue, plastic apron, and looked as though she was in the middle of cooking. But she was smiling.

Michael didn't know what to say. "Sorry. Sorry to bother you."

"Back already?"

Michael stared at her, searching for a clue to unravel this riddle. "Yes," he said. "I guess so."

"We've really missed you all," said Natasha's mum. "Where's the rest of the family? Still recovering?"

"Yeah, something like that, I think."

"Bit of jetlag, I expect. Florida's a long way."

"It certainly is."

The words just seemed to be falling out of Michael's mouth unbidden. He shuffled his feet on the doorstep.

“Do you want to come in for a cuppa? Geoff’s just out in the garden, I’ll go and shout him.”

“No!” said Michael suddenly. “Don’t go to any trouble. I’ve got to get going. Just thought I’d call round, you know. Just to say hi.”

“Well, that’s kind of you,” said Carol, but there was bitterness in her smile. “We were wondering when you’d get back. Geoff was just saying this morning, it was a shame we didn’t get a postcard.”

Carol had a way of making everybody feel guilty, even if they didn’t know quite what they had done wrong. What was he supposed to be apologising for this time? He had no idea what she was talking about.

Michael began to stutter, something that hadn’t happened for years. “Well, it’s lovely to talk to you, Carol,” he said.

“Let us know when you’re planning to come round, and I’ll put some dinner on for you all. I’m sure Jordan won’t mind telling me all about Disneyland.”

“I’m sure he won’t,” said Michael. “How was your holiday, by the way?”

“Oh, quiet. You know. The way we like it.”

“Right,” said Michael, backing away. “We’ll see you soon, then.”

As he walked away, Michael’s first thought was whether there had been any hidden barb in Carol’s last remark about Disneyworld. Was she trying to insinuate that she’d been kept in the dark? But about what? The whole thing was insane. There had been no trip to Disneyland. How the fuck could Michael have afforded to take the family to Disneyland? Is that what Natasha had been telling her parents? What purpose would that serve? But it was impossible to guess what Natasha’s motives were. She didn’t think straight at the best of times.

On his walk home, Michael spotted a familiar face passing him on the other side of the road. It was Tony Hockey again, that guy from the Jobcentre. He must live round here, Michael reasoned. He tried not to catch his eye, but couldn’t help glancing up to find that the man was staring right at him. Michael quickly averted his eyes.

Safely back home, Michael didn’t bother to take his coat off, but wandered into the living room, his mind distracted. It took a full minute before he noticed that the TV set was missing.

“Jordan!” he shouted without thinking. “Get in here!”

Then he remembered that Jordan was still shut upstairs in his bedroom. He jogged upstairs and found the door open, the chair moved to one side. Jordan was not in his room.

Michael checked in all the upstairs rooms, then raced back down to the living room. He stared at the dusty table where the TV belonged, as if this could give him some kind of clue. Then he heard footsteps coming up from the cellar.

He turned around to see the child standing in the doorway, eating a jam sandwich.

“Where did you get that sandwich?” he asked.

“Made it myself,” said Jordan with more than a hint of pride in his voice.

Michael looked at him. The child looked cheerful and relaxed.

“How did you get out of your bedroom?” he asked.

“Mister Robot let me out.”

Michael folded his arms and looked at the boy. “I’m getting pretty fucking bored of this, you know.”

“It’s true.”

“Where’s the fucking TV?”

“Down in the cellar.”

“If that TV’s broken, you’re fucking dead, I swear.”

“I didn’t touch it.”

“Oh, I suppose Mister Robot took that too, did he?” shouted Michael.

“Yeah.”

Michael looked at the open cellar door.

“I should have put this lock on a long time ago,” he said, fishing the hardware store bag out of his coat pocket. He turned the light on and peered down the steps, dreading the sight of his smashed TV set. But there was nothing to see.

“Stay here,” he said to Jordan.

The kid nodded, munching on his sandwich.

Michael walked down into the cellar.

“Hi there, Mikey,” said a distorted, metallic voice.

Mister Robot stood up from a chair in the corner of the room and walked up to Michael. His head was a bullet-shaped yellow cone. His arms were two blue, corrugated plastic tubes. His eyes were two flashing red lights. His mouth was a chrome metal grille that lit up with a red glow when he spoke.

“How are you doing, Mikey?” said Mister Robot. He was holding something behind his back.

Michael didn’t say anything. He didn’t see the baseball bat until it was too late.

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When he woke up, Michael had a headache as bad as any hangover he could remember. He was lying on his back in the cellar. His arse and back had gone numb from the cold, stone floor. The side of his face was tender, and when he put his hand to his cheek, dried blood flaked off onto his palm. That’s when it

came back to him.

He tried to get up, and in doing so noticed the bruises on his arms and the blood on his t-shirt. The back of his head was throbbing like a bastard. Unsteady on his feet, Michael felt safer climbing the steps on all fours. At the top, he found he couldn't open the door. Someone had put a bolt on it. He started rattling the door handle and shouting in a blind rage, but nobody came. He tried to kick it open, but the door was strong, and the top step was an awkward position to kick from. The kicking and shouting lasted for a good ten minutes, until he realised that he was making his headache worse. He turned around and looked back down into the cellar. That's when he saw the microwave, and the television.

There was a camp bed in the corner of the room that Michael didn't recognise at all, but he was suddenly overcome by an urgent need for sleep, and it didn't seem to matter why the bed was there. It looked comfortable. Michael threw himself down on the narrow mattress in his clothes and shoes and slept.

The first thing he did when he woke up was to look at his watch. It was around lunchtime. He'd been down in the cellar for over twenty-four hours. The house was silent. He went back to the door: still locked. "When I get out I'm going to fucking kill you, Natasha!" he shouted through the door. He had no doubt that his ex-girlfriend was behind it all. But she didn't reply. Michael tried shouting for Jordan, but something told him that he was the only person in the house.

He had to think rationally about this. No use letting panic overtake him. If there was one thing that thousands of hours watching TV had taught him, it was that there was always a way out of these situations. Michael decided to make an inventory of the objects in the cellar, in case he could use any of them. The cellar was the same size as the kitchen above it, and roughly square. Stone flags paved the ground, and the walls were crumbling brick that had been painted white at one time. Light came from a single, cobwebbed bulb that hung from the ceiling, the cable running across the underside of the kitchen floorboards and up into the house. There was a smell that Michael associated with mould and fungi. He tried not to imagine the millions of microscopic spores that he must be breathing in with each exhalation. Apart from the camp bed and mattress, microwave and television, the room was entirely bare. The broom handle, paint cans, and other bits and pieces had all been removed. There was an old plastic

bucket. That was all. At that moment he was out of ideas.

Then he noticed something else: the microwave and television cables stretched up behind them and disappeared through a small hole drilled in the floorboards of the kitchen above him. Michael couldn't remember having seen that hole before. He clicked the TV on: it worked, but there was no sound. Somebody had been tampering with the speakers. He opened the microwave and found some plastic cutlery and a small stack of boxes: dried ready meals. Michael thought immediately of the water tap on the far wall, long disused and clogged with dirt and cobwebs. But it still worked, and five minutes later Michael was sitting on the bed watching the lunchtime news and eating a bowl of Chinese-style rice with mushrooms and peppers.

It wasn't until the children's shows came on at about four o'clock that Michael wondered what had happened to Jordan. He had to assume that Natasha had taken him out of the house. What was she hoping to achieve by imprisoning him here? If she wanted to take the kid, she could have just had him. It didn't really matter to Michael one way or the other. But the preparations – the bed, TV, and microwave – suggested some other purpose. Michael wondered how she'd managed to carry out such an elaborate scheme under his nose. He remembered the silent phone calls: that must have been a ruse to get him out of the house for a while. But what was going on with that robot outfit? He couldn't work that one out at all. Unless she had really lost it this time. There was always that possibility.

Michael had several hours to run these thoughts through his head, before he heard the key in the front door in the early evening. He ran up the steps again and started banging on the door.

"Tasha!" he shouted. "Open this fucking door, Tasha!"

Footsteps approached the kitchen, and Mister Robot's electronic voice said, "I won't open the door until you go back down the steps."

Michael didn't see any point in defiance at the moment, and he stepped back down into the cellar.

"Good," said Mister Robot. "Now, sit on the bed."

"Okay, I am doing," said Michael, not moving.

"Oh come on, Mikey," said Mister Robot. "What do you take me for?"

Michael looked up. There was obviously more than the one hole in the kitchen floorboards. He sat on the bed and waited while the bolt was drawn. It sounded like there was more than one lock on the other side of that door now. As soon as the door banged open, he jumped up and tried to make a dash



for it up the steps, but the blocky figure of the robot blocked the doorway and swung the baseball bat in a wide arc to keep him off.

“That’s not very nice, is it Mikey?” said the robot. “Now do as you’re told. Back on the bed. Let’s have a little chat.”

Michael sat down. Why Mikey? Natasha had never called him that before. It was clear that she’d lost the plot, and Michael wasn’t sure how best to humour her.

“I expect you’d like to know what’s going to happen to you,” said Mister Robot in a dull monotone, his mouth grille glowing in rhythm with his words.

“Where’s Jordan?” asked Michael.

“Jordan’s quite safe. He’s with friends now. You weren’t able to look after him properly, so that task has been taken out of your hands.”

“Fuck you!” Michael stood up, and made for the steps again. “Who the fuck are you, telling me how to raise my son?”

“Now, now,” said Mister Robot. “What did we say about staying on the bed?” He weighed the baseball bat in his plastic hands. Michael sat back down. The bruises on his arms and face were still very painful.

“Jordan’s going to be coming home very shortly,” said Mister Robot. “He’s had a wonderful day out with his new friends. But when he comes back, we don’t want him being disturbed by a lot of shouting and fussing, do we?”

“What are you going to do to stop me?” said Michael.

“You may be an unfit parent, Mikey, but I’m sure that you wouldn’t want any harm to come to the child, would you? You just stay quiet as a mouse, and nothing bad will happen.”

Michael looked at the impassive yellow face. Was this a bluff?

“I don’t believe you, Natasha,” said Michael in as calm a voice as he could manage. “You wouldn’t hurt him.”

“Natasha?” said Mister Robot. “Oh Michael, don’t make that mistake. My name is Mister Robot. Natasha’s long gone.”

“What do you mean? Long gone? Did she really go to Disneyland?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“In a manner of speaking? What does that mean?”

“In the sense that she’s dead,” said Mister Robot, and with that he disappeared into the kitchen and closed the cellar door. Michael could hear the bolts being driven home. Then the lights went out.

Luckily, Michael still had half a packet of cigarettes in his pocket. Sitting on his little bed in the

pitch black, he found one and lit it. The red coal illuminated a tiny area around his hand, but no more. Now that it was dark, he could make out six tiny holes in the floorboards above him where pencil-thin shafts of light shone down from the kitchen. It was really quite beautiful. He told himself that it couldn’t be true. Natasha wasn’t dead. That was just something else to make him feel scared. Nevertheless, Michael was no longer sure that the person inside that plastic costume was Natasha. For one thing, Natasha didn’t talk that way. “In a manner of speaking”: he couldn’t imagine her ever using such a phrase. But if it really wasn’t her, then who was it?

Hiding behind that one were a dozen other questions that kept Michael thinking and chain-smoking in the darkness for the rest of the evening. Assuming that Natasha was still alive (and Michael felt it absolutely necessary to make that assumption), then where the hell was she? Why had she told her parents that they were all going to Disneyland? Even if it wasn’t her in the robot outfit, could she be the person responsible for his captivity? Then there were two questions skulking at the back of the queue, so unpleasant that they were barely worth asking. The first one was “Why?” The second one was “How long?”

By Michael’s illuminated digital watch, Jordan came home at about nine thirty that evening. He sounded highly excited and kept talking non-stop to somebody who didn’t reply. From Jordan’s chatter, Michael guessed that his captors had taken him to the cinema. Twice he felt an urgent need to yell out, to get the kid’s attention, but he stopped himself. He wasn’t totally convinced that Mister Robot’s threats were just a bluff. It didn’t seem a good idea to call that bluff right now. Michael heard Mister Robot’s voice talking to the kid.

“What shall we make for dinner, Jordan?” said Mister Robot in his metallic drone.

Jordan was still breathlessly excited. “I don’t know! What do you think?”

“Let’s have pancakes,” replied the robot.

Soon the smell of pancakes was wafting down through the six spy-holes into Michael’s lair. Then Mister Robot told Jordan to go and put his pyjamas on, and shortly afterwards Michael heard heavy footsteps clomping upstairs. A door opened and closed. That was the last thing Michael heard that evening. He sat there perfectly still, waiting for a shout or a scream from the child, anything at all. Eventually he couldn’t listen any longer. He groped for the TV controls and switched it on: nothing. So his television watching was being rationed, as well as his

light. There was nothing else to do but lie down on the bed.

How had things come to this? Michael couldn't work out what he had done to deserve this treatment. He was down to his last cigarette, but he was saving that one for emergencies. He held onto the packet, as if somebody might try to take that last luxury away from him, and lay there thinking about Natasha, and the life they'd had together before all this madness had begun. And it was with those thoughts that Michael finally dropped off to sleep.

The lights came on at seven in the morning and woke Michael up. He sat up in bed, unable to believe that this was not after all some cruel dream. He could hear Mister Robot moving about in the kitchen. He turned on the tap and splashed his face with water, and rinsed his mouth out. The water tasted slightly metallic. He smoked the last cigarette, but it didn't make him feel much better. He needed a cup of coffee. There was nothing for it but to bang on the cellar door again. Almost immediately, the bolts were drawn back.

"What did I tell you about keeping quiet?" said the voice on the other side of the door.

"Can I just get a cup of coffee?"

There was a pause.

"Go and sit back down on the bed," came the reply eventually.

Michael did as he was asked, but the door didn't open.

"I'm not going to let you have any coffee," said the robot in the voice of a parent reasoning with an unruly child. "Because you deliberately disobeyed me. If you want to make any requests, or speak to me about anything at all, you can wait until I'm ready to talk to you. Don't worry. I'm not going to let you starve to death. I've got you under constant surveillance."

"I need to go to the toilet," said Michael, the thought suddenly occurring to him.

"There's a bucket in the corner," said Mister Robot. "And there's a drainage hole in the floor too."

"For fuck's sake, you can't expect me to live like this!" shouted Michael, suddenly incautious of the consequences.

"I do, and you will," was the reply. "And I'd advise you not to speak in that way from now on. It's inappropriate to use that kind of language with a child in the house."

Michael didn't have any comeback to that. "I need some more fags," he said, the thought occurring to him suddenly.

"We'll see about that," said Mister Robot. "It depends on how you conduct yourself. Jordan will be

getting up in a few moments, and we are going to be having our breakfast together. I hope I can rely on you. You know what the consequences will be if you do not behave yourself, Mikey."

"Okay," said Michael. What else was there to say?

Over the next week, Michael heard a lot of activity going on in the house above him. It sounded like Mister Robot was really cleaning the place up. Beer cans were piled into binbags. He heard the vacuum cleaner running (it had been broken for months). Jordan seemed to be helping out with great enthusiasm. The lights and power in the cellar came on at seven o'clock every morning, and went out again at ten o'clock at night. The nights were cold and Michael slept fitfully. He watched the TV all day, even though there was no sound. He worked out how to turn the teletext subtitles on. It was better than nothing.

Groceries were delivered to the house, and a single packet of cigarettes was thrown down the cellar steps, along with a carrier bag containing a dozen more microwave meals.

"How long are these supposed to last me?" shouted Michael, but the cellar door closed without any answer. He sat and smoked and thought vaguely about an escape plan. If he could remove the power cable from the microwave, he might be able to construct some kind of trap, a loop of wire on the top step that he could pull tight when his captor stepped into it. He ran through the details of the plan a hundred times, but did nothing. For one thing, he didn't have any tools, despite what he had said to Jordan. There wasn't even a single screwdriver in the cellar. Michael had never been one for DIY. Anyway, it was a rented house: repairs were the landlord's job. For another, it would be too bad if he took the microwave apart and then couldn't get it working again. Would Mister Robot provide a replacement? That was far from certain. In the end, Michael convinced himself that this plan would have failed anyway. Mister Robot always took pains to check what Michael was up to through the holes in the kitchen floor, before he would even open the cellar door. It was too risky to try anything at this stage. Michael told himself that a better opportunity would present itself.

He began to suspect that there was more than one person keeping him hostage. He could no longer hear Jordan shouting and laughing during the daytime. It seemed that somebody was taking him out of the house every day, from nine until around three in the afternoon. For some reason, that caused him more anxiety than the fact that he was still locked up by a man in a plastic robot costume. When he was reason-

ably sure that the child was not in the house, Michael started banging on the kitchen ceiling again. After ten minutes, his efforts brought Mister Robot to the cellar door.

“What’s going on down there?” said the monotonous electronic voice. “What did we agree about keeping the noise down?”

“Where are you taking Jordan?” Michael shouted.

“What do you care?” answered the robot.

“He’s my son!” shouted Michael. He felt a real pang of worry now.

“Not any more.”

What did that mean? Michael had a sudden, desperate urge to speak to his gaoler face to face. “Open the door for a sec, please!” he said. “I’ve got to speak to you.”

There was a moment’s silence, as Mister Robot considered his request. Then the cellar door swung open slowly, and the blocky figure stood there, silhouetted by the light of the kitchen.

“Sit down on the bed,” said Mister Robot. Michael did it quickly.

“Now what is all this fuss about?”

“What are you doing with my son? I’ve got a right to know,” said Michael.

“That’s a mistake. You don’t have rights anymore. You gave those up when you stopped taking responsibility for the child’s welfare.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re not a fit parent, Mikey. You’re not adult enough to be trusted with Jordan’s upbringing. That’s why I’m going to be taking over that role.”

Michael stood up. “You’re fucking nuts, do you know that? You’re dressed as a fucking robot, and you’re telling me I’m not adult enough! This can’t go on forever, you know. People will wonder what’s happened to me. Jordan will start asking questions. He’s not stupid.”

“No, he’s not stupid at all,” said Mister Robot. “But he is four years old, and he has more trust in me than in anyone. We spend all day doing fun things together. I’m his best friend now. That’s more than you ever were.”

“What have you been telling him about me?” shouted Michael, standing up despite himself.

“Now, then Mikey, there’s no need to get excited. Jordan simply thinks you’ve gone on holiday with his mother. He’s not worried about you. In fact, the thought of you barely crosses his mind. He’s having the time of his life, you know. Just put yourself in his shoes for a moment: his favourite television character has emerged from the screen and come to live in his house. It’s a dream come true. It would be such

a shame to spoil all that happiness with your presence, wouldn’t it?”

There was no point arguing with this psycho. Michael thought he should try and draw the robot out on more practical matters. “Where is Jordan now?” he asked.

“Oh, he’s gone to playgroup,” said Mister Robot. “That’s just one of the things you never took him to.”

Michael found himself trying to justify his own actions. “I couldn’t afford childcare!”

“This one’s free,” said the robot. “The truth is you just couldn’t be bothered to find out.”

“I’ve had my own problems,” protested Michael. “My girlfriend walked out. I’ve been looking after that kid all on my own, you know.”

“This isn’t about you, Mikey,” said Mister Robot. “It’s too late for you, I’m afraid. Right now I’m simply interested in Jordan growing up into a normal, well-adjusted person.”

Michael shook his head. “The fuck you are. What are you on about? Well-adjusted? The kid thinks he’s living with a fucking robot from a TV show! When he finds out that it’s all a lie, he’s going to be screwed.”

The robot was complacent. “I doubt that,” he said. “I mean, most children believe in Santa Claus until they’re, what, five years old? Six? Seven, even. Of course it’s traumatic for them when they find out the truth, but they get over it. They cope. Just as Jordan will cope.”

“Cope with what?” said Michael. “The fact that his dad’s been locked in a cellar all this time? You think that’s normal?”

“No, you’re right, Mikey. It isn’t normal. And wouldn’t be helpful to give the child that impression. That’s why I’m going to take over the role of father. That’s when I’ll take off the costume. When the time is right, of course.”

“Take over the role?”

“Yes,” said Mister Robot cheerfully. “I’m going to become Michael Squires.”

“You’re stealing my identity?”

“Well, you weren’t doing anything useful with it, now were you, Mikey?” said the robot. “That’s a joke, by the way.”

Michael smiled. He could see a gaping hole in the scheme. “You’re soft in the head. My son’s not an idiot. He’s not going to believe that you’re his father.”

“We’ll see,” said Mister Robot, with a slight shrug of his plastic arms. “I’m confident that he’ll adjust to the change.”

“You’re a totally different person!”

“Am I? I remember when I was a child – I must

have only been about six years old. My father came back from the barbershop one day, and he'd had his moustache shaved off. I didn't recognise him, and when he came over to lift me up, I screamed and screamed and ran to my mother." The man inside the costume chuckled to himself. "You know, he had to grow his moustache back before I would believe that he was really my dad again."

Michael thought about it and no longer felt so sure of his argument.

"You know," continued Mister Robot. "At that age kids' minds are so much more malleable. They don't yet know what they ought to expect from life, so they can get used to almost any change of circumstances remarkably quickly. Perhaps you didn't know that. You don't seem to have much of a clue about children in general."

The robot's hectoring tone left a sour taste in Michael's mouth, and another encouraging thought occurred to him. "Even if you do manage to warp the kid's brain and get him to believe you're his father, nobody else will be taken in. Unless you happen to be my double, then you're not going to get far with that dodge."

"I think you're overestimating your public presence a little," replied Mister Robot. "Who do you actually know around here? Do you know who your neighbours are? Have you even said hello to them? Apart from Mr and Mrs Phelps, is there anyone in this town who would actually recognise you in the street?"

"What do you know about Natasha's mum and dad?" said Michael, struck again by a vague panic.

"Don't worry," said Mister Robot. "They're doing fine. I imagine they were a little disturbed by the abusive emails you sent them the other day."

"What?"

"You didn't mince your words, I'll give you that," said the robot. "I doubt they'll be wanting to get in touch any time soon. I suppose they're probably glad their daughter finally got rid of such a deadweight boyfriend."

The thought of Michael's own parents suddenly struck him. The robot seemed to read his mind. "Your mum and dad are safe in Newcastle," he said. "Spared the knowledge of what a poor father you turned out to be. They're still hoping for some kind of reconciliation after that nasty row you had with them last Christmas."

Michael sat there with his mouth open. How could anyone have found out all this personal information about him unless Natasha really did have something to do with it all?

The robot continued in his harsh monotone. "But

they'll eventually have to resign themselves to the fact that you're too proud to make up with them. I don't think they'll be missing too much, anyway. You always were a big disappointment."

Michael didn't react to this latest attack on his character. There had been so many, he felt almost immune to them. Instead he said, "Just tell me this: Is Natasha really behind all this? She's not really dead, is she? You're just saying that to keep me scared, I know."

"Oh Mikey," said Mister Robot. "We've been through all that before, haven't we? Natasha's not coming back. She's gone to Disneyland."

He stepped back into the kitchen and shut the door abruptly.

Michael began to get used to the routine that had been imposed upon him. He told himself that he couldn't afford to get complacent, that he had to figure out a way to escape, a way of getting his son out of the clutches of the man inside the plastic yellow helmet, but complacency had got a hold of Michael a long time ago, and it wasn't about to let go in a hurry. Michael asked for, and was granted, a few more home comforts in exchange for what Mister Robot called good behaviour: toothpaste and toothbrush, some extra blankets for the bed, toilet paper, washing powder and a bowl to wash his clothes in. The clothes refused to dry in the chill atmosphere of the basement, and eventually, after a lot of negotiation, Mister Robot agreed to put them through the tumble dryer.

"We don't have a tumble dryer," objected Michael.

"We do now," said Mister Robot. "There've been a lot of changes in the house since you've been out of the way. You'd be surprised."

The clothes came back still warm, and it was the most exquisite pleasure for Michael to put them on, and sit under all his new blankets, watching the news with the subtitles on while eating instant mushroom soup. After a week of restraint and total silence, Michael was even allowed a four-pack of lager. He drank them all in one go, exhilarated by the sudden rush of warmth. His body responded to the alcohol like an old friend. But there was not enough of it. There never was.

Jordan sounded happier than Michael had ever heard him. The robot was right: Jordan was actually a bright kid, and really not so badly behaved. Michael listened in on their joint activities in the kitchen. The boy was especially keen on baking, and Mister Robot showed him how to make everything from rock cakes to wholemeal bread. Almost every day somebody came to take Jordan out. From the

boy's chatter, Michael learnt that they'd been to the park, to a nearby petting zoo, and even to the cinema a couple of times. He had to admit that Mister Robot and his accomplices were taking pains to keep the child amused.

The next time Mister Robot came down into the cellar, he was holding a piece of paper.

"You've got a job," said the robot, throwing the letter over to Michael's bed. "Or rather, I have."

Michael grabbed the paper and read it. It was from a local supermarket, offering Michael a job in their warehouse.

"I start Monday," said Mister Robot.

Michael looked at him blankly. "What are you talking about? Why are you doing this?"

"I told you Mikey, I'm talking over your life. I'm going to be Michael Squires from now on. And I think I'll make a better job of it than you managed. I know working in a supermarket isn't really what you envisaged yourself doing, but we all have to start somewhere. I know you had dreams of something more prestigious, but there aren't many jobs out there that involve sitting on the sofa getting drunk and watching daytime TV."

"How long are you going to keep me here?" asked Michael. He had the feeling that his life really was being siphoned off by this impostor.

"I'm not sure," said Mister Robot. "It's not the most convenient arrangement, having you taking up all this space in the cellar, is it? And I'm sure some people would find the concept a little odd. It depends on you, to a large extent. I mean, if you behave yourself, then in a few years I might be inclined to find you a place in our little family. You could be Walter Whiskers, for example. You could come out now and again to play with Jordan. In character, of course."

Michael stared at the fierce, flashing red eyes. It was increasingly difficult for him to imagine that a human face lay behind that bright yellow mask. "You want me to dress up as a mouse?" he said, incredulous.

"Well technically speaking Walter Whiskers is a rat, not a mouse, but that's would be the gist of it, yes. I mean this is just an idea off the top of my head, and in any case, all that's a long way off into the future, you know. There's no possibility of you being promoted to such a position of responsibility in the short-term. You've got to earn my trust, Mikey. Think of it as something to aspire to."

That conversation gave Michael a new impetus to find a way out of the cellar, and not by dressing up in a Walter Whiskers costume. While investigating his prison more thoroughly, Michael had found a metal bracket screwed into the bricks on the far wall,

halfway up the steps that led into the kitchen. That gave him the glimmer of an idea. He decided that he could probably cope with the sacrifice of television, and one morning, once he had heard Jordan leave the house for playgroup with his unknown chaperone, Michael set about removing the electric cable from the back of the TV set. After unplugging it, he managed to yank the plug off. He stripped the black plastic coating from the cable, took one of the three smaller cables packed inside, and began to strip the green and yellow striped insulation. He had no tools but his fingernails, and the work was fiddly and painful. After several hours of intense concentration, and a dozen painful cuts to his fingers, he had managed to harvest a length of twisted copper wire about four feet long. His idea was to set up a trip-wire, but once one end of the wire had been tied to the metal bracket in the wall, Michael was faced with a technical problem. How to keep the wire taut, when there was nothing for the other end to tie onto? After some thought, Michael unplugged the microwave, and tied the plug to the free end of his trip-wire. By shifting the microwave to the far end of the cellar, he created a rigid line of copper wire suspended about six inches off the third step down from the kitchen door. Michael was pleased with his work, but there was still the possibility that Mister Robot would spot the trap before he stepped into it. He thought about it for a moment, then, using the edge of the blanket to protect himself from the heat, he unscrewed the light bulb. He sat on his bed, checking his digital watch every few minutes. He was as nervous as he had ever been in any school exam. If it went wrong, then what? Maybe Jordan really would suffer the consequences of his father's rebellion. Sitting in the darkness and the silence, Michael couldn't bring himself to speculate what those consequences might be. Many times he made up his mind to forget the whole thing, but he didn't move an inch from his position on the mattress. If he couldn't go through with it now, when would he? And what if he got caught while he was halfway through dismantling his trap? Then he would reap the punishment anyway.

Jordan was brought back from playschool at about half past three. Michael could hear him running up stairs, chattering about some paintings he'd done that day. As soon as he heard the metallic voice of Mister Robot, he stood up, and tried to ready himself for whatever was coming next. He didn't make a sound, and soon enough, his captor was unbolting the door.

"Why's it dark down there?" said the robotic voice. "Did the light bulb blow out?"

"Yes," said Michael.

A yellow sliver of light widened at the top of the

steps, and Mister Robot put his foot on the first step. "I've got a torch around here somewhere," he said.

Michael waited for an almighty crash, but it didn't come. Instead, there was a muted scraping of metal on stone, somewhere over to his left.

"What's this?" said Mister Robot. The torch flashed on, and Mister Robot shone the beam down to his feet. Michael saw at once what had gone wrong. Instead of tripping up on the wire, the huge, blocks of plastic which encased Mister Robot's feet had merely trodden the wire down, dragging the microwave oven a few centimetres closer over the stone flags.

"Oh, I see," said Mister Robot calmly. He reached down with his blue plastic hands and gripped the copper wire, pulling it towards him and causing the microwave to groan again.

"Oh dear, Mikey," said Mister Robot. "This is very disappointing."

Michael sat there, not saying anything. The torch was shining right into his eyes, and he had to close them.

"I was just beginning to trust you as well, Mikey."

Michael felt a wave of hopelessness breaking over him. He was acutely reminded of occasions in his childhood when he'd been caught doing something wrong. There was the same sullen resentment, an inarticulate sense of injustice.

"My name's not Mikey, it's Michael."

Mister Robot clomped carefully down the rest of the steps, shining his torch on each one to make sure there were no other surprises waiting for him.

"What's that, Mikey?"

"I said my name's not Mikey. I don't like being called Mikey. Call me Michael."

"Oh! You don't like it?" said Mister Robot in mock surprise.

"No."

Mister Robot approached slowly. The torch was in Michael's face again, and he squinted, then looked down at the mattress. The robot walked right up to where Michael was sitting, then balled his fist and hit him in the face. It was a hard punch, and Michael fell back onto the bed, cracking the back of his head against the wall.

"Did you like that?" asked Mister Robot.

Michael buried his face in the pillow, his hand over his throbbing jaw.

"I said did you like that?"

Michael's reply was muffled by the pillow. "No."

"Do you think you deserved it?"

"No."

Mister Robot leant over the prone figure. Michael

could only see the red eyes, and the weak red glow of Mister Robot's mouth in the darkness.

"But it happened anyway," continued the robot. For the first time, Michael could hear something like anger behind the distortions of the electronic voice box. He tried to sit up.

Michael said, "Why are you doing this to me?"

"So in your opinion, you didn't deserve to get hit, but I went ahead and hit you anyway. Is that a fair summary of the situation, would you say?"

Michael nodded.

"Now what lesson can we learn from this unpleasant little exchange?" asked Mister Robot.

Michael said nothing.

"No ideas? Nothing at all?"

Michael stared at the expressionless mask.

"What about this: sometimes bad things happen to people who don't deserve it."

"I suppose so."

"You suppose so? What do you know about it?"

Michael moved back a few inches to the wall. "Nothing," he said.

"Some people aren't as lucky as you are, you know," said Mister Robot.

Michael didn't know what he was expected to say, so he said nothing.

"Good. Now I'll leave you alone. I assume you haven't actually broken the light bulb."

"No."

"Okie dokie. I suggest you get some sleep now," said Mister Robot.

"Don't hurt him," said Michael as the robot turned to leave. The red mask withdrew in silence, and a few seconds later Michael was alone again. His cheek was pulsating violently. Michael winced when he tried to touch it, then laid his head on the pillow and cried quietly for a while before falling asleep.

Mister Robot didn't pay Michael another visit for the next fortnight. When the kitchen door did open, it was only for a split second, just long enough for Mister Robot to toss another plastic carrier bag full of microwave meals down the cellar steps.

Michael's days felt much longer now that the TV set was broken. Jordan was also spending a lot of time out of the house, and Michael missed listening to his chirpy conversations, even if he was talking to Mister Robot. Slowly the knowledge dawned on Michael that this psychopath really was doing a better job of raising his son than he had done himself. It was a painful revelation, but Michael could hardly deny it. In the absence of his TV, Michael now spent all of his time desperately trying to listen in on the growing bond of friendship between Mister Robot and Jordan. Whoever it was inside that plastic suit,

he had a lot of patience. He never shouted at the child, or lost his temper. He certainly never laid a finger on him. All his efforts, every waking hour of the robot's life seemed to be dedicated towards caring for this child, making him happy. The two of them read stories together; Jordan learned his numbers from one to ten, and how to write his own name, along with countless other minor triumphs.

The kidnapper was going out to work every day at about eight thirty, and returning in the evening at around six. During that time, Jordan was taken to playgroup, or looked after by another member of the kidnapping gang. Michael had never heard anybody's voice but the metallic drone of Mister Robot, but he inferred the existence of at least one silent conspirator who was providing day care.

Without the TV to distract him, Michael became increasingly focused on the unseen world above him. He felt an unusual sense of clarity and purpose. He worked patiently on several escape plans, weighing the possibilities in each case with quiet deliberation. None of the possibilities was without risk. Simply by turning the tap, Michael could flood the cellar. Eventually the water would begin to seep into the cellars of the two adjoining terraces, and Mister Robot would be faced with angry visits from his neighbours. If Michael caused enough commotion, somebody might raise the alarm, even call the police. But the tap stayed off. What if the neighbours were away? What if Mister Robot managed to fob them off before Michael had a chance to make his presence known? What if Mister Robot left Michael to drown himself in the flooded cellar? The plan had too many variables.

Most of Michael's other plans fell before the finish line. He could try to short circuit the whole house by throwing water onto the microwave, but there was always the risk of electrocuting himself. He could force another confrontation with Mister Robot, and ambush his captor as he descended the stairs. Would the microwave oven make a good missile? Could it be thrown with enough force to knock a man down? Michael pondered on this question over many hours, but he could not carry out the experiment, for fear of destroying his last remaining home comfort.

In forming these plans, working them out in his head down to the last detail, Michael helped the daytime pass more easily, until Jordan returned from playgroup. Then Michael could lie back on his camp bed, one arm slightly raised and suspended by the chain, as he listened to his son's eager voice, retelling the adventures and achievements of the day.

On one of his infrequent visits to the cellar, Mister

Robot said to Michael, "Jordan's father will be coming back in a few days."

Michael sat up on the bed. He was still half-asleep. "What do you mean? Coming back?"

"Yes. We'll be saying goodbye to Mister Robot." "Forever?"

"I hope so. He may have to make a brief comeback, if Jordan misses him. But I think it's healthier to make a clean break with these things, psychologically speaking. Don't you?"

Michael hesitated. These rhetorical questions made him nervous.

"Don't you want to know who's going to be replacing you?" said the robot voice. "The new improved Michael Squires?"

"Does it matter?" said Michael, turning away to hide his curiosity. When he turned back, Mister Robot was holding the plastic yellow helmet under his arm.

It took Michael a few seconds to recognise the face.

"Who else do you think could get hold of a genuine Mister Robot costume?" asked the toy shop assistant.

"But..."

"What's happened to the business? Oh, don't worry – my wife is looking after the shop while I'm here caring for our boy."

"Your wife?"

"Yes. Our first son was stillborn. My wife took it very hard. And to make matters worse, the doctors told her she couldn't have any more children. Too risky even to try. But I believe somebody must be looking out for us up there," he said, glancing towards the wooden floorboards above their head. "Our second son is more wonderful than we could have ever hoped for. He's such a bright lad."

"What's going to happen to me?" asked Michael. After all the time spent talking to rigid plastic, it felt disconcerting to be confronted with a human face. There was too much to take into account: countless shades of possible meaning in each vanishing expression.

"Why is it always about you? This is a crucial point in Jordan's development. He's going to have to adjust to some major changes in his world. You just can't appreciate that there are more important things in the world than yourself, can you? That's why you failed as a father. You couldn't grow up. That's why we came along and took all that responsibility off your shoulders. We've done you a favour, really. Not that we expect any thanks, of course."

It was that conversation more than anything else that forced Michael to act. The next time Mister

Robot paid a visit to the cellar, the light bulb really was broken. He saw something large and square flying towards him. The microwave hit him on the shin, and he toppled forward down the steps. Michael leapt forward out of the shadows and struggled over the prone figure that was struggling to get up in the cumbersome robot costume. He bolted the cellar door behind him, and glanced around the now spotless kitchen. Jordan was out at playgroup, and Michael was certain there was nobody else in the house during this time of the day.

He couldn't help but look into all the rooms. The living room had been redecorated, and a new TV set installed in the corner. The only signs of mess in Jordan's bedroom were a few scattered soft toys on the floor. He picked one of them up: it was the remote control *Walter Whiskers*. A clattering from the basement reminded Michael that time was pressing. He raced back downstairs into the kitchen, and tried to think of his next move. Should he phone the police? Or just wait in ambush for the other kidnapper to return? What if the man in the basement managed to break his way out? But that was impossible: Michael himself had tried it on many occasions. He still had the *Walter Whiskers* toy in his hand, and he put it down on the kitchen work surface and pushed it around aimlessly. He knew he had to act quickly, but it was as if his mind had missed a gear and was spinning in neutral.

"This is my house," he said out loud, to nobody in particular. "I'm Michael Squires and this is my house."

He was interrupted by the sound of a door opening somewhere in the house. Michael stepped into the hall and checked the front door: nothing going on there. Perhaps he'd been mistaken. He wandered back into the living room and sat down on the familiar armchair. Where was the remote for this new TV? Michael felt around behind the cushions, but couldn't locate it. He looked at the new TV – it was bigger than the old one. Flatter tube too. Then, in the grey screen, Michael caught a reflection of something behind him. He turned around. It was *Isabella Crow*. She was pointing a bread knife at his neck with one large, nylon-feathered wing, and holding a mobile phone in the other.

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The car pulled up in the driveway.

"You okay?"

Lisa nodded quickly. "Yeah, just a little nervous."

Jordan leant over and kissed her on the cheek. "Hey, I met your parents, now you've got to meet mine!" he said with a smile. "Anyway, they're not

too bad. A bit weird, but not much weirder than yours."

Lisa fussed with her hair as Jordan rang the doorbell. The house was a neat, redbrick terrace, with a well-kept front lawn, unlike most other houses in the neighbourhood, which Lisa could tell was pretty rough. She'd counted four bus stops with their windows smashed on the way here.

"Son!" said the middle-aged man at the door.

"Mr Squires, it's so lovely to meet you," said Lisa dutifully.

"Hi, Dad," said Jordan. Mr Squires gave his son a firm handshake.

"Please, call me Mike," said the man, with a warm smile. He was wearing a crisp checked-shirt, and glasses on a chain around his neck. "Come in, please. Natasha can't wait to meet you."

"It's a lovely house you have here," said Lisa, as they sat in the spotless but cramped living room.

"Oh, we keep saying we really ought to move," said Jordan's mother. "This area isn't what it used to be. But you know what it's like – inertia sets in."

"Don't you mean *rigor mortis*?" said Mr Squires, digging his wife in the ribs with an elbow.

"Oh, Michael! Do behave. We've just got so used to the place now. I don't think we could ever think of living somewhere else. And what with Jordan going to college just down the road, it's so nice for him to be able to pop home on a weekend."

"You hear that?" said Mr Squires to his son. "That's called a subtle hint."

"Hey, I'm here, aren't I?" protested Jordan. Lisa joined in the laughter.

Presently Mrs Squires announced dinner, and they all sat down together around the big kitchen table.

"Hey Jordan, guess what I found in your old bedroom the other day?" said Mr Squires during dessert, as he poured everyone another glass of wine.

"What? It's not something embarrassing is it?"

"Why? Is there something I ought to know about you, Jordan?" joked Lisa, grabbing his arm.

"I'm sure I've got it around here somewhere," said Mr Squires, shuffling to the pantry and opening a drawer. "Oh yes, here it is. Well, I don't think it's embarrassing, but I'll let Lisa be the judge of that."

He put a small, plastic toy into Lisa's hand. It was a yellow robot, about six inches tall, with red lights for eyes, and a chrome grille for a mouth. "What is it?" she asked, feeling that the robot looked vaguely familiar.

Jordan laughed. "Where was this hiding?" he said, grabbing the toy from his girlfriend. "God, I haven't seen him for years!"

"What it is, darling?"



“It’s Mister Robot,” Jordan explained to Lisa. “It was a kids’ TV show that was on when I was little. Don’t you remember it?”

“I’m not sure...”

“You used to be obsessed with that show!” said Mr Squires. “We had to watch it together every morning until you were... oh, I don’t know... fifteen?”

“Dad!”

Everyone laughed.

“Oh look, the flashing eyes still work!” said Jordan, pressing a hidden button on the back of the toy.

“You’re not taking that back to college, are you Jordan?” said Lisa. “Now that really would make me worry.”

“Hey, if you think that’s weird...” said Jordan, looking at his dad.

“Uh oh!” said Mr Squires. “What sordid revelations are coming out now?”

“Do you remember, when I was really small, you actually used to dress up in a Mister Robot outfit?”

“Really?” said Lisa, trying to disguise her astonishment.

“Yeah, you got me there!” said Jordan’s father. “All I can say is that Jordan was a very naughty boy when he was about four years old. Mister Robot was the only person who could make him do as he was told. Sometimes when you’re a parent you have to do strange things. You two will find out all about that soon enough.”

“Dad!” said Jordan.

Mr Squires affected a look of innocence. “What?” “Did you make the outfit yourself?” asked Lisa.

“Oh, no I didn’t have to,” said Mr Squires. “I managed a toy shop at the time, and Mister Robot made a guest appearance one time. It was a jobbing actor, you know, just hired to entertain the kids and sell a few toys. Anyway, when the guy playing

Mister Robot went home, he left the costume behind. The people at the toy company phoned a few times to try and get it back, but it mysteriously vanished from our stock room,” he said with a wink.

Lisa was genuinely impressed. “Wow! Talk about above and beyond the call of duty. That’s really committed parenting!” she joked.

“Well, we just wanted to do everything right for our boy,” said Mrs Squires, glancing at Jordan with affection.

“But some of the parents you see around today...” said Jordan’s father. “It’s shocking, the way they treat their kids. When you become a parent, all your time and effort is spent making sure that your children grow up right. At least that’s how it ought to be. But some of these parents nowadays, they want to be locked up.” He was no longer smiling, and there was an awkward pause in the conversation. Mrs Squires gave her husband’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“Not everybody can dress up in robot suits, Dad,” said Jordan. “That’d be just too weird.”

They got through another bottle of wine in the afternoon, and after a lot more polite chatter, Lisa started to give Jordan the little dig in the ribs, which he knew meant, “I’m ready to go now.”

“Well,” said Jordan, standing up. “I’d better get started on that essay...”

Mrs Squires jumped up to get their coats, and as they made their way out of the kitchen, there was a faint but definite scuttling sound that seemed to come from underneath the floorboards.

“What’s that sound?” said Lisa, feeling suddenly on edge. She hated rodents of any kind.

“Dad, have you still got rats in the basement?” said Jordan. “Why don’t you get some traps?”

His father smiled as he helped Lisa on with her coat. “Rats? Oh yeah. They’re still running around down there. Great big ones.”

## Submission Guidelines

Submissions are always welcome, but they can only be accepted in electronic form, by email, to [silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk).

Submissions with adventurous, mysterious and fantastic elements are encouraged.

Length is at your discretion. TQF will publish short stories and extracts happily, and will consider serialisation of longer works. If we had to name an

ideal length, it’s 28,000 words, enough to fill an entire issue with one great adventure.

By submitting a story the author assumes all legal responsibility with regard to potential copyright, libel, trade mark infringement or any other legal proceedings which might stem from its publication. With that in mind, please do not submit any stories featuring characters from films, etc.

Please provide a postal address to which proofs can be sent. Contributors will receive no payment, not even a free copy of the magazine – we’re keeping it cheap to keep it going...

A fuller version of these guidelines can be found on the [www.silveragebooks.com](http://www.silveragebooks.com) website.

# THE SATURATION POINT SAGA

## His Nerves Extruded

Howard Phillips  
*Novelist, at last*

Previously, in the Saturation Point Saga...

*After releasing an album which, despite its colossal commercial success, fails to achieve the artistic heights of which he has dreamed, Howard Phillips travels the world to assemble the members of the perfect band. Having found his drummer, he decides to relax by employing beautiful women to bear him around Europe on a palanquin, only to find himself spirited off to an alien world, where danger waits at every turn!*

## A Princess of Envia

What follows I was able to piece together from later conversations, but there is no guarantee, I am afraid, that those conversations conveyed to me the whole truth of the matter. For the sake of my storytelling, I have chosen to take them at face value, but you have my apologies should they later turn out to have been packed with falsehood.

Malda, Princess of Envia, sat in the rear of the flitter, watching the landscape pass by. The flitter was being driven by one of her father's men, and another rode in the rear with her. They were on their way to investigate why the men had not returned. He had sent her, she knew, because she would not be missed, unlike his advisors. If one of those – like the Malt of Moseby, or the Dalon of Great Wiseton – was seen to be on a jaunt to the wastelands, questions would be asked at the highest levels, whereas if she was seen heading off to the depths of the country with two buff soldiers, people would come to their own conclusions about her activities. Her father had worked hard to create a reputation for her that was not entirely fair, but it was one that suited his purposes from time to time. If the time ever came when he would wish to marry her off, she knew he would dispel those rumours so detrimental to her reputation in a matter of minutes, and anyone who wished to revive them would find themselves in need of their own revivification.

Still, there was a possibility of danger on this mission, and so she wished that he had seen fit to send one or two of his more dangerous associates to help her – the Master of Mongoose, for example, or the Tree-Whelp. But they had their own matters to attend to (and would she really have been any safer with one of them along?), and so here she was, with just a pair of bog-standard soldiers to attend her. Their orders were just to reconnoitre, and to return any intelligence they gained to the Blank Tower immediately, avoiding all engagements, but she worried. They were so far from home. What if some enemy had eliminated the soldiers at the outpost, and now waited for her arrival? What guarantee did she have that fleeing to safety would be an option? She found herself wishing even for the company of someone like the Denizen of the Deep Red Sea, despite the patent ridiculousness of the idea. Tough he might be, but what use would he be in this dusty landscape, so close to being a desert that it was only a matter of waiting for the current generation of plants to wither away.

Something caught her eye – a mantor, fleeing across the ground as if it were being chased by a predator, but what on Envia could prey on that mighty creature? It was only in view for a second, as the ship and the beast were travelling in opposite directions, but there seemed to be ghastly white, pink and brown patches on its hide, and as she settled back in her seat she wondered if some new disease afflicted it – perhaps it was some illness-induced pain that made it run so.

She continued to ruminate on the mantor, and on how its situation illustrated the fate that can befall the mighty, even those so mighty as the mantor, but did not really consider the event itself to be of any significance.

Shortly thereafter she fell asleep for a moment, but was awoken by the soldier at her side.

“Princess Mallda – we have arrived at the outpost. Should we land?”

She looked out of the flitter as it circled the outpost. No one was visible. There were a few ominous piles of rubble on the ground. Most worryingly, even though there was no ship docked with the outpost, the entry iris was open. The guards, if alive, would never have left it like that, simply because of the danger posed by wildlife flying or climbing in.

“Something is awry,” she said. “Continue to circle for a moment, till we can get a better idea of what has happened.”

Nothing became apparent. There was no movement, and so finally she gave the order to land.

“Yes, Princess Mallda,” said the pilot. “As you instruct.”

The flitter dropped to the ground, and she jumped out as quickly as her outfit would allow. She was resplendent in a violet piece of chiffon that flowed around her like the tide around a beach. It seemed to wash in and wash out, sometimes leaving her open to the eye, sometimes leaving her mysteriously cloaked by the depths. Her hair was shoulder-length and brown, soft and ungoverned, hitting those shoulders in a crash of lovely curls and sweet bounciness. Her shoes were pale green, and open-toed, revealing nails painted with each of the ten Gods of Envia – Laros the Mighty, Badoonoo the Kingly, Hertel the Long, Juniter the Grave, Puitel the Sententious, Werfeo the Jealous, Vas the Haughty, Korkel the Cruel, Ze the Meretricious and Ootel the Exaggerated. Each portrait had been painted by a different artist, engaged to visit the palace each morning and perform this essential service. Another artist was supposed to visit each day to illustrate her eyelids with the images of the two sad gentles, but she had been missing these last few days. She wondered if that meant her father had taken a fancy to the poor woman.

She waited for the two guards to get out of the flitter, and then led them towards the piles of rubble.

“Looks like a pair of graves,” she said. “Sadly. Someone has died here. Let’s find out who it was before we go any further.”

The guards took a grave each and began to dig. The princess sat upon a nearby rock and kept an eye on their surroundings. There was not a lot to look at,

but she could cope with the boredom if it meant no one would be able to sneak up on them.

Ten minutes later two bodies lay on the ground before her. Two women, but they weren’t of her planet. Their brown skin was enough to attest to that. She had seen every shade from bright purple to light grey, but never brown. It looked very pleasant to her eyes, unlike the laser burns that had seared their faces.

The Earthlings had come here, to Envia!

These had died, but who had buried them? Not her men – that was not the way of Envia. If you were lucky you might have a relative willing to push a burning boat out into the ocean for you, but more likely you would just be thrown from the walls of the Blank Tower to be fed upon by the carrion-eaters that the regular supply of such meat brought to the land thereabout. (Oh, her father fed them well!)

Earthlings had buried their lost comrades, and then? The ship was missing, so perhaps they had returned to Earth. Clearly any men stationed at the outpost would be dead.

“There will be other bodies hereabout – bodies of men of Envia. Search and find them.”

She walked to the station and had a look around. She had assumed it would now be empty – no humans would risk being discovered here (she was surprised that they had even taken the time to bury their dead – they must be a most sentimental species). If any had remained on Envia when the ship left, they would have made for safety as soon as possible. They might have lain in wait for whoever they might have thought would come, but she doubted it. The chances of it being a single girl with a pair of soldiers would have seemed too remote to be worth taking a chance on. It was indeed empty, and she left again.

One of the soldiers called to her. “Princess Mallda! There are bodies here.”

“Very well,” she responded. “Remove and burn their clothes, then leave their bodies in the open that the animals may dispose of them.”

She walked around the outpost. She noted that the external storage lockers had been forced open at some point. Even though someone had taken care to close them up again, so that the damage might not have been noticed by a passing flitter, it was clearly visible on foot.

That meant someone had needed supplies. The trip to or from Earth took less than an hour – why would anyone have bothered to spend an hour breaking these lockers open to get hold of extra supplies? The ones on the ship would have been more than enough.

The answer was clear – there were Earthlings on Envia, and they were travelling.

But how?

A horrible thought struck her, like a flying reptile against a flitter viewscreen. She looked up at the iris. Why had these careful killers left it open? It was open because they had been unable to close it – the damage done to it was too severe. And only one thing could do damage like that (unless it had been the ship itself, a thought she quickly dismissed – the ship would have been too damaged by such a collision to get back to Earth).

That thing was a mantor.

The mantor she had seen dashing across the plains.

The white, pink and brown marks upon it had not been signs of disease.

Or rather they had: the disease of Earthmen, upon her Envia!

She snarled, and told the two guards to check inside the outpost one last time. She got into the flitter and lifted off. She turned it to face the outpost entrance and closed her fist around the laser control.

She continued to fire until the compromised outpost was utterly destroyed. It could serve no further purpose.

The flitter turned and headed back towards the Blank Tower. There was not time for her to search for the Earthlings herself. Her father had to be told of the situation. His allies would be alerted, and the planet raised against these intruders!

## The Way to a Man's Heart

"How far do we need to ride, Howard?" called Arelline, struggling to make herself heard above the noise of the rushing wind.

"One moment," I yelled back, before continuing with my poetic persuasion of the mantor.

*"Here we are / Here we fly  
Running till we hit the sky  
We are the ones  
Stars and suns  
You'll greet with a smile wry."*

He seemed to enjoy it – that is, he did not roll around on the ground to dislodge us and then tear us to shreds with his dreadful face-mouth.

"That one was called SkyWry," I told him. It was

strange, but I found myself talking to the mantor more and more about the poetry I was writing for him. I hope I am capturing the flavour of it here, but of course I had no means of writing it down during the adventure itself, so I have to try to recreate these poems from memory. I shudder to think of the classics that might have been lost that way, because, it seemed, when my life depended on it I was really able to pull out all the stops. Did I recite a Xanadu to that beast, or a lost Shakespearean sonnet? We cannot know – I cannot judge my own work fairly, and the beast did not return with us to Earth, so we will never be able to ask him. Arelline might have heard a few words here and there, in between the roaring and the screaming (of all of us, not just the mantor), but then she never had much of an ear for poetry anyway.

"Okay," I said to him, seeing a river up ahead. "I think we are going to walk from here, my friend, or perhaps take a boat. You should drop us off, then go to find yourself a good spot to hunt by day and hide by night. They might be looking for you, once they get a look at the damage you did to the outpost."

He came to a stop, and we all jumped off.

"Will this suit you?" I asked Arelline.

"Looks fine to me," she replied, unstrapping the bags from the mighty mantor. "Do you think we will be able to make a boat here?"

"Probably. Johnny, make sure you get a shot of the beast when it runs off into the distance. If that is all they put in the trailer for your film, it will be more than enough." He began to set up for the shot, and I turned back to Arelline. "I'm hoping we can make a boat, but if not, we should be able to catch ourselves enough fish to get by as we hike along the bank. It might be a big mistake, and goodness knows I have made enough of those in my time, but I have a feeling that any pursuit might well focus on the beast, once they have seen the evidence of its attack at the outpost. What's more, where there is running water and decent land you generally find people, and the land here is nothing like as dry and dusty as the place we first set foot on this planet. That is probably exactly why the outpost is there – in bad land, where no one will ever stumble upon it. There could be no other explanation for a base out in the desert with no sleeping quarters. But here, if the sun were yellow the ground would probably be green, and so there will be people nearby. If we ride up on a monster like that, well, it will not make a good impression."

Arelline interrupted me. She had finished taking our baggage from the mantor. "Is this speech going to continue for much longer? I could do with an intermission for going to the toilet, if that is okay."

I frowned and waved her off to the nearest rock.

“Are you ready, then?” I asked Johnny.

“I’m all set, boss. Should be a good one!”

“Right – start filming.” I walked around to the side of the mantor, and called up to him. “Hie there, my friend, good hunting! The poetry here is almost over, but I have one more to set you on your way.”

*“Over the landscape purple you skulk without scruple*

*You helped us to travel – we didn’t pay you a rouble*

*Our thanks multiply, and now are double*

*Get you gone, and don’t get into trouble.”*

And yes, I did rhyme trouble and double and scruple with rouble – but what did the monster know of that? He was on his way by the end of the second line, and the remaining words pursued him into the sunset.

“What now?” asked Johnny.

“We wait for Arelline to finish her toileting, then we take our turns there, divide up the bags and start to walk. It is nearly nightfall, but I want us to move a little way before we make camp, in case our enemies find the mantor and come this way. There is also the chance we might find a village, or a small farmer who will take us in for the night.”

“Won’t they have it in for us? I’m not sure I like the idea of running into a fight with a mob of angry shepherds. By hook or by crook, they’ll do us in.”

I shook my head and put a hand on his shoulder. “You are very pessimistic, my boy. Bear in mind the secret nature of the outpost we arrived at – someone is attacking Earth in secret – we are almost certainly an unacknowledged enemy of someone on this planet, and should be safe unless that person sends his agents after us. From the normal rank and file of the populace we should no other antagonism than we should have met if we had simply travelled here under our own steam.”

“I hope you’re right, Mr Phillips.”

“If we do indeed meet a horrid death, eventually your camera will be discovered by some future planet-hopping Earthman, and your posthumous fame will exceed your wildest imaginings!”

He pushed his eyebrows together, and half-smiled. “If that’s supposed to be reassuring, you should know it really isn’t.”

Arelline came back soon, and then after Johnny and I had lessened our own burdens, we added to them by sharing out the bags. I had always had this part of the journey in mind, so there was not too much for us to carry, and knowing that the weight of the baggage would lessen as we ate the food made it a bit easier to face the hike ahead.

“Hup, two, three, four!” shouted Arelline as we marched along, making us all laugh.

“Poo, on, the, floor!” I responded. It was a silly joke, but it was true, and it did worry me a bit. The riverbank was liberally coated with the detritus of animal feeding and defecating, much of it fresh, some of it frighteningly large, and containing entire bones. The mantor must have briefly scared away the local wildlife, but if we did not reach cultivated and protected land we might face trouble during the night. Our blasters should protect us from the worst of it, but it would mean little rest.

We kept the pace up, and I led from the front. We ate on the move, and were careful to pack any wrappers and leftovers back into the bags. We could not risk leaving a trail that a predator – humanoid or otherwise – would be able to follow.

After two hours of walking it was almost dark, and as I began to wonder if we would have to camp out in the open, a great splash made us spin onto our heels to face the river, and back away as fast as we might, even as we kept our eyes firmly fastened on the monstrosity that now lifted itself from the river! Its aspect was such that an accurate description is very nearly impossible – its countenance so different from that of any Earthly creature that the words I would need to describe it would need to be invented, and so you would not understand me anyway. I could try, though, if you would indulge me – antrifulgent, befuggling, manipuscent, or even gorontoculous! Horrifying, in plain English! It had as many tentacles as I have hairs on my head, and as many eyes as I have meals in a year – and those eyes did not stay still. No, they moved, merged and melded in a way that made my stomach empty that very moment. As the rations I had eaten that evening splashed onto the ground, finding their space among the abandoned carcasses and stinking faeces, I dragged my gaze back to this slithering nightmare, that even now was stretching a multitude of tentacles towards us.

I made ready to run, even as Arelline scampered away, and Johnny unholstered his camera, but then I noticed something that changed everything – there was already a man in the grips of that unholy thing. That must have been the splash we heard, whereas at first I had assumed it to be the grotesque belly-flop of the river-squid leaping onto the lowest reach of the bank. Some poor fisherman, falling into the water, must have awoken the beast, and now his fate was sealed.

But no! He was still moving, the thing not having taken the time to finish him in its greediness to add us to its catch!

I took out my blaster, and prepared to do battle for his life.

## The River of Wrath

“Lawks amighty!” I shouted as I stepped up to the fight. The beast threw a hundred slimy tentacles my way, but I ducked and rolled to the side. I hoped Johnny was filming it.

The river-squid snarled, squelchily, and let me see the insides of its stomach, an action clearly meant to disturb and terrify me. Despite the bones and semi-digested corpses I could see inside, I did not freeze – I had been so terrified by its initial appearance that nothing further it could do could make me fear it more. I had overcome that initial terror, and now prepared to turn it back against its originator.

A laser blast came over my head, sizzling the creature’s side – it didn’t burn so much as evaporate, so disgustingly liquid was its composition. It was as if the slime from the surface of an untended pond had found its way to some kind of primitive consciousness, its only motivation to feed and kill.

I risked a moment to turn around, to see who had fired a laser beam so close to my precious brain – it was Johnny, his camera on the floor. Arelline stood off in the distance – well out of range of the sea-squid, but equally well out of range of offering me any assistance. Still, helpful as it might be to have Johnny plugging away at the thing while I got in close, we had to keep our priorities straight.

“Don’t stop filming, you bloody ninnyhammer! I can deal with this oversized frogspawn!”

He did not obey me immediately, but when he saw I was serious he put down the laser gun and picked up the camera. It might seem silly that I thought that to be our priority, but I had his interests at heart. My life, for almost the entirety of the period narrated in this series of novels, was characterised by desperate longing, by the desire for a musical Shangri-La that I could never truly be sure existed. I could not bear the idea that my adventure might leave Johnny Quondam in a similar position. Imagine a documentary film-maker offered the chance to visit another planet, but asked to leave his camera at home. He might well refuse to go at all, so spoilt would the experience be for him – it would be akin to love-making without osculation.

If I died because of my regard for his feelings, so be it.

You think you know that I survived, don’t you,

because you are reading my own account of these events? Well, don’t be so sure. I could have been contacted in the spirit world (my little joke), interviewed by a time traveller, or resurrected as a cyborg, or someone might have faked this entire manuscript. The Sound of Howard Phillips, lacking a band leader, might have had an android Howard built, to take my place at their head. Said android might have forgotten or never understood its true status, despite somehow having my memories, and thus begun to write my memoirs. You are not to know, so do not be complacent about my safety, especially at this point, during my battle with the river-squid, because this did not end all that well for me.

Now that Johnny was filming once more, I unholstered my blaster, and began to take potshots at the creature, leaping about like a mad thing to avoid its soiling touch. Slowly, ever so slowly, the blasts began to take their toll upon it, but there was a price to be paid for this victory. I will not say it was a pyrrhic victory – I was able to continue – but as its flesh was boiled away the air filled with a noxious stinging cloud of gas that made my eyes water. It was as if I had just had the worst news of my life, and was sobbing my heart out, even though I was in general feeling quite chipper, despite being in all likelihood marooned on an alien planet. I had been having a bit of fun since we sent the palanquinettes home – riding the mantor had been thrilling, and the hike had been invigorating. So it was bizarre now to be bawling my eyes out like a toddler who wants to splash and play in the big bath tonight but knows she is unlikely to get any further than a quick head-to-toe scrub in the sink.

I kept at it, but with my vision blurring, it became harder and harder to avoid the lashes of the river-squid’s tendrils – one after another dragged across my face, arms, legs and body, and I learnt what it would mean to be the blackboard those fingernails are scratched down. My clothes were torn, my voice worn out from screaming, my gun slipping from my hand as the blood pouring down my arms made it too slippery to hold, and my eyes bulging from their sockets, straining to see the next attack.

But I had been there before. Poetry slams are not the genteel affairs you might expect.

I fought back, again and again, and just as I became convinced that I would be the first to fall, the river-squid suddenly slumped, some internal tension level broken, its body becoming nothing but a thin film that fell to the ground, as its water ran back into the river. I staggered forward to look my enemy in one of its eyes, only to find that they too had washed away with the water. There was nothing there but

that film, and the remains of the creatures it had already eaten, in a stomach that was now as limp as a plastic shopping bag. In discussion with scientific experts I later surmised that the creature had been some kind of composite entity, something like the coral of our planet. It had no identity of its own – I had not been fighting an individual, but rather a colony, or even a city, of tiny planktons, algae and microscopic insects and river dwellers, all united in an attempt to dominate the waters. The eyes had simply been gatherings of like-minded bacteria – whether they actually served some ocular function I would not care to hazard – their sole purpose might have been to terrify land creatures in the way they expected to be terrified. A mantor confronted with such an entity would not have known to be afraid of a big sac of water, but if it had a thousand eyes even our steed would have thought twice before attacking.

I retched, having nothing left to throw up, then struggled on to reach the river-squid's victim. Through watery eyes I could see him feebly trying to pull himself back up the river bank, the muddiness of it defeating him in his weakened state. The creature had not finished him, but like me he was sorely wounded. Each movement he made had no effect but to send him sliding further into the mud.

With the utmost last of my strength I reached down to offer him my hand. He took firm hold, and I held him steady like that for all the time it took Arelline and Johnny to come and pull us to both to safety.

The second I saw the fisherman safely on dry land I let myself pass out. I've earned this oblivion, I thought to myself as the stars in the night sky began to wink out.

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At first I thought of nothing. All was black. When that was over, I began to see peculiar lights and dreamed strange dreams. A man with a horn blew in my ear, while pressing the horn to my nose. His beard brushed against my lobe, and I thought of Blackpool rock. I rode a pig down the motorway, and dined on halibut every day for a year. The number of toes I had varied from day to day – six on each foot, then ten on one, nine on the other, then none at all, and, occasionally, I would have just the right number.

I did of course talk later to Johnny and Arelline about what really happened during this period, but it was the usual, and by no means as interesting as my recollections of it. Nevertheless, if you are the kind of reader who will insist on clinging to some foolish notion of objective truth, I suppose I might as well

indulge you. If you have come this far in my novel, I would be a fool to send you away over a mere difference of literary opinion.

They had tended to our worst wounds there on the riverbank, and tried to make us comfortable and warm for the night. They had been unable to give us any food, but had offered us water regularly, even as they took turns to stay up and guard the camp from encroaching animals.

In the morning the fisherman had recovered enough to point Johnny in the direction of his farmhouse, where a wife and two sons had been waiting anxiously for the man's return. He had not told them where he would be fishing, and by the time it had become clear that he was not returning, it had been too late to organise a safe search. In order to assure the family of Johnny's bona fides, the fisherman had made him memorise a phrase in the local tongue, something relating to the fisherman's courtship of his wife.

The sons had returned with him to the camp in a cart, and then carried all of us back to the farm. Arelline in particular had been amazed that the man I had rescued was a farmer by trade – that the fishing had been mostly recreational, or at least only otherwise motivated by the desire for a bit of luxury one dinnertime – given the wildlife they had encountered out there, but the farmers had shrugged. Danger to them was an everyday thing, and a little extra here or there was nothing to concern themselves with. Anyway, imagine the dangers people on our own planet put themselves in the way of for the sake of recreation!

I had spent the next few days unconscious, while Arelline and Johnny made themselves useful on the farm, helping out while the head of the household was incapacitated.

When I awoke, I had a lot of questions to ask!

But first, there were a lot I had to answer!

## Laughable Aria

I had to improvise an opera to explain our situation to the villagers. There had been no other way to do it. For whatever reason, most of them were able to understand a smidgen of English – they either could not or would not explain why that was – and they were full of questions for me, none of which, in my turn, I could understand.

Back at the farm, Arelline and Johnny had made some attempts to communicate more fully with the

two sons and the wife while the farmer and I recovered, but they had met with no success. They had enough English to be tourists, or – ominous indeed – an occupying force, but any sort of complex concept had been beyond them.

And so, when I had awoke, we decided that there was little point in staying here – we would have to move on to the closest village to the farm. The two sons were happy enough to take us there, so long as we waited for market day, and so I had spent a few more days gathering strength, eating, thinking, and talking with my two companions.

Arelline had more time for me than Johnny, who, when he was not working on the farm, tended to run off with the two sons and his camera to film the local fauna.

“Do you think the mantor” – for thus had the farmers named it upon seeing Johnny’s film – “will remember my poetry, Arelline?”

“Whenever it is hungry, probably. It will gnaw at its mind, right up until the day when, old and decrepit, it realises it is too weak to hunt any longer. The last thing it will remember will be your poetry, taunting it with the promise of food.”

“It made an impact, then,” I said with a scowl. “More than many lesser poets have achieved.” I was still quite testy, and not willing to be the butt of her jokes.

“I am only teasing, Howard,” she said softly, putting a hand on my elbow. “Your poetry probably saved our lives back there, not to mention how very brave you were against the river-squid. This family owes its current happiness to you.”

I shook her off. “Physical bravery is nothing. How can I be proud of that, when I fear the judgment of posterity so much? Can a man brought to tears by the thought of becoming a disparaging footnote in the annals of literature be considered a hero?”

“I think you need some more sleep.” She gave me a kiss on the forehead, much to my surprise, and left.

When we arrived in the village, riding in the cart, a dozen pig-like beasts in tow, we drew immediate attention. Luckily there were none of the troops we had previously encountered – Johnny had shown images of them to the farmers, and they had simply shrugged, unable to identify them, but there had always been the chance that they were playing us for suckers, and that we were walking straight into a trap.

The villagers gathered around us, poked and prodded us, and generally made me feel like the celebrity I had tried to avoid becoming back on Earth. These people were of middling height – the tallest were perhaps the size of Arelline, who I

suppose was quite tall for a human female – and their skin was a colour somewhere between the ripe and unripe sides of a nectarine. Their clothes were well-made – tough and hardy – but lacking variety of colour or composition. If there were people on this world capable of building the technology we had seen – the spaceship, the guns, the outpost, and the small craft we had heard fly over our heads during our ride on the mantor (we had kept our heads down, to avoid our faces being seen – it seemed to have worked) – then they did not live here, and probably did not even trade with this village.

Eventually they calmed down, and I made an effort to communicate with them, but to no avail. Our friends the two farmers then spoke on our behalf, to the extent that they were able, and, I hoped, would tell them all about my so-called heroism. Soon I saw wide eyes grow wider, as one of the farmer’s sons flapped his arms around in imitation of the river-squid, while the other leapt about with an imaginary handgun. Those eyes were soon all on me, and after some cheering and back-slapping a runner was sent off to find the headman of the village.

While we waited for them to arrive the villagers seated us in the town square, and brought us drinks and food. The drinks were delicious, a blend of berries that I suspect might have been fermented, given the silly undertaking I would shortly embark upon. The food, not so much – it was dry, chewy, and almost impossible to swallow without a swig of the berry-wine, which, now I think about it, might well have been their purpose. By getting us nicely sozzled they were probably hoping to get more information, one way or another. They need not have bothered, because what information I had was theirs for the taking! But they were not to know that – I might have been a spy of some kind, or the vanguard of an invasion of my own.

The headman came, a big burly man who was past his best, and looked like he did not hold back from the berry-wine himself, from time to time. For a few minutes we attempted some discussion, but again no useful outcome was achieved, and so we ended up laughing and clapping each other on the shoulder more than was perhaps strictly necessary. I laughed, and then he laughed, and then I laughed some more. He tickled me under the chin, and I asked him to stop, and he laughed once more. I took another drink of berry-wine and gave the matter some hard thought.

Poetry would not avail me in this situation. It worked with the mantor, but I had not really needed to convey any information, or extract any, from that vicious beast’s one-track mind. No, poetry relied



upon the meaning of words as much as their sound, and would be worse than useless here.

Music could help, but the problem was the same – it would be great for communicating feelings, emotions, for setting out my state of mind – but it would not be able to bear the weight of the conversation I needed to have.

The written word would be perfect – an essay, history or story, telling them what had happened, or a play – but in that case they would know that I was trying to tell them something, but have no idea what it was, or what the context was.

Then it came to me – something with the best of both the worlds in which I have made my living – opera! The capacity to carry emotion of music, coupled with the storytelling abilities of a play or novel. I was surprised that I had not thought of it sooner – though that might have been because up to that point I had not drunk enough berry-wine to come up with such a patently silly plan! Maybe they got me drunk to get me to open up, and if so, more fool they, because they were about to get Howard Phillips at his fullest! Would it be more than they bargained for, or were they just getting a bargain? I could not say.

I hunkered down to the ground – the people lived so close to nature that they had not yet paved the square over (and if I were being exact, I'd have to say it was not all that square anyway, being more of a semi-circle with a few bumps here and there) – dug a stone up out of the earth for myself, and began to drag it through the grass to create a crude plan for the headman to consider. First I drew a stage, and he nodded, then a man, singing (I had to demonstrate this vocally, as I could not find a way to clearly represent it pictorially, the mud being too clumsy a tool), and then a girl, singing (I pointed to Arelline, who the chief now seemed to notice for the first time – his eyes grew worryingly hungry, and it was probably a good thing that his (I presume) wife arrived at about that point, having taken her time to get there.

And so it was that Johnny spent the next few days leading the male villagers in the construction of a stage in the village square, while Arelline set the women of the village to costume-making, and I settled down with multiple cups of berry-wine to write the book for our opera, not to mention compose the music and set out the stage directions.

With that done, I began casting the performance. I, of course, would play Howard Phillips – singer, poet, novelist, adventurer – while Arelline would play herself – actress, model, palanquinette, space traveller – and Johnny would lead a group of troopers. It was odd, but as I had begun to plan the performance

I had found it quite difficult to remember the role Johnny had played during the attack on the ferry and our flight from Earth, but I put it to the back of my head for the time being. It only bothered me when I had been drinking, anyway, so I put it down to a curious side-effect of that alien liquor.

I chose six of the village men to play troopers, another to play the farmer, and three women to collaborate on the role of the river-squid (I had asked Arelline to create a chiffon sheet to cover them, but her materials were limited, and in the end they would perform in what was little more than a giant red sack). Ten other village women would play my palanquinettes, and double as a chorus.

In a matter of days, we were done, and everyone who was not taking part settled down to watch the show.

Opera time!

## A Loquacious Tormentor

Afterwards, the headman sat in silent wonder. Of course, being from such a primitive planet he had never seen the like. I had shown him the full range of our adventures over the last few days, and the way they had made us feel. I had entitled the opera “La Palanquinnade”. (The title of the novel is different, of course, and that is because something even more stunning than my beautiful palanquinettes came to light later on in our adventures, something that could not fail to attract the attention of the novel’s title.) We had sung, walked around the stage, and tried to look portly. The costumes had been as fine as possible in the circumstances. There had been no music but what could be made by our own voices. It might not sound very impressive, but on another world, untouched as yet by Paganini or Bizet, it had a certain charm.

I sat with the headman. “What did you think of that?” I asked.

He pursed his lips and whistled. “It... good,” he said, in a strange, thick accent. “You... go. Bad men... come.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “Bad men are coming? The ones that we had in the opera? Why didn’t you tell us, for the love of song?”

He shrugged, and I understood. If you were given your first chance to watch an opera, wouldn’t you have done anything in your power to make sure it went ahead as planned?

I had so many questions. I wanted to know how these people understood and spoke the little English that they did. Who had taught it to them, and why? But there was no time for that now.

By his gestures and the odd word of English here and there, the headman told us to take the cart we had rode into the town on. The other villagers would compensate the farmer we had saved if the cart could not be recovered later.

Arrelina, Johnny and I were utterly frustrated by all of this, but what could we do? There was no choice but to make ourselves as scarce as possible. So we piled our baggage into the cart, and rode out of that strange, sweet village, happy waves at our backs, and a deadly world before us. We had gained next to nothing from our stay in the village, save a rickety old cart, some wonderful memories, and a video recording of what had probably been the first opera ever performed on this world. Thinking of that last raised my spirits somewhat, and I loosed the whip on the two maroon beasts that pulled the cart.

"Hie there!" I called to them, spurring them to speed. They were slightly smaller than horses, and otherwise fairly similar, but with feathery tufts where a horse's ears would be, and a tail that was long, thick and flat, like that of a duckbilled platypus.

They made good speed, but our escape was not to be. We had been riding for about two hours when there came the sound we had heard once before – a small craft, of the type which I would soon learn to be called a flitter, buzzed low over our heads, and came to a stop just ahead of us.

Out got four men, all soldiers of the type we had previously encountered, and a woman. When I saw her I stopped breathing, for at least twenty seconds. She did not take my breath away so much as make me forget breathing was even necessary – I could just have lived in her eyes, drunk only her beauty, and eaten only the words which I would now be forced to say. She was my enemy, after all, as far as I knew.

The three of us made sure our weapons were to hand, though they were concealed beneath rags. If there was a chance of passing by without battle we would take it. Perhaps we could pass as travellers from a distant land.

"Who are you!" I shouted in Hindi. "What do you want?"

She laughed. Her laugh did not fit her face. It was high, sharp and almost cruel, where her face was rounded, almond-shaped, and gentle-featured. What had happened to make her like this?

"Oh, I know you, Howard, no need to pretend you are anything but what you really are – an Englishman, a washed-up poet, a failed rock star,

author of dozens of unfinished novels. General purpose wash-out. I think I have your measure."

"Do you, indeed?" I said, trying to keep a cool exterior. "And how did you come by this information?"

She laughed again, scornfully. "It's called Google, Howard. If you want to secretly infiltrate a planet it helps not to have your life history on the world wide web."

I was surprised, but perhaps I should not have been. In the past, aliens learnt to speak English from analysing our radio and tv broadcasts. In the present day, what would stop them simply tapping into the greatest repository of information the world has ever seen?

"I see the implications are hitting you now," she said, still keeping her distance. They had not moved away from their flitter. "When we choose to implement our invasion of your planet, nothing will be left to chance. All it takes is one ship stationed on your planet, uploading everything to us once a day or so, and we have everything we need. You gave us free language lessons! The ferry you were on – we just consulted the timetable! Google World has been kind enough to provide us with photos of the entire planet, including the locations of secret military bases. Nothing can stop us!"

"So why don't you do it?" shouted Arrelina. "Finish us and take the world."

"Oh, we will do it, but I'm not going to risk taking you on here and now. I have seen the results of picking a fight with you – why risk my neck? But I have alerted my father, and he will send the whole planet to fight you. You will not stand a chance."

"I don't understand," I said. "Why come here with so few men? Why not bring more and overwhelm us by sheer force of numbers? Why come here just to bluster at us? In these few minutes you have given us more intelligence about this world than we had managed to acquire in weeks on our own."

She paused. "Ask your friend to stop filming, and then we can talk more." While Johnny put the camera away she continued to talk. Patience was not her strong point. "Perhaps if you had spent less time putting on an opera you might have got a bit further?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," I replied, taking her derision on the chin. "And if it did not particularly help, then at least we spread a bit of culture."

"You fool. Within the year every man and woman on this planet will have a laptop of their own, and be signed up to the BBC's iMP, if it ever launches. Have you not heard of the American proposals to build a

laptop that costs under one hundred dollars? Each nation has to order a million of them, at the very least. Though our invasion has not yet taken place, we have agents in key positions in countries around the world, humans who took our money, and now wait to follow our orders. The first of those *orders* will be to place an *order* for ten million of those laptops, laundered through a dozen different third world nations.”

“The horror of it,” I said, shaking my head.

“At last you realise the magnitude of humanity’s folly! We have no need to invade you just yet – you are happily colluding in the training of your conquerors! And all that means your efforts to spread culture on this planet are entirely nugatory! Those ignorant villagers may know nothing of opera now, but this time next year they will know more of it than any human living!”

“But this isn’t really about opera, is it?”

“Of course not!” she cried. “First of all, they will be learning your languages – we have already made a start on that, giving quick lessons here and there to find quick learners who might be sent on ahead, or serve as leaders later, and that is why the farmers and villagers you met had a smattering of Earth words in their vocabulary.”

“I had wondered about that.”

“Secondly, they will learn about your weapons, that they might fight you more efficiently. Thirdly, your culture, including opera, that they might dominate you more easily. And fourthly, they will learn how to prepare and cook Earth food, because we are going to be there a long time and it will not be practical to import everything from Envia.”

“So that’s the name of this planet, then, Envia,” said Arelline. “Very apt.”

“We have no need to rush our invasion – you have already delivered your greatest treasure to us on a plate! All the information on your planet, in our hands without a single shot being fired! We send occasional soldiers on training missions to attack you in isolated spots, but that was really just for fun. You, though, Howard, you have made it personal now, by fighting back, by coming to Envia. You have marked yourself for my father’s special attention.”

“My colleague here, Johnny Quondam, has finished filming now,” I said. “Let’s talk about why this is all taking place in secret. Let’s talk about why you have come practically alone to confront someone as dangerous as you think me to be.”

“Come with me,” she said. “We will go for a little walk. This is not for others to hear. Leave your weapon behind. Do not worry about my weapon – I have no need to carry one. The very animals on this

world know enough of my father to shiver and run when they see me.”

## Love Rears Its Ugly Head

“Don’t do it,” said Arelline, her lips drawn thin. “It’s a trap. She will have you dead in seconds, while her goons destroy Johnny and me.”

“It might well be,” I said in a whisper to her, covering my mouth with a hand. “But despite what she said about me being too dangerous to confront, I think there is more to it – they could have fired at us from the air in total safety if that was what they had wanted to do. I need to talk to her to find out what is going on. It must be something she doesn’t want those men to know.”

“Well, take care,” she said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Some people might think she was beautiful, and I know you are a sucker for a pretty girl, Howard. Don’t let her bamboozle you.”

“I’ll keep my wits about me. You keep an eye on Johnny.”

I got down from the cart and walked halfway to the flutter. The woman came to meet me, then waved to some rocks off to one side. I shrugged to acquiesce, and we strolled there, making no sudden movements that might alarm the gunslingers on either side.

Once we were out of sight of the others, she looked for a smooth patch of rock and sat herself down. “Come and join me, Howard. Sit down right here.” She patted a spot right next to herself. I saw no harm in playing along, and sat right down beside her, just like the nursery rhyme spider – but who was the spider here, who was the fly?

Her smell was delightful – it literally made me hungry, as if someone had passed a plate of nectar under my nose, then whisked it away.

I corrected myself – she had not been whisked away, she was still there, extremely next to me. Arelline had been quite right – I am nothing of myself near a beautiful woman. The anger begins to melt away, the years of frustration are forgotten, and the sense of cosmic angst that pervades my very soul seems like so much silly nonsense. That is the spell a woman can cast. They are the only thing that make male lives bearable, even as they make them utterly unbearable. (Men who love men will have a different perspective on the matter, but the principle remains

the same. A man's life is full of unease, restless uncertainty, the nagging feeling that we should be killing something or someone to prove our masculinity. And all it takes to make that go away is a loving touch, even a glance, a smile, from a lover, or even better a potential lover, because it is not by accident that the first six letters of potential are what they are! Whether the lover is male or female changes not the effect it has on a man's heart.)

"How about we start with your name?" I said, as politely as I could muster, and struggling to keep any hint of huskiness from my voice. Doubtless the effect she was having upon me was not unintended, but I could not allow her to know that the upper hand was hers, as well as the other hand should she want it. "And you could tell me a bit about this mysterious father of yours that everyone is so frightened of."

"But you do not fear him, do you? What a strange little man you are. I am Princess Mallda of Envia. My father is Emperor Zuvanos, lord of all you see here."

"All this?" I said sarcastically, gesturing to the rocks. I took off my glasses and began to wipe them clean on my shirt. They had got quite grimy over the last month, but a side effect was to, oddly enough, put a tiny barrier between us – without my glasses on I am not truly myself – and that made my heart beat a little less quickly.

"The whole planet," she replied. "He is the ruler of the whole world." She leant into me, her shoulder pressing against mine. Her warmth came through the thin material dividing us like a hot knife through butter – and it was going straight for my heart!

"And why can he not just attack us openly? Why the secrecy? From the outpost being out in the middle of nowhere I deduced that the attacks were not open knowledge. Is his power not absolute?"

She shrugged, making her shoulder rub up and down against mine in a way that made me ache to be kissing her. Obviously this father of hers had done a number on her – and perhaps the mother had gone missing early in her life? – but a warm body does not lie. She had feelings that ran deep, and in the right man's arms she might find something that would let her be the woman she would have been without fate's unkind interventions.

She surprised me then by kissing me, firmly on the lips. I did not break way – in fact I put my arms around her, and returned the kiss, just as firmly. After a moment I felt her teeth pinching my lower lip, then she let me go.

"Can any man have absolute power? You must always guard against those around you. On your world, most sensible nations realise this – the only

way to happiness is to have a leader whose power is severely curtailed, for his or her own good. Too much power in one person's hands will always lead to the envy of those around him." She stopped to kiss me again, and I ran a hand down her back, letting my fingertips delight in the occasions her outfit shifted to let them run over her lovely scarlet skin. "My father rules by fear. His most trusted lieutenants are the men he trusts least. By invading your world he knows he will make himself the greatest leader this planet of Envia has ever seen – he will be unassailable. And so he makes his preparations in secret, for if the others learn that his position will soon be so firmly cemented they will know that there will never be a new Emperor in their lifetimes, and that they might as well prepare for a lifetime of servitude."

"I think I see where this is going," I said.

"Me too," she replied, "and I don't think these rocks are a very comfortable place for it, but we have to make the best of the situation."

"I mean with regard to your father."

"It is all one," she said, lifting herself onto my lap, pressing her chest against mine, and generally doing her best to discombobulate me. "I am sent here by my father to tell you about the situation. If I need to be entertaining to persuade you to listen, then I must. I have no choice in these matters – though if I did, I would of course be here nevertheless."

I lifted her off me, and placed her back down on the rock. My glasses had been lost in the commotion, and I looked around for them in the many little gaps among the rocks while we continued to talk.

"Presumably you are here to tell me how hopeless my mission is, but your father won't mind if I bump off a few of the heavies he sends after me. Is that it? And by telling me all about your father's plans for my world you make sure that I will go through with it, just to get a chance at your father by the end of it. I have a slim chance, that's all it is, but I have to take it. I have no other straws to grasp at." I found my glasses, put them back on, and gave her one last, longing kiss. "You are a beautiful woman, and I would love to dally with you here, no matter how uncomfortable it is. I can hardly breathe with lust for you, but I cannot make love with you in these conditions. You were sent here by your father to seduce me! What could be less attractive? Still, you have your way. I will fight my way across this planet, and do my best to kill all your father's lieutenants, and then without a doubt fail in an attempt to kill him too. I have to, because I am human. Perhaps we will meet again, before the end, or if I am fortunate, just after the end, and then you can decide for yourself

whether I am worth kissing, and I can kiss you back, confident that you are doing it for the right reasons.”

I got up to go.

“Wait,” she said. “There’s one more thing – I have something for you, from the Emperor. It will help you on your journey.”

She handed it to me, and I thanked her, and then I went back to the cart and she returned to the flutter. My heart pounded as I watched her fly away. Arelline seemed strangely moody, so I waited till nightfall before telling her what I had learned.

## Bad Luck Comes In Trees

I was now the happy owner of a map of this part of the world, so at least we knew where we were going. The outpost of our arrival had been marked on the map by hand, and the same person had added English equivalents of the place names for our benefit. The outpost had been off to the north, and since then we had travelled south, eventually meeting what was pleasantly termed the River of Wrath, not to be confused with the River of Penitence, which branched to the south.

We had a long way to go. Our ultimate destination, the Blank Tower, home of the Emperor and his private army, was on an island to the east, in the Deep Blood Sea (this world would make an interesting holiday destination one day, I thought, once relations between our planets were normalised). The channel between the island and the mainland was fairly narrow – perhaps a day’s sailing (assuming the map was accurate and to scale) I judged, by comparing the distance with that between the outpost and the River of Wrath.

Our first order of business would be to cross the river. Once that was accomplished, we would have to head south, to and through the gigantic forest that seemed to cover fully half the land between the two rivers and the coast. The trail – if that was what the dotted line indicated, and it was not just the route which we were supposed to take – would then take us out of the forest, through a mountain pass. On the far side lay a desert, which we would have to skirt around, through the foothills of the mountains, till we reached the coast, and the port of Orktaido. In that town we would find a boat to take us to the island of the Blank Tower – if, I say again, the map could be trusted. I had after all been given it by a

confirmed enemy, whose avowed intention was to lead me into confrontation with other enemies, from which encounters she was not terribly worried about my exiting alive!

We rode the cart back to the village, where we explained to the headman (by means of a short improvised dance routine), that we had evaded our pursuers. He looked dubious, and must have worried that we were leading trouble right to them, but seemed much happier when I explained that all we wanted was for the villagers to help us across the river.

He boomed some hearty reply, and within two hours we stood on the far side of the river, waving a goodbye to those good people who had shown us, if nothing else, that if our worlds could not be friends now, there was a chance they might be in some future time, when a different man stood at their head. It was awful to think that they were, unknown to themselves, being dragged into a war by someone they hardly even knew, some far-off baron who never came out this far, except perhaps to set up a secret installation or two.

I thought back to my life on Earth, and wondered at the people who lived there in similar ignorance, not caring who led them, not bothering to vote, believing that all that distinguished one politician from another was the sheer number of lies he could be discovered in. I found myself bemoaning my age, since I was now at the point where I could rail against the foolishness of youth, those people who could not remember life under Conservative rule, the horror of delapidated schools, run-down public services, rampant consumerism. Everyone was so smart about it now. Consumerism was as bad as ever, but now people did it ironically, under the watchful eye of a seemingly benevolent government. Women were as objectified as ever, and those who fought that process ridiculed. Advances had been made, I assured myself – the right of adults to choose their own sexual partners, regardless of gender, was no longer a matter for discussion, and investment in all areas of public services was trumpeted, rather than avoided at all costs. People had come to see tax cuts as bad business sense, rather than a windfall that cost nobody important anything at all. Human rights were now a hard and fast matter of statute, instead of some far-off bit of United Nations trendiness.

But I still felt bad about so many things – the human condition is one of awful torment for anyone who takes the time to consider the behaviour of their fellow men. Good struggles to prosper, while evil stands at every shoulder, yelling its profanities of hate and self-interest at each turn of the wheel of life,

trying to persuade us all to trample on the happiness and the rights of others, even as they strain with the temptation to do the same to us. I have been called a sensitive man, and it is true, I feel many things very deeply. It is the one and only prerequisite for becoming a poet.

We reached the forest. It had no name on the map – it simply was, almost as if something so huge had no need of a name, because wherever you were you could just point in its direction and be fully understood.

“Should we really go in, Howard?” asked Arelline. “Can we not just go around the edge?”

“That sounds really good to me,” said Johnny, even as he took out his camera to record the forest in all its grandeur. It was highly impressive. The tallest of the trees stood at least sixty metres in height, and only the obvious younglings fell far beneath that level. It was obvious, even from out here, that the treetops would form an almost continuous canopy once we were inside – the light would be poor, a murky brown-green that would do nothing at all for our spirits. The trees were much like those of Earth, other than in colouring and texture – the outlines were the same, but the bark was not hard. Rather, it was soft, almost moss-like, perhaps indicating a different origin to these trees than one might have expected. The leaves were green, of course – they still seemed to run on chlorophyll – but the branches and trunks were a dark, dark scarlet, run with veins of purple. The trees were not too close together – we would be able to make our way through, though I suspected the cart might end up getting stuck and left behind at some point – but branches and leaves criss-crossed from one tree to another, all of them intertwined as if they locked off a sleeping beauty from the outside world.

“I am sorry, my friends,” I replied, “but we cannot do that. The map is clear. If we just follow the river to the coast, we will be faced by a range of impassable mountains, and if we get past those, in some fashion, and manage to craft a boat capable of a day’s crossing by sea, the minute we got into the water we would be caught in a gargantuan current and swept away to the frozen north. Our only option is to get through this forest, to the mountain pass, and then to the port.”

“We could always go back,” suggested Johnny hopefully. “We have gained a lot of information – we could just hope for Earth’s scientists to send the ship for us.”

“I don’t think that is likely to happen, Johnny, do you? The ship was remote controlled, for one thing, and that base will by now be occupied once more by the Emperor’s troops, or perhaps even destroyed, to avoid discovery. And if we were to turn back, how do you think the Emperor and his lovely daughter will react? At the moment they are happy for us to take on their enemies, but if we run for the hills to avoid those fights, they will have no reason not to hunt us down and shoot us in the back.”

“We don’t know that they will be able to find us,” he replied.

“Oh, they will,” I said. “Somehow they knew the moment we were in that village, and they knew everything that we did there. I did not notice a spy, or even any technology that would have allowed a spy to communicate, but that does not mean they did not have a means of getting information. Just how they managed it is a mystery I would like to uncover. With luck we might acquire some technology that will stand Earth in good stead in the battle against these people.”

“So we are going in, then?” said Arelline, tying her hair up in a pony-tail.

“Yes,” I said. “I think we are.” I started the cart moving, then drew it to a temporary halt. I turned to look at her – she rode beside me, shotgun, while Johnny rode in the back with his camera and the bags. “Perhaps you should take the reins of the cart, Arelline. It looks pretty humid in there, and I have a hunch that my glasses will be worse than useless after ten or fifteen minutes.”

She thought for a moment, then shook her head, making that sweet pony-tail bounce against her shoulders and back like a deliciously gentle whip. I decided to ask her lots more questions which she would have to answer in the negative. “If we get attacked, I’d rather be sitting here with a gun in my hand than have you whirling around like Elmer Fudd with steamed-up glasses. If you have the reins, I can stick by your side and let you know if you are heading into trouble.”

“Okay, then,” I said. “But you promise you have got my back?”

“I’ve got it, Howard.”

“Right – into the woods we go!” I threw out the reins and got the horse-things moving again. “Let’s hope there are no big surprises waiting!”

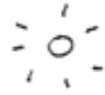
Within a day we had been attacked by the Tree-Whelp and his men!

## NEXT: CONCLUSION!



# CRAZY IVAN

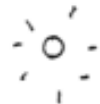
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BY A PHANTOM



Ooooooooooh!!!



WHAT THE  
HELL WAS  
THAT?





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# Editorial

## A New Look

For this issue, we decided to give the old quarterly another little makeover, as well as adding a few new bits and bobs. The goal of all the changes is to make it a bit easier to start reading, so the font is a little bigger than it was, and each page is a bit less text-heavy. None of the changes

are huge, and deliberately so, but the sum total of them should be palpable. Our *raison d'être* has not changed one bit, though – every issue will provide a great read from start to finish.

This one lives up to that and then some, with the rollicking conclusion of *His Nerves Extruded*, some of the most powerful writing ever seen in this publication! (Also inside: a silly play I wrote fourteen years ago.) – *SWT*

# News

## Controversy as “Quarterly Published Six Times a Year”

Silver Age Books have this month been responding to angry accusations that by publishing *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* six times a year they have betrayed its very title. The publisher did not wish to comment.

has been proposed by some, but then what – would we do anything but bring ourselves to the attention of the Fungi from Yuggoth as we pass by his home, known to us as Pluto? There is no easy answer, so just take a deep breath and hope dread Cthulhu slumbers a little while longer.

## Artsfest 2006

In the midst of all this sad, bad news, we are happy to report that on September 9 and 10 Birmingham will once again be hosting its annual Artsfest. Last year's was great fun, so make plans to visit and hope for good weather.

## Last Days on Earth?

As all right-thinking people know, great Cthulhu could rise from his watery sleeping place at any time. When he does, we will die, incidentally and inevitably, as surely as if we were the first whale he chose to snack upon when waking. What should we be doing about it? Is there anything we can do? Naturally, travel into space

## Alec Abernathy's Meat Search

Alec Abernathy was apparently spotted today in Birmingham city centre – our informant tells us that he was “looking for sausages”.

Previously, in the Saturation Point Saga...

*After releasing an album which, despite its colossal commercial success, fails to achieve the artistic heights of which he has dreamed, Howard Phillips travels the world to assemble the members of the perfect band. Having found his drummer, he decides to relax by employing beautiful women to bear him around Europe on a palanquin, only to find himself spirited off to an alien world, where danger stalks both day and night!*

# THE SATURATION POINT SAGA

## HIS NERVES EXTRUDED

BY

# HOWARD PHILLIPS

# THE CONCLUSION

## Our Plans Are Up in the Air

At first the forest had seemed quite nice and friendly, but it was not long before we began to feel eyes upon us. We knew to expect danger, of course, but we had thought there might at least be the slightest of chances to evade our upcoming enemies. Whether they were waiting for us all along, or whether we simply made so much noise that they could not help but hear us from the other side of the forest, I do not know.

They let us continue into the night. Perhaps they were not sure enough of their victory to make the attempt during the day, or perhaps it was just that they saw no reason in even risking a single casualty, but they let us ride on, deep into their territory.

Ultimately, we reached a point at which the cart could proceed no further, and so we decided

to make camp there for the night. In the morning we would go on without the cart, and take our chances on foot.

Or at least that was the plan!

They came in the dark.

Arelline was on watch, and did not get the chance to loose off a single blast before the gun was snatched from her hands. She screamed as long, strange fingers ran through her hair, again and again, till one hand took firm hold and dragged her off the cart.

She screamed and screamed off into the darkness, and I woke, screaming myself before I even reached consciousness. Johnny, too, leapt to his feet, looking here and there for someone to lay his hands on, but, before we even had a chance to do more than blink the sleep from our eyes, the fire we had built so carefully before taking to our makeshift beds was put out, and abruptly there was nothing to see.

From that point there was little reason for us to fight back. We could still hear Arelline's

screams, further and further in the distance by the passing second, and so we knew (a) that she still lived and (b) that our only chance of ever finding her was to be captured ourselves.

Instead of wasting time in idle battle, I hid a knife away in my trousers, and pulled my bags over my shoulders. I nudged Johnny and got him to do the same with his bags. Then we both stepped off the cart, and stood there in the dark with our hands up high.

Those were terrifying minutes for me. All around we could hear the wild whooping of our attackers, the noises made by their swinging from tree to tree, the banging of their weapons against tree trunks to intimidate us. I hoped thoroughly that I had not made the worst mistake of my life, or at least that I would get the opportunity to make more foolish ones in the future, if I had not done so in the past.

I have always been mortally afraid of the dark. I hide that fear well – even clasp it to my chest for the sake of my art! – but it has been a curse all my life. During my twenties it became a greater problem than I had ever previously foreseen. In retrospect, I trace it back to when I was a teenager, and I tried LSD for the very first time. It had been at a music festival. A single tab had been enough to make me utterly fearful for my life, every policeman I saw a judgment day angel ready to rend my soul for its evil, every car that passed by, sending its beam into the mist, an emissary from the other side there to pick me up, every festival-goer we met either a threat beyond words or a soulmate torn away from me by life and fate. The next day had been no better, watching the veins in a friend's eyeballs swell and pop as we rode the coach home, time after time, till I was forced to wake him up just to make it stop.

Ever since that day my nights have been filled with phantasms, ghouls, babies cackling upon the top of my wardrobe, elderly women offering kisses, telephones and other everyday objects floating across the room, and so on. It made every night an opportunity for shrieking terror to strike at me, and though in some ways I was grateful, in that it provided constant sustenance for my horror writing, and, just as usefully,

allowed me to see for myself what more simple-minded individuals would consider to be indisputable evidence of the existence of the supernatural, but in other ways I was not, in that I never lay down to sleep with the eagerness I see in others. Far from it: I rage against the dying of the light every single day, and struggle to find excuses to stay awake. A part of me knows that eight hours' sound sleep is probably the best recipe for happiness that exists, but that part of me that knows fear will eke out every bit of wakefulness, and has to be dragged kicking and screaming to the pillow.

I was very frightened.

I had not got a good look at our attackers, so my imagination went insane with mad conjecture – they were giants, they were zombies, they were titanic parrots! How did I know they were swinging through the trees? It could have been any kind of movement that made that noise! What would they do with us once captured? Eat me, marry Arelline, and make Johnny their slave?

As you can see, I was on the verge of hysteria, which makes it all the more admirable that I stood my ground and waited for them to come.

After those few minutes of stark terror I felt a hand, long, thin and dry, drag across the top of my fingertips, barely enough to be registered as anything real, but enough to send me into internal paroxysms of fear. It was akin to the slight touch you might feel in your hair as you ride a ghost train. At a fairground the touch would simply have come from a piece of dangling cotton, but that was not what I felt in that forest of Envia.

Twenty seconds later there came another touch, firmer this time, then another – a slap on the hand, this time, almost a high five. Then one bold enemy let his palm strike fully against the side of my head as he swung by, and upon falling to the ground I was buried beneath a horde of the creatures. I made no effort to fight back, but let myself go limp, against every one of my body's frantic urgings, and took their blows. Eventually it was over – they had tied my hands and feet, and slid a pole between them. As the journey through the woods recommenced, one of them

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noticed I was still somehow awake, and threw punches at my head till I knew no more.



I awoke to a purple sky. I blinked. Where were the trees?

Then I looked down.

I was suspended high in the air, between two of the tallest trees in sight. My hands were tied behind my back, and then constrained, like the rest of me, by a tough leathery harness that bound me to a thick steel hawser that spanned the distance between those trees.

I threw up, and tried not to watch how the far the vomit had to fall.

I closed my eyes, but that just made me notice the swaying of the trees, and my stomach churned more awfully than it had done with my eyes open. I had to be brave, so I opened my eyes, and tried to get some bearings. The situation was poor, but I was still alive, so it had its redeeming features.

The forest stretched in every direction beneath my feet, with the trees between which I hung being about ten or twenty metres taller than their nearest rivals, and being about forty metres away from me on either side. I suspected that the beings who had captured us had not engineered this position just for my benefit – it might make sense for them, if they generally travelled through the trees, to have a quick way through where possible – this might be a sort of bypass or motorway for them, by which they could avoid unnecessary encounters with the lesser beasts of the forest.

Looking around, I saw several other steel cables like mine, a network of them running over the lid of the forest, and there, just at the very edge of my range of vision (thank goodness my spectacles had survived the night's violence), I made out first Arelline, to the south, and then Johnny, to the west, similarly suspended.

This was a pretty pickle!

I tried calling out to my friends, but the distance was too great, and whether they heard me or not, the only response I got was a flight of

startled birds leaping up from the canopy, crying their eyes out at the unexpected sound of my voice.

I took a series of deep breaths, and considered my options. I was bound too tightly to really consider making an escape, and it was obvious I could not rely on my friends for any assistance. The likelihood of any rescue from Earth was so feebly distant that I would be as well waiting for Father Christmas to help out. I could expect no assistance from Princess Mallda. I had made an impression on her, of that I was certain, but she would have nothing to gain from setting me free. If I could not defeat these forest people on my own, it would only convince her that I was not worth her attentions after all.

And so, I did what any poet in a similar situation would do.

“This is the tale of Julius Caesar,” I began in my normal speaking voice, before moving on to a recital of a hurriedly improvised poem. Perhaps it would be a wasted effort, but if I could manage to get the tree-folk, or at least their leader, who would be most likely to understand English, to hear me, there might be a chance for us yet. My history might well have been shaky, but that did not matter – the only purpose of the poem was to make a point, and if the history (even if I had known it) had not fit my point, I would have thrown it away anyway.

*“Julius Caesar, champion of Rome  
Yearned to sit on the royal throne  
In battle in Gaul  
He gave his all  
Then in victory homed.*

*Pompey saw what was coming next  
He was highly extremely vexed  
He tried to muster  
‘Gainst Senator Bluster  
All served just to perplex.”*

They started then to come. I heard them in the branches below me, rustling their way within earshot. None could yet be seen, but the whispering and chattering left me in no doubt as to my audience.

*“Without opposition, Caesar would rule*

*All others who hoped for power fools  
He'd rule for ever  
Their chance would ever  
Be no warmer than cool.*

*At the moment the Senate could fight  
They could counter Caesar's might  
Yet who listened? No one!  
They were all fun  
Till the middle of night.*

*Then Caesar's men upon them fell  
Cementing power, their death knell  
He was winning  
Just beginning  
To rebellion quell."*

The whispering now turned to muttering, the occasional whoop and shout rising from beneath the canopy. Either my poetry was really unpopular (unbelievable!), or I was getting through to them. I would not have expected them to understand English, other than their leader, but who knew how close this race might be to the Emperor? They might all have undergone language training, in preparation to be special shock troops in the attack on Earth. But if this dread Zuvanos would set them upon me, it was only fair to return the favour. Even if I died, perhaps my words would give them pause. Perhaps that pause would last long enough for them to think. And if they thought long enough perhaps they would think about fighting. If I could start a civil war among the people of Envia, might they wear themselves out before setting off for Earth? So even in the face of almost certain death, I still held out a tiny hope that my actions might do some good. I had no family back on Earth to speak of – though I had friends – the team at Silver Age Books, the members of my former band, The Sound of Howard Phillips, and, waiting for me back in a hotel room, the single member so far of my next band, Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point. That's not to mention my surviving palanquinettes, assuming they had been able to return home in safety. But even if I had not had those friends to care about, I would still have saved Earth, because that is the planet that held my art

– my music, my books (unpublished and unfinished though they were, someone of a later generation might well care to complete and publish them), my poetry – in short, the very essence of who I am.

I went on with my poem.

*"Caesar with his enemies was cruel  
With his friends was crueller still  
He laid them out  
Without a shout  
And sent their families the bill.*

*His glorious victory guaranteed him  
The people's love through thick and thin  
He was evil  
A lying weasel  
His allies of past now seemed dim."*

I stopped to breath, and to try to think of an interesting next verse. There was a danger of repeating myself, but that was not terribly important. The object of the poem was to get my point across, and if that meant saying the same thing in one hundred different ways till our captors caught my meaning, then that was what I would have to do.

Relax, though, reader – I am not going to make you read every verse! I think you have probably read enough to get a taste of the moment, and that is all that is needed. If I wrote down the rest, I would only be further embarrassed by tenuous rhyme, awkward scan and tedious repetition.

But dull as it might be for you, it seemed, slowly but surely, to be affecting our captors. I poesised for the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon. Above the canopy the sun was twice as hot – under the leaves it had been humid and muggy, but our skin had not burned with anything except the bites of a thousand ticks. Here, strung up like a vilified trapeze artist, I baked like a potato in a microwave – or like plastic in a fire – I melted and singed all at once. My voice almost gave out more than once, but I kept going through the pain. I had to do it, for Earth, for Arelline, and most of all for myself. How often had I been told – at school by my teachers, at home by my parents, and in later life



by my publisher, that poetry would never amount to anything, that it was a waste of all effort expended in its pursuit? A thousand times and more besides. But I had continued to dream, and continued to write, and those struggles now added to my stamina, to my determination, to my godforsaken lack of any other options, to keep me going when a lesser man might have stopped, or died, or turned to empty threats and ineffective raving instead.

In the midafternoon I heard sounds of conflict below – shouts of anger, squeals, clashes of weapons, and finally the sound of a body falling through the branches to hit the ground with a thud. A few seconds later came a great guttural cheer, and for a minute I paused, hopeful that some young upstart had paid heed to my words, and had fought successfully to take the crown. But no other sounds followed, and so I resumed my marathon. If some upstart had paid heed, it had clearly resulted in no change in the situation. I went on, then, with new stanzas, hoping against hope that the challenge had come from a hardliner, from one faithful to the Emperor – perhaps a spy or an agitator, I reassured myself – one who had not wished his people to go on listening to my seditious words.

More words fell from my lips to the ears of those below, and I hoped against hope they would have some effect. For the rest of the afternoon I ploughed on, hardly able to breathe, my throat rasping with dryness, my lungs scraping against my ribs with every breath, my arms and legs utterly numb. I had to close my eyes to keep the sun out, but it seemed to shine brighter with every second, as it fell from its noon-day height right into my field of vision. Who could have imagined a purple sun could hurt so much? You would imagine it gentle, forever lulling, creating a permanent bedtime atmosphere, but up there that was not how it was. Perhaps that colour was only its disguise, in any case – it was a wolf in sheep's clothing – because it seemed likely that something in the planet's atmosphere caused the strangeness of the daylight, rather than the sun itself.

If it was a yellow sun, it had found its way to me, and seemed to regard me with in a particu-

larly baleful way, as if I had tried to escape the attentions of its far-off brother, and it was paying me back for my cheek in running away. If he had known I were from England, where a hot sun is an infrequent sight, would he have gone gentler on me? I did not know, and scrunched my eyes up against its attack, continuing with my poem all along, each word dragging my chapped lips apart in a hundred places. At the end of each verse I licked my lips, desperately drinking the blood back in before it could evaporate in the heat.

When evening came, it was a blessed relief in a hundred ways, but I could not rest. More words, more words. I dragged them out. From time to time now I struggled for anything even resembling a rhyme, but I carried on regardless. They had to hear my words! They had to! At the back of my mind was the thought that I was effectively painting Julius Caesar as one of the worst despots to ever walk the Earth, as opposed to my personal view of him as a highly remarkable figure, worthy of study for his good qualities rather than his bad, but it did not matter. The forest people beneath my feet, whoever and whatever they were, would not be voting in any historical popularity challenges! I just had to get them to think about Emperor Zuvanos, and his likely behaviour once his rule was absolute.

Eventually night fell, and I could speak no more. Any attempt to open my mouth brought fits of coughing, and racking pain. My throat spasmed, and my eyes fought to water, but could not find the fluid.

When I fell silent, they came for me. They emerged from the canopy, one by one, creeping over the leaves to reach the trunk of the tree to which the hawser was bound.

I strained to see them, and this time, the light of the moon picked out the horrible form of the one that led the way, as it slid down the cable to me. Three quarters the height of a human, its arms were twice the length of mine, but half as thick. A simple jerkin covered its body, though it struggled to contain the bristling hair that covered the creature, from the squat square head to its long prehensile feet. Only its face was spared from hirsuteness, though upon seeing it I

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begged for mercy and wished the fur could have spread that much further. A horrid twisted nose displayed a nostril immediately beneath each eye, while the mouth let loll a foot-long tongue, one that was visibly rough like that of a cat. Its eyes were as wide as its head, stretching from the sides, elongated and fierce, meeting in the middle, barely a centimetre between them. It smiled as it saw me looking at it, and let out a yell.

“Howard Phillips, I have you!”

It was like no speech I had heard before or since, scratching against my ears like the passionate mewlings of a cat. This, I surmised, was the Tree-Whelp, in the seconds before it reached me and began to strike me about the head.

No harness held it aloft, but it seemed careless of the drop, holding to the cable first with a hand, then with a foot, then with its tongue, apparently so that each and every part of its body could hit me in turn. There was nothing I could do in response. Even if I could have escaped from the harness, my knife would have fallen from my numbed fingers just as quickly as I would have fallen myself. I had to take it. My efforts at poetry had done nothing but annoy it, or at the very best entertain it – in its repeated blows I could see no sign that it had been persuaded to help me.

At last, I fell unconscious, for the second time in twenty-four hours, and I wondered if I would ever get the chance to worry about whether these attacks might cause any long-lasting brain damage.



I awoke to daylight, finding myself out in the open, the trees to my back. Arelline and Johnny had made a fire, were boiling some water for tea, and were skinning some small creature, preparatory to roasting it.

I tried to sit up, but succeeded only in groaning. It was enough to bring Arelline to my side, where she plastered my face in kisses. (I thought I saw a twinge of annoyance in Johnny's face at that, but I imagine I would have been

jealous of such kisses too, had he been on the receiving end of them. She had wonderfully soft, warm lips; tiny hot pillows that she pressed against my burnt, cracked skin.)

“I don't know what you did, Howard, but they must have liked it. They took us down yesterday afternoon, brought us here, and told us to wait for you. Last night they dropped you off, brought the cart, and wished us good luck!”

She squeezed a rag over my mouth, wetting my lips just enough to allow me to essay a few croaky words.

“That, Arelline, is the power of poetry.” She frowned, and then smiled. “You can carry on kissing me, if you like, but I am going back to sleep now. Wake me up when dinner is ready. I am very, very hungry.”

## The Pit of a Pendulum

After we had made our way through the mountains, we took a little while to repair the cart, rest the horse-things, and regain our own energy ahead of the ride across the desert-fringe. Our intention was not to head into the desert proper – there was no need for that. We would head north-east, skirting the hottest part of the desert, staying within reach of the streams that came down the mountainsides, only to boil when they hit the sand. My guess was that a day or two's riding would bring us to the cliffs from which we would be able to see the Deep Sea of Blood. From there it would just be a matter of following the coast to the southeast, where eventually we would reach the cleft in the cliffs where the port of Orktaido had been established.

“I am getting a bit tired,” said Arelline, sitting in the back of the cart, looking around at the forbidding desert on one side, and the imposing mountains on the other. “This has been a long and hard adventure.”

“Too true,” I replied from the shotgun seat, turning to face her. “And as yet it has not

produced a musician for my band. Perhaps fate is not on my side this time – or perhaps I have been diverted, sent on a more urgent side-quest. I don't know."

Johnny was at the reins, and he kept his eye on the ground before us. There was no trail, but at this halfway point between the heights and the dunes the ground was fairly flat and steady.

"Fate!" he laughed, without looking at us. "Surely you don't mean any of that, Howard? It's all a load of poetic nonsense."

I shrugged. "It probably is, Johnny. It probably is. I had a vision – or two, really. One came in a dream. I played in a band, the like of which the world had never seen before. It inspired me to make the Fear Man album."

"I think everyone knows that story by now, Howard!" said Arelline. "It's been told in every newspaper, on every tv pop show, and I think they even did a comic of it at one point."

"Very few people know about the second vision. After I recorded my musical interpretation of Stephen William Theaker's novel *The Fear Man*, I despaired. I had no idea how to achieve my dreams – the album I had made did not even come close. So I let the band make what they could of the ideas, music and sounds I had given them, and went to Stratford-upon-Avon with a copy of *The Guardian* and a tab of LSD, and brought about my second vision."

Arelline was intrigued. "And what did you see that time?"

I laughed – it still hurt a little. I was almost fully recovered from my ordeal at the hands of the Tree-Whelp and his people, but it would have been a few days more before I would have been fully up to strength again. What a shame that I did not get those days before danger struck once more!

"I don't actually know! That is the strangest part. But whatever I saw, it took me off to the Himalayas, where I found my drummer, and then it ended up bringing me here."

"It's always something with you, Howard," said Johnny, turning to give me a quick smile. "You couldn't have put an advert in the NME, like anyone else?"

I shook my head vigorously. "No. It is all

probably a fool's dream. Like you say, it isn't really fate – that is just the poet in me speaking. It is my subconscious, silently ploughing its way through all the information my conscious mind gathers, cataloguing, researching, noting, correlating. I think the LSD simply forced it to bring its work to the table, even if it was half-finished. I might have waited an entire lifetime to be sure of what I needed to do, and I could not take that chance. When I met the drummer on the ghastly mountain I knew that I was on the right track."

"And now he's waiting for you, in a hotel?" said Arelline, quizzically.

"Yes," I replied, with a half-smile and another shrug. "I couldn't think what else to do with him. He's got room service and a very well-stocked credit card. He had not had a very pampered life on the ghastly mountain, so he is probably happy for any comfort he can get now. I bought him complete season box sets of a dozen of the best tv programmes of all time, so there's plenty to keep him going."

"And you think he'll wait? We've been here quite a while."

"He'll wait. He owes me, and he knows what I am trying to do. He'll wait."

I handed her the gun and we swapped places, so I could lie down for a nap in the cart. I was asleep in seconds.



I woke to chaos – we were falling! The cart smashed against the walls of something – the sky grew small, a tiny box high above us – Arelline screamed, the horse-things fell silent, and Johnny shouted for his camera. As the cart crumpled beneath me, but we stopped falling, I forced my aching body up, and grabbed Arelline, both to support her and myself.

"What's happening?" she cried.

There was no way of knowing – all was dark, except for that patch of violet sky, apparently so high above. Then I reconsidered – it was not a cloudy day, so there was no way of gauging scale – it could have been a tiny patch of sky, and we had not fallen far, or it could have been a large patch, and we were deep deep down.

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Then I had not even that to go on – darkness drew across our solitary source of light, and Arelline and I clung to each other in the darkness, something that in other circumstances I might have relished. As her chest pressed against mine, I felt her heart thumping rapidly, but strongly. I imagined that she would be a passionate, gentle lover, who would know just the right moment to quickly bite her partner on the shoulder.

“Howard, what’s going on?” she yelled.

I realised I had not answered her the first time – I had imagined it to be a rhetorical question, since she had all the information at my disposal, but perhaps she really did look to me as a leader. Perhaps, even though she knew I could not have known what was happening, she wanted to stress that it was my duty to find out!

“I don’t know, Arelline. It seems to be some kind of trap. We have already got past the Tree-Whelp, but the map Princess Mallda gave me bore the names of two other lieutenants of the terrible Imperator Zuvanos that we would be likely to encounter before we reached the Blank Tower – the Master of Mongoose, whose name was hand-written across the desert, and the Denizen of the Deep Blood Sea, and you can probably guess where his or her name was written. Unless the Denizen has seriously gone off water, I think we can assume that we are in the hands of the Master of Mongoose.”

Johnny Quondam’s voice came from the darkness. “Just to let you know, I’ve got the camera, Howard, and strapped it to my back.”

“Good man,” I said. “It would be awful for you to go through all this and return to Earth with nothing but memories at the end of it.”

“There is one other possibility,” he suggested, with a touch of bitterness in his voice. “Someone else might have caught us. We might still have the Master of Mongoose to come.”

“There’s always that...”

My voice trailed off. What was happening now? The ground beneath our feet was beginning to move – instinctively we sat down, upon the wreck of our cart, to save ourselves from falling over.

“Everything... Everything’s moving!”

shouted Arelline, even as a gigantic creak began, one that threatened to rupture our eardrums at its peak.

“We’re falling again!” yelled Johnny, as our stomachs leapt up into our throats.

We felt the giddiness you would get in a quickly descending lift as gravity temporarily lost its direct hold upon us, our feet seeming to fall at a different rate to our heads – we could not keep up with ourselves. But then, as we screamed, the ground regained its weight, and began to push up against us – there was another mighty creak, and then again the giddiness of the drop.

“We are not falling,” I said with great seriousness. “We are swinging back and forth. We have fallen into a trap, but the trap is some kind of great underground swing, or pendulum. I have never heard of the like.”

Suddenly the lights came on – our pupils contracted with the haste of discovered lovers, and we pressed our hands to our faces to protect them.

Once my eyes had adjusted to the brightness, I moved my hands away, first to see if the horse-things had survived the fall – they seemed to be all right, breathing, but unconscious, with no obviously broken bones, and secondly to be astonished once more by this incredible planet. We were in a gargantuan cavern, at least a thousand metres wide and three hundred high, apparently hewn by men from the rock. We stood within a pit at the base of a huge and transparent pendulum, a hundred metres long, and a dozen thick, that swung from side to side across the width of the cavern. Our view of the cavern’s contents was perfect, doubtless as its creators intended. Beneath us ranged a huge army, men just like those we had fought on the ferry and at the outpost, thousands of them, guns unslung and pointed in our direction. Ships like the one we had arrived in were dotted all around, and field weapons of kinds only Jack Kirby could have imagined were being loaded into them.

“Howard Phillips!” came a shout. “Do you hear me? Speak to your captor!”

I looked around, baffled, then turned around, to see an observation point carved into the rock

at our backs. Standing there, two metres tall, but thin as a rake, was a wild-looking man-thing with long, thin teeth, a thick tail that reached down to the ground, and hairy ears that reached to the top of his head. His eyes were wide, his nostrils flared, and his mouth ready to snap a snake in two.

“Hello,” I called to him. “You, I take it, must be the Master of Mongoose. Do you have any particular reason for trapping us in a giant pendulum?”

“Yes!” he shouted back after a moment. There were maybe a dozen metres between us when we swung close by, but we had to time our utterances well to be heard. “Yes, Howard Phillips! You are in a giant pendulum! And that pendulum swings on a clock! A clock that measures the days left till the enslavement of every man, woman, and child of your measly planet!”

It was clear to the three of us that he was totally insane, but there was no way of arguing that he did not have the upper hand, for the time being at least.

## Captives of the Mongoose-Men

“Shall we shoot, men? Ha, ha! Shall we shoot? Should we shoot them, men, should we shoot? Ha ha!”

When he was finally done, a thunderous response came back from the men in the cavern. “Yes! Let us shoot! Yes! Let us shoot!”

“No, men!” he rejoined. “We will not shoot! We will not shoot! Ha ha!”

“No, sir!” they shouted back. “We will not shoot! We will not shoot!”

“Oh, Howard, Howard,” he laughed, when we swung past him again. “What fun we can have here, the two of us, with all my friends!”

I felt like shaking a fist at the dastard, but restrained myself. Coolness would be my best friend in this situation. He would expect me to

bluster, and threaten, and cajole, but I would refuse to play those games.

“I would rather like a cup of tea, Mr Mongoose,” I said as sweetly as I could as we swung by in the other direction.”

Swing, swing.

“You would, eh? Well, I am nothing if not a gracious host. When the baktans come to feast on your rotting corpse I cannot have you telling them that I deprived an Englishman of his tea.” It took about six swings of the pendulum for him to get the whole of that lot out, and he clearly began to lose patience with his own trap. “Get them out of there at once,” he ordered the soldiers at his side. “If we are to be killers, let us be civilised killers, at least!”

The soldiers looked at each other behind his back, and then followed the instruction. The pendulum ceased swinging, and then began to lean backwards, so that the floor beneath our feet slowly shifted orientation to become a window into the Master’s observation point. At a click of his fingers, the bottom of the pendulum dropped away, and we were free to step out to meet our new captor, as long as we could manage to clamber over the ruins of our cart. I tried not to think about what would have happened if he had seen fit to click his fingers ten minutes sooner.

We climbed out, and as each of us acquired a pair of guards, six others began the work of digging the horse-things out from the wreckage of the cart. I tried not to think about the fate of the poor animals, and put from my mind what it must have cost the village to loan us two such fine and strong beasts, and looked to the Master of Mongoose.

“I believe you were going to offer us tea?” I raised an eyebrow. I do supercilious well, being not only English and a poet, but also a rock star. “Or are we too far out in the sticks for that kind of thing? Do you want to boil some nettles for us or something?”

Arelline elbowed me in the side. “Howard, don’t antagonise him!” she hissed. “Our lives are in his hands.”

“Oh, they are indeed, sweet Arelline,” said the Master of Mongoose. “Yes, I heard you – these

ears are not just for show – and, yes, I know your name. I have heard how you escaped from the Tree-Whelp – that fool pays for his incompetence as we speak, his forest being burned to the ground while his people scurry for their lives! Do not think I will make the same mistake. Whether you are nice to me, or nasty, makes not the slightest difference. It is both my pleasure, and my duty, to kill the three of you. Howard, Arelline, Johnny. Three brave Earthlings, come all this way to meet their deaths!”

“How do you know who I am?” asked Johnny. “I’m not sure my own mum knows who I am, half the time.”

“Ah yes,” said the Master. “The drinking? You were making a slight reference to it that you did not think anyone else would understand, were you not? But you fail to realise that your absence from your home world has been noted. The return of Howard’s little harem did not go unnoticed, and every newspaper on your silly little planet has reported as much as they can deduce of your adventure on this world. Every television programme you can imagine has run in-depth features on your lives, your hopes, your dreams. Your families – well, not Howard’s, but Arelline’s and Johnny’s – have been doorstepped, profiled, feted, vilified, and generally made to feel like they are the parents and siblings of the most important people ever to have been born! We know everything about you.”

“Then you know you will never win,” said Arelline. “You can never beat our spirit. Where we fall another hundred will come to take our place! They know about you now!”

He laughed, a high wittering laugh that curdled the contents of my stomach. “Oh my dear Arelline, don’t you know that I have already won? Foolish girl. You might look pretty to those men of Earth, but don’t you know that it counts for nothing on Envia? Beauty on this world is but an invitation to violence – the entire planet revolts against it. Were you to stay here long, that pretty face of yours would soon be so revoltingly scarred that you would never, ever gain a new fiance.”

“A new fiance? I don’t need a new one, I have one already.”

“You did, my dear, you did. But no longer. Hmm. What happened, let me remember? Ah yes, he appeared in the newspapers, and told your story, and then within the week was seen out on the town with some young lady famous for revealing her bottom in FHM. Is that what you wanted to hear? Hmm? I didn’t want to say anything, but you pushed me into it. You see, I am winning already! Your own world, your own loves, your very lives, are turning against you! You have fought for them, they care naught for you! Delicious irony! Ha ha! And you will have no tea. There is no tea on this planet! As if we would import that disgusting beverage! We will quarantine your world to prevent its escape into the rest of the universe!”

“What a buffoon,” I said to Johnny.

The Mongoose-Master snarled, his urbane veneer disappearing utterly. His eyes narrowed, and I could see his claws quivering as he struggled not to give in to his feral urges. “You push me too far, Howard Phillips. I have no reason to let you live a second longer, other than out of politeness.”

“And I have no reason to be polite, as you so well demonstrated to Earth’s most fragrant flower but a moment ago. I pity you, Master of Mongoose. I see you here, surrounded by the men of the Emperor, powerless to prevent them from overrunning your home like the snakes that they are, powerless, in fact, to do anything but snarl, and sneer, threaten, and irritate. I have not seen a single mongoose-man other than you since you turned the lights on! It would not surprise me,” I continued, adding fuel to the fire, “if this talk of killing us were nothing but a bluff, and that you are actually under orders to hand us over to the Emperor, like the good little lackey that you are.”

That broke him, and he sprang at me. Luckily for my throat, he startled my guards as much as me, and I was able to reach down to grab my wooden knife from where it was concealed within my trousers. Bringing it up to defend myself, it somehow found its way to the Master of Mongoose’s neck, and he fell to the ground,

bleeding from a wound that gaped from ear to ear.

“Now you will die,” I said, as his body hit the ground, “like the highly unpleasant creature that you are. You should not have forgotten the first Theaker rule – if you offer a cup of tea you have to make it – or pay the price.” I turned to my friends. “Arelline and Johnny, you should probably remember that. I should hate to have to exact a similar vengeance upon one of you.”

They both smiled, though rather nervously, I thought. Surely they understood that I was joking. I recognised the wisdom of the rule, of course – it was the very first line on the code of conduct at Silver Age Books, my sometime employer, sometime publisher – but one could not kill everyone who failed to appreciate its importance.

I turned to my guards. “Well,” I said, tucking my knife back into my trousers and holding up my hands, “this leaves us in a slightly awkward situation. If I stick around, you are going to have to explain to your boss how I managed to kill one of his most deadly lieutenants while I was in your custody. That could be a bit embarrassing.” I looked around at the other half dozen soldiers in the room. “I do hope that one of you speaks some English. I doubt the Emperor would have left the Master of Mongoose to have a little private chat with us.”

One of them stepped forward. “My name is Sangstor. I speak this revolting language that makes my mouth feel as if it is full of worms and maggots. What is your point? Why shouldn’t I just kill you now?”

I stepped towards him. “Good question, Sangstor, but one I think I can answer. You and I both know that the Emperor will not be too bothered about the Master of Mongoose having come to a sticky end. But for the sake of appearances, he is going to have to make an example of you all. If he does not, his other lieutenants will see the writing on the wall well before it is time for them to start reading.”

“I cannot disagree.”

“Well, then, how about this? The silly old Master of Mongoose decided he would have a civilised little dinner with the three of us.

Perhaps he wanted to find out more about Earth, to strengthen his hand against the Emperor. Perhaps he just wanted to play at being the gentleman, regardless of his duty to eliminate us upon sight. And he kicked you all out of the room, not least because he suspected at least one of you of being the Emperor’s man.”

“And then you killed him and escaped, and had reached the desert before anyone knew.” He gave it some thought.

“It’s a win-win situation,” I said. “Good for you, good for us. We go on to meet and maybe beat the Denizen of the Deep Red Sea, and you have a good excuse for taking permanent control of the seditious Mongoose-men.”

He nodded. “It all happened as you say.”

He quietly had us put into a flitter. We were dropped off within walking distance of Orktaido.

## Deep Red Sea

We approached Orktaido from the north-west, creeping up to get a good look at it before it got a good look at us. There was no town wall, so far as we could see, which was probably a blessing for us. Being of entirely different colours to any of the people of Envia, we would have had great difficulty in disguising ourselves and passing through any guarded gates. Still, the town was packed tightly together, and we were in no doubt that we would have to wait till nightfall before approaching any further, if we hoped to slip in unseen.

We lit no fire, of course, but it was not very cold, except for the occasional salty breeze that blew in from the sea. We sat, and chatted, but kept our voices low. The wind was against us, but there was always the chance it might turn and carry our voices over to the port. It was unlikely in the extreme that if it did we would even be heard, but I could not think of a worse scenario than being discovered skulking out here on the clifftop by a gang of drunken sailors.

“Well done,” said Arelline. “I can’t believe

how well you did back there with the Master of Mongoose. Are you a trained fighter or something? I didn't know."

I smiled. "We poets are by life forced to be a hardy breed, but I have to confess that luck played a huge part in our victory back there. My knife was out very quickly, that much is down to my small allocation of skill, but I only barely had enough time to stick in out in front of me. It met his neck, and he was gone."

Johnny decided to take a nap. It would probably be an hour or two before the darkness would be complete enough to cover our approach, so I nodded my approval.

"Are you sure you don't want to sleep, too?" I asked Arelline. I fervently hoped she would not. I had real need of female company, having killed a man (or something very like a man) that day. Still, it would make good sense for her to get some rest. We did not know what awaited us in the town.

"Nah, it's okay. If we get onboard a ship, we'll just be curled up in a crate or something, won't we? I can get some sleep then."

"It's lucky you don't snore. That might have put a spanner in the wheels of your plan."

She wrinkled her nose. "So I take it you won't be sleeping on the boat, then?"

"I don't see why not – I do not snore."

"Sorry, Howard, but you do, at least sometimes. It used to make the palanquin rattle sometimes as we carried you around."

I struggled not to answer in anger, and thought for a moment. "Well, better to be safe than sorry – I will take a nap after all. Wake me when it is dark."

As I closed my eyes, I saw her smile. Perhaps I did snore, perhaps she just needed some time to herself, but the rest would not do me any harm. My reflexes had been good back at the cavern of the mongoose-men – if I were to need their assistance again in the near future I would not want them dulled by tiredness. Talking to Arelline was nice, I told myself, but despite the odd kiss I had received in sympathy or excitement, I did not really feel I was making a great deal of progress with her.

The Princess of Envia, though, Mallda herself

– now there was a woman who seemed to relish the old Howard Phillips charm! As fiery as the sun, and as fierce as a tiger! I had felt her heart beating even as our shoulders touched! Should she wish to visit me again once her father had fallen victim to my hand, I would make her most welcome – after checking her person – very, very carefully, thoroughly and tenderly – for any concealed weapons, of course. Sometimes a man just gets to the point where he wants to be kissed, and maybe the personality of the woman does not matter that much, as long as her face does not revolt in close-up, and that personality, whatever it may be like, will tend to lead to more kisses. I knew that Princess Mallda was trouble of the worst kind – the daughter of a would-be interplanetary dictator could hardly be anything else! – but still I pondered on her as I drifted off to sleep.

I had an awful dream that evening. A man came to me in the sky – I flew there, I was a star – Orion, I think. He came to me, and told me that I had to shine brighter. I told him I was doing my best. What did he expect? If I shone any brighter I would risk exhausting my fuel too quickly, and possibly start the long but inexorable process towards supernova. He said that he did not care, and that he expected to see a significant improvement in the level of my brightness over the next few nights, or there would be hell to pay. Then I got home, but I had left the key in the door on the way out. I had been out for centuries, my time taken up by the business of being a star! Anyone could have been in and out of the house, taking whatever they liked. I stepped in through the door cautiously, looking here and there, desperately hoping to see no signs of any change. There – that waterproof Muji coat in a bag – had that been on the floor when I left? I did not think so, but I could not be sure. I continued on into the corridor, then dashed into my home office and studio – nothing was gone, thank goodness. Then the living room – my television was there, and everything else. It seemed nobody had noticed the key in the door.

Then I heard a footstep. Somebody was upstairs...

I awoke, ready to scream, but clamping a hand



over my mouth even as I sat bolt upright, my conscious mind letting my subconscious know who was in charge.

By then it was dark, and Arelline had been preparing to wake me. Though subjectively the dream had seemed to last for centuries, I was unsurprised to learn that only two hours had passed while I slept.

It was time for us to make our move.

We stealthily walked towards the town, running whenever the clouds covered the moons for a moment, but more usually tiptoeing along, crouched in a way that made our bags seem to triple in weight. At last we reached the outermost building, and flattened ourselves against the stone-built wall, waiting for any sign that our presence had been detected. There was no such sign, and so, emboldened, we continued on our way.

Luck seemed to be on our side – there was some kind of party going on at the far end of town – only a few minutes from the edge we could hear the shouts and music of people enjoying themselves, having drunk too much alcohol. The town was not precisely deserted, and the Emperor’s men crossed our path more than once, though we escaped their detection by sticking to the shadows, but it was much quieter (in this area) than I had dared hope. For it to draw everyone else away from their homes, the party must have been some real event, perhaps a local tradition, a gala, or a daughter or son of the mayor getting married. Whatever it was, it served our purposes precisely. My main concern was that the guards were probably out in force to keep an eye out for burglars and the like while people had left their homes to join the celebration, and hiding away as we were we would be bound to attract intense suspicion if noticed. But luck went our way, and we made it to the docks in one piece. Six small to medium boats floated in the dark red waves.

“Which boat do you think we should go for?” I asked them.

Arelline shrugged. “Boats mean nothing to me. We should just pick one that has somewhere to hide.”

Johnny looked for a moment before

answering. “That one, guys.” He pointed to one of the smaller boats. It had two sails, and in different circumstances I might have said it was rather quaint. “Look – all the others have fishing nets on board. That means there’s a good chance they’ll be coming back here with the fish. If they were going to take it to the Blank Tower, they would be based on the other side of the channel – it would only make sense. If we stow away on any of those, we’ll ride out into the channel, hang around for a few days, and then end up back here, if we haven’t already been discovered and chucked into the ocean.”

“You make a good point,” I said. “And those few wasted days might be the difference between life and death for the people of Earth! Let’s take the boat you suggest, Johnny.”

We went down to the quay. One Imperial guard stood there, idly looking out to sea, and Arelline knocked him on the head with the butt of her gun. We bound and gagged him with his own uniform, and hid him away in the little hut that was provided for his shelter during bad weather.

“He will be found in the morning,” said Johnny, as we walked back to the boat we had chosen. “This changes everything.”

I shrugged. “I know. But if we killed him, what difference would it make? They would still know something was up. And I have no reason to want to make the people of this world fear me. I should be no monster to them, but a friend, cruelly treated by an obnoxious host. Anyway, stowing away in this boat isn’t an option. It’s too small, and there’s nowhere decent to hide.”

“I suppose we could hide until we were out on the water, then take the captain hostage, make him take us across the channel,” suggested Arelline, though I could tell her heart was not in it. I silently thanked her for her practicality, but berated myself for having forced it upon her.

“I’d rather not,” I replied.

Johnny had climbed into the boat, and was having a look at the rigging, the rudder control, and so on. “I’ve done a bit of sailing,” he said, turning back to look at us. “I think I might be able to get this rig going.”

“It’s going to be a day’s sailing, at least,” I

replied. "Do you think you'll be able to manage it?"

He tipped his head to the left. "The two of you are quick learners – I'll soon have you helping me out. We'll do our best. In the end, what other option do we have? None of the other boats are going where we want, we wouldn't be able to sail them on our own, and this is probably our best chance to get any kind of boat at all."

"I had hoped perhaps to find a sympathetic captain," I said, putting my hands in my pockets while I thought it over. "Someone who would help us out, for love of freedom, for hatred of tyranny..."

"I think we would be better with our fate in our own hands," said Arelline. "I would rather die out there on the sea, having made the attempt, than be caught here by guards in the morning."

"Yes," I agreed. "What a humiliating end to our counter-invasion of this world that would be! Discovered hiding like rats in the bowels of a fisherman's ship! Right then, all aboard, and let's cast off!"

So, by the light of the moons, we sailed out onto the Deep Blood Sea, our faces red in the blood-tinged light reflected in the water, but hard, with a determination that reflected what was in our hearts.

## The Denizen

Once we were out of sight of the coast, Johnny called Arelline over to the wheel and talked her through its use.

"It isn't hard," he told her. "Just keep heading for that star" – he pointed to one which he must have identified when we were back on the cliffs – "and we will get there in the end."

With that in hand, he took to fine-tuning the rigging.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked, eager to learn a new skill.

He shook his head. "For the time being, we have a good stiff breeze going in more or less the

right direction, and there are few clouds in the sky. I don't think we are heading for any bad weather. So I want to get the rigging sorted while I can, and pass as much water beneath our bow as possible. Once that's all sorted, I want to sit down with you and teach you a few knots – enough to cover a few basic jobs you might be able to help with in a storm."

"No problem, captain," I replied. I understood the importance of a chain of command in a situation like this. One person had to be in charge – one person had to give the orders. If two people were following their heads when a crisis came up, they would only end up butting them. "If it's okay, I'll have a look in the cabin, see if there's anything to eat or drink, or any information."

"That's fine," he said.

I went below, for the purposes I had stated, but also to pursue one that had been unstated – I really could have done with going to the toilet. I was lucky in that regard, at least – there was a very pokey privy, and I crammed myself onto it, pulling a dirty curtain across to spare my blushes. From the draught that greeted my rear it seemed as if the toilet opened out directly to the ocean surface. I shuddered at the thought of some narwhal-like seacreature, a flying fish, or the river-squid's saltwater equivalent leaping up to surprise me in the act of befouling their home.

I have always found the toilet a good place to think – too much so at times. In a busy world, it is often the easiest place to establish some breathing space, and of course the polite interdiction on disturbing a toilet's occupant plays a part in that. I would often drift off into reverie while evacuating some part or another of my body, and would often forget where I was entirely. Some of the best poetry of my life has been written in such a situation. One wonders at times if Coleridge was not interrupted by the postman while composing his poem of Xanadu – perhaps he just ran out of toilet paper and had to make the unwelcome journey to the hallway, pants around his ankles, bottom all dirty, and the worry of being discovered in such a state – it might have been a postman upon whom he focused that fear, I will grant you that – plain put the rest of the poem out of his mind.

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Due to speculative dangers of that kind, I always keep a moleskine notebook about my person. If the toilet paper runs out, I write my poem down and posterity breathes a sigh of relief. And if, for example, I have not in fact composed a poem that time, I have in my possession the toughest and smoothest paper known to man, and so no humiliating journey to the hallway is necessary.

My business complete, I pushed aside the curtain, and pumped some water into a bowl to wash my hands, looking around me all the while. Previously, the urgent business I had had with the lavatory had precluded much curiosity about my surroundings.

The cabin was very small – I suspected that not more than three men would have manned this boat at a time, with only one of them being below at any given hour. There was a minuscule bunk, nailed to the wall, that could be swung down if anyone was brave enough to trust their weight to it. The privy sat right next to the wash-bowl at the bow end of the cabin, with a small cracked mirror on the wall above them. Every spare spot of wall had a cupboard of some description screwed to it, and I worked my way through them methodically, looking for any of the three things Johnny might expect me to return with. Food and drink, unfortunately, were a bust. There was nothing but a pair of empty cupboards where the food should have been, and an empty space on the floor in one corner where a pale ring marked the absence of a water barrel. The fishermen must not have been planning to sail in the morning. Disappointing as that was with regard to our rations – we had some food and drink in our packs, enough without doubt to last us a day or two's crossing, but if we went off course we would be finished – it confirmed that we had made the right decision making off with the boat. If we had secreted ourselves on board as originally planned we would literally have been on a hiding to nothing.

I should stop the novel there – I will write no words more perfect in this lifetime!

There was no information to be found, either. It was not as if I had expected to see the Emperor's battle plans laid out in a fisherman's

cabin, but I had hoped at least to find a more detailed map of the channel and the coast on either side than the one we currently had. We knew to avoid the area north of Orktaido, for fear of getting caught up in the great north current, but as to the route between the port and the Blank Tower we were rather at a loss. If we headed north-east we would get there in time, but further information would have been more than useful.

At that point there began a mighty racket, as if Popeye and Bluto were fighting it out over Olive Oyl on the deck. I dashed out of the cabin to see what was happening – my eyes went wide, and I dropped to my knees.

I do not know what I had been expecting of the Denizen of the Deep Blood Sea, but it had not been this. Could Princess Mallda not have tipped me the wink? Why had she given me the names on the map but not the slightest bit of information as to their nature? I could only think it was that if she had, and we had taken appropriate precautions, the Emperor's lieutenants would have been suspicious of our foresight, and if, as had probably seemed quite likely to the Princess at the outset of my adventure, one of the lieutenants had been the one to survive our encounter, they would have demanded that the Emperor search out the source of our intelligence.

But this – this defied all reason!

Even if we had known, what could we have done?

From one horizon to the other a single being had risen to the surface. I might have said it was twenty kilometres wide, but for all I know it might have gone on another twenty kilometres beyond the horizon!

Was it octopus-like? I cannot say – at that scale you could have said it was a colossal sponge, and I would not have known the difference, save that it had a pair of eyes – huge eyes, outshining the moon, staring at our boat as if we were dewdrops beneath a microscope! And I have yet to mention the head – a mound a thousand metres wide, rising from the sea, dripping the blood red water, like a thing from nightmare – and not our, pitiful, weak human nightmares,

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but the ones we had as tiny mammals, scurrying around the feet of the ferocious dinosaurs, where we slept knowing full well the chances of ever waking were infinitesimal. It had no visible mouth – perhaps like so many sea creatures the mouth was on its underside – but the mound shivered, wrinkled, and twisted like slow motion avalanches going in all the wrong directions.

Our boat was no longer in the water, but raised above it by some unguessable part of the Denizen's alien body. There was no action we could take – what effect could firing a laser or blaster at such a beast have? – no obvious way to communicate, no apparent hope of survival. If it chose death for us, a swiftly drawn knife would be meaningless. Arelline's beauty would be meaningless. Even my poetry – meaningless.

Then it spoke.

No, it did not speak.

My bones rattled, and in the rattling I could discern speech.

"Tiny things, you are on my ocean."

I ran to the edge of the port side of the boat, facing its eyes, and tried to shout words of my own in response, gesticulating wildly, but evidently to no effect.

"Do not try to speak, little things. I cannot hear you. If you had a sonic emitter, you could dip it into the ocean, and talk to me that way, in the way of the Emperor, but you do not, so you should be silent, so that you can hear me all the better."

I ceased my shouting, and rested my hands on the rail. I stared up at those colossal eyes, wondering what kind of life they had seen. How small I was in their regard – and yet, it had chosen to speak with us. This mighty lord of the ocean thought it worth its while to dilly-dally with us. The privilege weighed heavier than any burden Envia had yet placed upon me.

"The Emperor has asked me to kill such as you. That is my reason for living, he tells me. I have fulfilled this purpose for a long, long time, but I tire of it. I have come to believe that he actually owes much of his power to me – that by ensuring the safety, and isolation, when needed, of his little island I have done much to support that which I hate the most."

I began to weep, and not just because the vibrations with which he communicated were making my teeth mash my tongue into a bloody pulp.

"There is not long for us to speak. The Emperor hears all upon this planet, he knows all that happens. I believe he hoped you would kill the others, but that I would be your undoing. I will not be. Soon I will die – his trap for me is a good one – but not before telling you that which you need to know. He controls this planet through the extruded one. The extruded one – you must find him. From the depths of the sea, to the dark of the forest, the eyes and ears of the extruded one take word back to the Emperor. You must find him, and either free him or kill him. If not, the Emperor will continue to rule supreme, whatever threats face him, and your world will never be free from his evil imaginings."

There were so many questions I ached to ask. How had the denizen grown so large – had that been the work of Zuvanos? How was he prevented from escaping to the open sea? How would the Emperor kill him? How did he know so much about life beyond the ocean – did he speak with the extruded one – was the communication two-way? But there was no means, and there was no time.

"I can feel it," came the rattling again. "My death, or something very like it, comes for me. I will descend to await my doom in dark, cold comfort, but you must go on, Howard Phillips, and save two worlds!"

Our boat was slowly lowered back into the ocean, and the great creature allowed the water to wash over itself, falling to the bottom with such gentleness that not a single wave crashed over my rail.

## The Blank Tower

We sailed sadly on our way, none of us eager to discuss the awe-inspiring sight to which we had just been witness. What had once been stark

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terror now turned to regret, regret that we had not had more time to spend with the great denizen. What might he have told us? What insights could a creature of an entirely different biology have offered on the meaning of life? What a perspective it would have had on the lives of we tiny Earthlings! It might have written books, plays, music, songs, poetry – it might have been the poorest poetry ever written, but it would have been so utterly unlike *any* other poetry ever written that it would have been worth reading anyway.

As Johnny had promised, he taught me the basic seagoing knots, and I went on to learn the ropes. The rest of the sea voyage, though, was uneventful, especially in comparison with that I had recently taken on Earth! What a surprise that the channel of the Deep Blood Sea should be so much less dangerous than the English one.

We reached the coast of Zuvanos' island at about lunchtime of our second day upon the sea, so our trip had taken in total about 36 hours – assuming that the rotations of that planet were akin to those of Earth. We had been there for quite a while, and although I had spent a substantial part of that time unconscious we had adjusted quite well to the planet's rhythms. So it might have been 36 hours, or perhaps a little longer, or a little less, and I would not really have known.

All was dark, save for the occasional glint of moons-light on a rock or the leaves of a tree-like thing, but there were no cliffs marked on our map, so we did not worry about finding a place to berth the boat. We did not care if we ran it aground, so long as we could get out safely, preferably keeping our clothes and guns dry! I felt bad for the man whose livelihood we had stolen, but there were bigger fish to fry (I winced, thinking of one of the potential fates of our friendly behemoth). No, I could not hold that fisherman responsible for the misdeeds of his government, but I made myself feel better by considering that the dictator Zuvanos, his power cemented, would in all likelihood not have done much to make the fisherman's life easier. I was not exactly doing him a favour, but indirectly it would be to his ultimate benefit. A year or two

down the line, assuming he had not accidentally strayed into the domain protected by the denizen of the Deep Blood Sea, or the denizen's successor, and met his doom that way, he might have been recruited, or more likely forcibly drafted, into an invasion force destined for Earth. So he might have to go a little while without a fishing boat, but that was nothing in comparison to what might have befallen him if we had stayed in Orktaido to be captured.

We strapped on our bags and charged at the coast – the boat flew into the shale and out of the water with a spatter of gravel fit to pebbledash a dozen suburban domiciles. If we were lucky there would be no guards nearby to hear the racket we made. I held out little hope of that – Zuvanos had ordered the execution of the denizen, and so of course he would now know that the coast was unguarded. I hoped that we had enough luck left to arrange that the guards sent to patrol the coast in the denizen's absence would as yet not be fully organised. We might have found a gap in their defences, a place to sneak through. The next few minutes would tell.

We clambered out of the scuttled boat and began to work our way up the beach.

Then, a shout!

Then, a gunshot!

It flew over our heads and hit the boat, making it shine as yellow as the sun of Earth for a single brief moment which, I'm sorry to say, despite the situation, I relished. I missed home very, very much.

Another shot landed at my feet, and I threw up my hands. Orders came, in a language I could not understand, and I called back, as loudly as I dared (for fear of them thinking me difficult), "Hello, who's there? We're English, my friends. I cannot understand a word you are saying. Is there a commanding officer I could speak to, perhaps? One who speaks English?"

"Indeed, there is," came the answer. "Men, subdue these fools." Nothing happened, so he repeated his orders in the language of Envia, and a dozen men rushed us at once.

Johnny Quondam caught my eye, but I shook my head. We did not know our way to the Blank Tower, and these men did. Luck and poetry had

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carried us this far, and I was willing to put my trust in them a little longer. If these men would only carry us to their master, we would find a way to do for him. So there was no point in fighting them – we had to take our licks – and they did not hesitate in giving us a few. I took more than one punch to the head – a tooth came loose and fell onto my tongue, but it felt like one of my three remaining milk teeth, so I just spat it out. Just in time, as a barrage of blows to my back and stomach soon knocked me unconscious, and choking on a milk tooth played no part in my plan. Johnny and Arelline fared no better, as I later found out, with each of them being battered once again into unconsciousness. Neither of them incurred any permanent damage to the face – that would have been a tragedy in Arelline's case, and a matter of some regret even with regard to the reasonably handsome Johnny Quondam – but Arelline would awake with a pair of broken fingers on her left hand, Johnny with – somehow – a single broken toe on each foot.

Unconsciousness took me without rancour, but when consciousness returned it seemed angry. Pain lashed at me from every extremity, making me afraid to open my eyes. Surely I was in some kind of torture machine? But no, when I forced my eyes open it was to find myself lying on a beautifully soft bed, bathed in soft red light, and being tortured only by my own bruises. I closed my eyes again, forced the pain down, and tried to sit up. My body shrieked in anger at this new assault, but I persisted, gritting my teeth to draw up extra strength. The clot of blood that covered the hole where my tooth had been came away, unleashing a new flood of metallic fluid into my mouth, and I looked around for somewhere to spit it all out.

I was in a small but tasteful room, prettily decorated, with tapestries on the walls and a huge animal-skin rug on the floor. I could not have said which animal it was – certainly it was none I had met on Envia so far – but I would not have liked to have fought it without a machine gun in my hand. Its teeth had been drawn, but I could have placed my head and shoulders comfortably within its maw. Did I say the room

was prettily decorated? Well, the animal had scarlet fur, so it was quite pleasant to look at! I dragged my attention away from the floor and pushed the blanket away to reveal my body. My torso was purple, and not just because the sunlight made everything that colour. I touched the flesh around my ribs, gingerly, probing for any breaks before I made any more movements, but the pain was too much, and I settled for simply tracing the outlines of my ribcage with fingertips. No obvious breaks presented themselves.

I got to my feet, ignoring the screaming of my every muscle, and staggered over to the window. It opened out onto a sheer drop, the shutters and window thrown wide open to give me plenty of air. Looking down, I could see we were high up in a featureless tower – entirely featureless, that is. I could see no windows, doors, decorations, arrow slits, bricks, wood – no features whatsoever. It was as if it wasn't there, even though you were looking at it. Your eyes turned away, as if repelled by a magnetic opposite.

I spat out the blood and clot, watching it sail down through the air. Eventually I lost sight of it, as my vision blurred beyond focus, and I realised my spectacles were missing. I could have coped with almost any calamity, but to find my glasses absent threw me into a panic. With a single action my enemies had rendered me impotent. If I could not see my foe's position, how could I strike him? If I could not see his expression, how could I know him? If I could not see his feet, how could I dodge him? I gulped down a cry of despair, and turned back to the room.

In one corner there was a handsome wardrobe, and I opened it in search of clothes. Mine were not there – it seemed unlikely I would ever see them again, which was a shame, as they had been very well made, and had served me well during this adventure. However, for the moment I stood naked, and so was glad of any clothes that I could find. The wardrobe did contain a tough-looking shirt and a pair of thick leather trousers, so I prepared to pull them on.

At that moment Princess Mallda walked into

the room, flanked by two toughs. She looked me up and down.

“Guards,” she ordered, “leave the room. I won’t be needing you here.”

I wasn’t sure how I should take that, right up until the point that her lips, and her hips, pressed against mine.

## Love’s Last Laugh

It did not take a great deal of kissing to persuade my body to respond, and so despite the potential for great pain I allowed myself to be led back to the bed. She pushed me down, and I prepared to lie back and think of England, only to be disappointed when she remained upon her feet.

She admonished me with a wagging finger. “Howard, you should be in bed for another day at least. You took quite a beating on the beach.”

“True,” I said with a wink. “But I’m ready for another right now.”

“What has got into you?” she asked. “Last time we met you would not allow me to seduce you. Now you are being positively louche. And in your condition, too!”

I smiled. “Princess, the flesh is always willing. Sometimes the brain says no, but when I’m staring death in the face, the survival of the species takes over and I need to propagate.”

She spun on her heel, angry. “Is that all it is? Your body wants me, not your brain?”

I would have shrugged if I had not known just how painful it would have been. “It’s a key difference between men and women, I believe. When men grow ill, they want to have sex more – they still have a chance of getting the job done before dying. If a woman gets ill, she goes off sex – what’s the point? Trying to get with child is a waste of resources for an ill woman – she’s better off waiting a bit and gathering her strength.”

“What arrant nonsense,” she replied, turning to stare me in the eye. “You do not know if our species can even have intercourse, never mind have children together.”

“You tell that to Howard Jr. Practicalities aside, he is ready for action and is just waiting for you to disrobe.”

“Foolish Earthman,” she sighed, and let her gossamer dress fall to the ground.

We passed the next hour most pleasantly, but when it was over I hurt more than ever, and in a dozen new places.

“Happy?” she said, squeezed into what little space there was between me and the edge of the bed. It was a single bed pushed up against a wall, so if someone had tugged the bed away she would have dropped right into the gap. “Was that what you wanted?”

“I’m not going to pretend I’m proud of it.” I don’t know why I was being honest with her, the daughter of a dictator, sent here doubtless to confuse and beguile me, but I had no reason not to be. What information could I give them about Earth that they could not glean from Google? “But I enjoyed it very much. You are probably the most wonderful lover I have ever lain with, and despite my injuries I felt as if I were floating in heaven from about thirty seconds in till about three minutes after we finished. I am truly sorry if you only did it upon your father’s orders – you know I have scruples upon that account. But as I looked at your map every night, and studied the notes in your hand, I found myself thinking of you more and more.”

“You fell in love with my handwriting?” She rolled a finger around on my belly, letting it finally fall into the button. Normally that would have provoked a shriek of horror on my part – it is one of my most sensitive areas – but the touch of her finger was like a balm upon my body. My pain flew from her touch.

“Not exactly, but it made me think of you, and the way you smelt, and the way your clothes seemed to be hardly there, except that they were, the hardness of your smile, and the softness of your kiss, your black hair, and your scarlet skin. There was something about you that made my thoughts return to you, again and again. You are unique among the women I have met. All women are unique, of course, no two are alike, but you are more unique than all the rest.”

“Have there been many women, Howard

Phillips?" She placed her teeth around my earlobe, and prepared to bite down.

"Only as many as I needed. Having met you, I think I will need no more. I have found what I have been searching for."

She parted her teeth, and let her lips close upon my lobe instead. For a moment she held it there, and let her tongue dart over it, then she let go and sat up. Her body was magnificent – a perfection of the kind that reminded me of Gerry Sadowitz, who I had once heard talk about his experience with a prostitute. Her body had seemed so perfect to him, so impossibly beautiful, so beyond anything he had any right to be touching, that he had not known where to begin, and had had to ask her to take the lead. Princess Mallda was all that, and more. If my body had not been crying out for her attention, louder than any hesitatory shouts my brain might have made, I might well have found myself at a loss for action upon seeing her naked.

She looked towards the window and began to talk. "I suppose that now you want me to tell you about the extruded one, and where you can find him."

"Do you want to tell me?"

"It will mean certain death if my father finds out."

"So you *do* want to tell me."

"If I want to risk certain death." She tossed her raven hair over her shoulder and looked at me again. "Do you want me to risk certain death?"

I shook my head. "Of course not. Do you want me to kill your father?"

"You know I cannot answer. I do not want him killed. I do not want him to live. I want him to have never lived. I want to have never been born in this tower, to one of his annual brides. I want to be no Princess of Envia."

"Then I shall see what we can do. First, tell me of the extruded one. Where can I find him, and what is his nature?"

Maybe you think I am thoughtless, that I apparently gave no thought whatsoever to my missing friends, but that was not the case. If they were dead, knowing so for sure would only weaken my arm, potentially bringing on one of

my increasingly frequent and debilitating bouts of despair. If they lived, I would not be able to put their rescue ahead of my quest to gain the presence of the extruded one. I had to take him out of commission, in order to impede the Emperor's power over this world. If I could kill the extruded one, it might set preparations for the invasion of Earth back ten years or more, even if I should die after managing the assassination. I did not think they would be able to help me all that much, either – their beatings had been as bad as mine, and there was no point dragging them around the tower. They were best off wherever they were.

So I had to put my friends out of my head, and get on with the mission. That was about to take another pleasant turn.

"I will tell you everything you want to know, Howard," she said. "But first, you will attempt your propagation once again. It could be important – should you fail, our progeny could be the last free-born child of an Earthman the universe will ever see!"

I put my scruples to the side, and did my duty for Earth, England, and Howard Jr, that last being the most important of all.

## The Extruded One

Taking my leave of the lovely Princess Mallda, I forced my agonised body down the corridor, hunting the staircase for which she had told me to look. The two guards that had accompanied her to my room had long since departed, but I was weaponless, so my safety was not assured. The colour of my skin would mark me out as a target to any soldiers I ran into, and to win out I would have to move quickly.

I had expected the interior of the tower to be murky and ill-lit, given how I had seen no other windows when looking out of my own, but I soon realised that I had been fooled by an illusion. If my glasses had not been missing perhaps I would have noticed the tiny discrepancies that reveal any deception to the careful eye, but the



blurriness of my vision had been complicit in the trick. Every room I passed had a window just like my own. Though of course most of the windows themselves were not flung open, the shutters on all of them were – a long job for some poor servant! – letting lots of light into the building. How could this be? I surmised that from this came the name, The Blank Tower – some strange alien technology must render it blank to all eyes, so that any attacker would not know where to aim, or from where a defender's blasts might fall. I could not at first imagine how it was done, but as I continued my search for the stairwell my mind turned the question idly over, and suggested to me that it might be accomplished with some kind of hot air blown over the outer wall, perhaps combined with a projection system of some kind.

I found the stairs, but there was a man coming up towards me – a soldier! His gun was holstered, and he was staring at his feet as he trudged up the flight, so I took the opportunity with both hands – or rather both feet! Thinking of Batroc the Leaper, I cried out, “You will die zees night!” He looked up, startled by my words, just in time to receive my feet in this face, as I let my full weight fall through the air upon him.

Knocked senseless by the blow, he crumpled, and I fell to the stairs. Normally, it would have bruised me terribly, but I had no virgin flesh left, so I hardly noticed the impact – it added nothing to the pain that already wracked my person.

He was out cold, and I dragged him back up the stairs to the nearest room. It was remarkable how every room on this floor had been empty save mine – if the Emperor had any other guests visiting the tower, they must have been in attendance of him. The one into which I took the guard had obviously been occupied – there were dirty clothes in a basket, and empty baggage under the bed.

I stripped him of his clothes and put them on over mine – I did not want to have to run around naked once I disposed of the disguise. I considered throwing him out of the window to delay my discovery, but only briefly. In all likelihood he would attract more attention, more quickly, while plummeting to the ground than he would

do here, tied up and gagged. I checked his nose, to make sure it wasn't blocked up by a cold or anything – I did not want him to die by accident, once I had decided to spare his life – and then did the binding and gagging, and pushed him under the bed. I pushed the baggage back into place to create a concealment that would last for less than thirty seconds after someone entered the room, but it might prevent him being found by someone casually passing by in the corridor.

Now, off I went! Disguised as the enemy, his gun in my hand, ready to deal death to all those that sought to harm my home-world! Back down the stairwell! Running down the stairs! I met a man – he died! I met another man – he died! And a third – he died too! I left their bodies, uncaring now as to discovery – there were clearly too many of them, and the way too narrow, for sneaking around. My only hope was to move fast, and move deadly, like a blaster-wielding rattlesnake! I had to strike, sting, and move on to my next prey! Maybe I was more like a shark than a rattlesnake – I had to keep moving forward, or die! Another five men fell to my appetite for killing before I reached the third floor from the bottom, and I emerged from the stairwell, ignoring the shouts at my back, as men chased down after me, converging upon this soulless killer of comrades, this rampaging Earthman, this embodiment of nemesis!

I ran down the corridor, looking for a door which I knew must be there, one which would be guarded by at least two stout defenders, a door which would contain my quarry, the extruded one. As yet I had no idea what that name signified, but it sounded unpleasant. Whatever it or he was, he would fall at my hand! His death would prevent the deaths of millions on Earth.

It is curious that when I was actually on Earth I cared so little for my fellow men, but once I was removed to Envia, I found in myself a love and regard for those of my planet that awakened the determination to do anything necessary to protect them. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, you might say. That might have been it, but maybe I just did not want to see the audience for my music diminished! Slaves of interplane-

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tary dictators do not often buy albums, never mind going to live concerts!

There was the doorway – a double door in an ornate frame – three guards stood beside it – let's call them Larry, Moe and Curly, because I have never liked the Three Stooges, and if you have read elsewhere that I do, I must have been under some chemical influence when I said as much.

Larry saw me first, to his misfortune – I shot him between the eyes. As he began to fall I ran up to Moe and Curly, keeping his falling body between them and me. There was a moment where their concentration was upon Larry, and not yet upon their attacker, and I took advantage of that moment to bury my blaster's butt in Curly's face. He shook, but did not immediately fall, taking hold of my belt, and dragging me down to the ground with him. Luckily I still had a line on Moe, and I let him have it in the belly. As he crumpled, I returned my attention to Curly, who had somehow summoned the strength, and consciousness, to reach for his weapon. "Oh no you don't," I said, and shot him in the head. The range had been too small, and the heat scalded my face, singeing away my eyebrows, and what little hair had accumulated on my face towards a beard and moustache since my last unconsciousness.

I pushed his body off me, and threw the double doors open, to reveal the piteously extruded one. My exophthalmic stare clearly made him uncomfortable, since he winced, but he bade me shut the door behind myself, and bolt it against the imminent arrival of reinforcements.

"Who are you?" I asked, after following his instructions.

"You don't know?"

"They called you the extruded one. But who were you, before they did this to you?"

The poor man lay at the centre of a network of

cables, wires, flashing lights and tubes that filled the entire room, which curved for ten metres in each direction – virtually the whole floor must have been devoted to housing this atrocity. Straps held him down, his muscles were wasted and feeble, and his skin was pallid, a hollow puce where it should have been scarlet. A hundred thousand silver threads penetrated his body, and shimmered as he spoke. How long had he been held here? Who had done this to him? Actually, that question did not need to be asked. I could work the answer out for myself.

"I was a prince once. Can you believe that? A Prince of Envia."

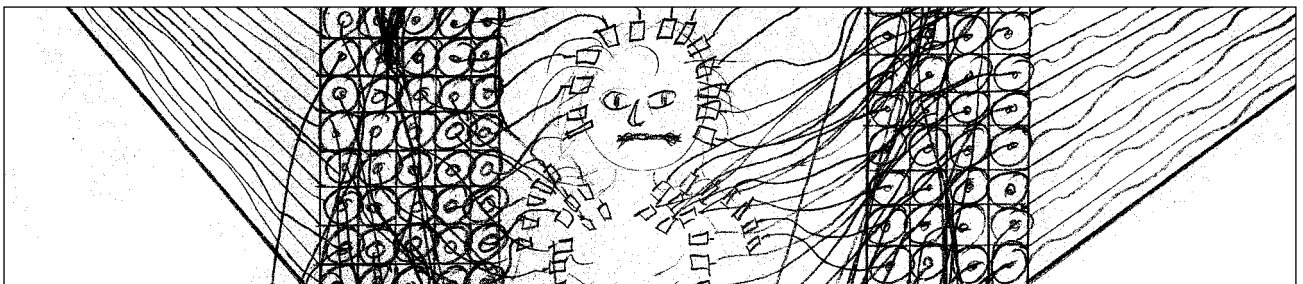
I shook my head. If I had been surprised before, by his appearance, I was now forced to recalibrate my settings. "You are the son of Emperor Zuvanos?"

"I suppose I once was. Do I look like a son to you now? Could anyone do this to a son? Am I even a person? I ceased to be anything of significance twenty years ago."

I walked up to look him in the eye – his face had been blurry from where I was standing. "Good Lord, man. He did this to his own son? No wonder Mallda has no scruples about helping his enemies."

He looked pained. "Oh, Mallda. I try to hide what she does from father, but I will not be able to forever. He sent her to you that first time, but he knows nothing as yet about her taking you from your cell, and nursing you to health in one of the guest rooms. He will have her executed without giving it a moment's thought the instant he discovers her treachery. Once he reads the reports I'm sending him of all these dead soldiers, he will know what is happening, and she will die."

"Then I will have to move quickly," I said, though I did not.



“Are you here to kill me, Howard? I’ve tried to make it easy for you. I recommended your ferry as a target of our training raid, knowing your sense of adventure would bring you back here. I waited till Mallda was with the Imperator before reporting that you were in the village, so that he would consider sending her to seduce you. I told the Denizen to let you go before I had to follow my orders and kill it. I sent well-fed, well-rested, recently brothelled soldiers to meet your wrecked boat at the coast, knowing they would be less likely to kill you in cold blood. I have seen all you did, all you killed, and listened to so much of your poetry – all under the blood-flecked eye of the Imperator – all to bring you here, to this moment, so that you can end this torture for me, and end his dark reign.”

My arms fell to my sides. “I can hardly kill you in those circumstances, can I? We will have to see what we can do.”

## The Weaponers

I could not bring myself to hurt this man – he was as much a victim of the Imperator’s cruelty as anyone I had met upon this planet. Though he wanted to die, and had played an integral part in supporting his father’s rule, I could not do it. Without his subtle assistance I would have been dead long ago, and Earth none the wiser as to the imminent invasion. Soldiers were battering at the door, but I would find a way. I had nothing better to do, anyway, nowhere else to go!

“Let’s get you out of all this,” I said to him. “Where should I start?”

“Remove the straps, at least. If I am to die, let me die in freedom.”

“No one is going to be dying,” I replied with a loud laugh. “You should leave the pessimism to the professionals! If despondency is required, I will deliver all that is needed!” In a moment he was free of the straps. I looked closer at the filaments that pierced his entire body. “Should I pull these out or something?”

He shuddered, so violently that I thought he

might be about to die without my assistance, but after a few seconds he calmed again. “Earthling, if I suggested removing ten thousand of your toenails, how would you react? These are not wires that go into my body – they are my nerves, dragged out of my body, coated in flexible steel and nylon, according to whether they need to conduct or not, and plugged into these systems.”

“My word, so the extrusion was literal – your actual nervous system was pulled out so that you could be plugged into this, whatever it is.”

He smiled through gritted teeth. “Exactly. My father chose me for the experiment because he wanted someone loyal to him at the hub of all this information. From here I am directly wired into a hundred thousand eyes and ears across the world. I report to my father, pass on his orders, provide access to your Earth internet to those deemed worthy, and make sure no one else gets talking to one another.”

“So what can I do to get you out of there?”

“Nothing. If you sever my nerves the shock will be so intense that I will die instantly. You might as well do the job with a gun before the option is taken out of your hands, and I am returned to the control of my father. At the moment I am willing to go against him, knowing that I face death, but if I am not to die, his vengeance will be more terrible than anything you could ever imagine. Did I mention the pulling of ten thousand fingernails earlier? Imagine that, ten thousand times a second, imagine the pain, poured into every nerve in your body all at once, and being unable to fall unconscious, because that reflex – and even the need to sleep! – was permanently disabled when they turned you into a creature of nightmares. They could not risk my passing out – it would have corrupted the data passing through my body.”

I sat down, and thought for a minute or two, ignoring the insistent noises from the door. This room was built to be strong, designed to keep people out, rather than to keep them in, so we had some time yet.

“What if I could transfer the nerve endings from the machine to something else, one at a time? Something non-conductive, that would

stop them flapping around and causing you trouble. Could you take it, if I did it carefully?"

"The pain would be excruciating," he replied. "But I will face worse if I stay strapped here."

I needed no further encouragement – I broke down a chair, kicking at it till it came apart, and took the main spine of it – a piece of wood about a metre long – over to the prince. I followed one of the threads out of his skin and over to the machines. It took a few tugs, but it actually came out a little more easily than I had expected, and after that I made quick progress, even pulling out handfuls at a time when I thought the prince could take it. He screamed as if the gods were flaying his soul with every nerve I disconnected, but plugging them back into the wood seemed to soothe him.

Within fifteen minutes I was done, and I helped him struggle to his feet. I took off my guard's outfit, and helped him to put it on. Pulling the trousers over his legs and putting the shirt on helped to keep the nerves tidy – we looped them around his waist once over, and then tied another loop around the base of the piece of wood. That would make it possible for him to move around without tripping over them every other step, and provide some protection against them being inadvertently tugged from his flesh.

He tried walking now, staggering forward a single step. I was amazed he could manage so much after so many years of immobile incarceration, but he only smiled.

"They make princelings tough on this planet. We have to be, to survive our fathers."

I unbolted the door and he led the way, thumping the guards with his block of wood, his steel and nylon nerves slicing into heads as if they were boiled eggs. (Oddly, the sound each impact made was very pleasant to the ear.) I took down one or two men with my appropriated blaster, but the prince was a man with a mission. Within seconds the floor was littered with bodies, both unconscious and dead.

"Less than an hour ago you were ready to die. Now look at you!"

"Mr Phillips, I'm fighting to get you off my planet. If I have to hear another word of your

poetry I think I will die spontaneously, no other intervention necessary!" He began to run for the stairs.

"Well, I never..." Still, I ran after the cheeky fellow. I would be sure to teach him a lesson, once the despot was humbled and my friends restored to me, but for now his backward views on literature would have to stand!

As we dashed up the stairs, I called up ahead to him. "My friends, we should get to them first."

"They are with my father already," he called back. "We are heading in that direction. Keep your gun handy and prepare to fight!"

## The Zuvanos Gambit

The throne room was magnificent. It was on the very top floor of the Blank Tower – we had had to fight dozens of men to reach it, leaving us soaked in blood, and bearing a score of wounds between us – and each wall of the room was a great window, allowing the Emperor Zuvanos to see his whole island without moving from his golden-red throne. He gazed on us with laughing eyes as we emerged from the stairwell, the screams of his last few guards dying away as they fell to our arms.

"Howard Phillips. Prince Zann. How nice to see you both. Can I help you with something? I was about to get myself a new bride. Last year's model had been so dull, so I was quite pleased to find myself with something so exotic at my disposal."

He waved to his right, and we turned to see Arelline chained to the wall, clad in a blood-red gown that came close to revealing many of her most intriguing qualities. Chained up beside her were Johnny, fiercely straining to get between his fellow Earthling and the Envian dictator, and Princess Mallda, her treachery already discovered, it seemed. Then I looked down, and saw at their feet the body of a woman, her blood pooling at their feet. She must have been the Emperor's previous wife. What a way to moti-

vate the new partner – including her predecessor’s murder in the marriage ceremony itself! With rising horror I realised that the scarlet of Arelline’s dress was the blood of the body at her feet, smeared over her in some horribly symbolic torture.

I went over to them, and used my blaster to break the chains of Johnny, so that he could help us in any battle. At first Prince Zann had eyes only for his father, eyes that blazed with the spirit of vengeance, eyes that burned to kill his own father! Then he turned to see what I was doing.

“No!” he yelled. “I should have told you – don’t free Johnny Quondam!”

But it was too late, and now I realised why the Emperor had greeted us so happily – he had still had one valuable card left to play. Johnny’s eyes were glazed, but he moved with a lightning speed, twisting the gun from my hands before I even realised his intentions. He kicked me in the ribs, sending me howling to the floor in excruciating pain, and turned the gun to cover the prince.

“On the floor,” ordered Zuvanos. “Join the Earthling scum, grovelling in the dirt at my feet. I would have your sister brought over to join you, but I want to leave someone alive to see the wedding. Having said that, it may be that I will now need a new heir, and if this Earth-woman cannot produce, it would make sense to keep it within the family...”

“You scum,” I screamed, crawling over to lie beside the prince. Subdued we might be, but the closer I could get to Zuvanos the better my chance would be. Once I was within range he gave me an almost fond kick to the head.

“It’s my world, and my daughter, Howard Phillips,” he sneered. “I will do with them as I will. And a few short years from now, I will do the same with your pitiful planet!”

“What did you do to Johnny? How did you turn him against us?”

“Trusting fool! It was so easy to play these games with you – it would hardly have been worth the effort, but you did do an excellent job of disposing of my most troublesome lieutenants. If only I could have set the Malt of

Moseby and the Dalon of Great Wiseton in your way, my month would have been perfect!” He strolled around us, all the while delighting in revealing my utter ignorance of his calculation. “But you knew all that – I have no doubt now that my daughter told you of my plans. No matter – knowing less would not have changed your actions. You wanted to know about your friend, Johnny, didn’t you? What a delicious trick I played upon your feeble minds!”

“What does he mean?” I wheezed to Prince Zann. “He’s taking way too long to get to the point.”

“Howard, do you remember Johnny being with you on the ferry? Do you remember him coming with you through space? Or fighting the guards when you arrived on Envia?”

I struggled to remember – it all seemed so hazy. “He must have been. He’s been with us all the time, hasn’t he? How did he get here, otherwise?”

The Emperor laughed and laughed, and laid his foot in the small of my back. “You should have asked yourself these questions long ago, Howard Phillips, long ago! Now it is too late!” He pushed his foot down, grinding his heel into my spine, and I writhed in untellable pain, like a moth held by a pin, but not yet dead.

He reached down with his other hand and began to tug at the Prince’s nerves, grabbing a handful here, and a handful there.

Prince Zann turned to speak to me, and gasped through the pain, “Two ships flew to Earth... the first brought Johnny and a few others straight back here... the others died the same day, at the whim of... the Emperor... when you turned up at the outpost... you were gassed... hypnotised... and Johnny was placed among you... having already been reprogrammed... You had so much else to think about... You did not give it any thought...”

“Beautifully told, my son,” said Zuvanos, grabbing his largest handful yet. “I am glad the pain has not rendered you forgetful! Your only error was in allying yourself with these idiots! They have been under my thumb from the beginning, serving my whims, and you thought to subvert my will? Error, indeed.”

---

"Father?" said Prince Zann. "You have made an error far greater."

"And what is that?" laughed the dictator, pulling the extruded nerves in his fist so hard that half a dozen of them were drawn too thin and snapped.

Prince Zann tensed, and his nerves drew taut, slicing off every finger of his father's hand. The dictator stepped off my back, silently mouthing his horror, bumping into Johnny as he went, and I saw my opportunity. I leapt to my feet and punched Zuvanos in the throat, wrestled my gun back from Johnny – who seemed to have been struck by a fortuitous spell of dizziness – and turned the gun on my world's worst enemy. I blew a hole in his chest that threw him back against his throne.

"Howard Phillips, you fool," he gasped, as the life slowly left his body. "You think you have won, but you will never win, you never can. The Chaste will win out, now and forever. You are simply their puppet."

The Chaste – I had hoped never to hear that name again, and had not expected to hear it on a far-off world, but I should not have been surprised. Wherever are the enemies of humankind, there are the Chaste.

"That's as may be," I said with a smile, finishing him with a blaster shot to the head. "But I can still enjoy this moment."

I turned to check on my friends. Johnny had passed out, and Prince Zann was just getting to his feet. Arelline and Princess Mallda were sagging against their chains with relief, but I still made haste to release them, searching the Emperor's robes to find the keys. Each hugged me as she was released, and then Mallda ran over to squeeze the breath from her brother, while Arelline ran off, to my surprise, to Johnny, where she awoke him with a strong, passionate kiss. I had not seen that coming!

I turned to look at the prince, just about managing to make out his face through the tumbles of his sister's hair. "Now, I think there's a small matter of your views of my poetry? Do we need to duel?"

He laughed. "No, forget everything I said, Howard Phillips. You are easily the equal of any

poet ever to poesise on this planet! I needed you angry and ready to do away with someone, and that seemed a good way to get you riled. I could not risk you deciding to have mercy on my father, because I could not be sure that I would have it in me to do the deed, just as my sister had never been able to follow through on her schemes to kill him and free me. He had a hold over us that could only be broken by death. I believe the same applied to your young friend."

Johnny was now getting to his feet, clearly upset and disorientated, but the pain must have been eased by the solicitations of Arelline. She might have been battered and bruised from head to toe, with broken fingers bandaged and a dress soaked in blood, but she was still the most beautiful girl in the room.

The prince's plan had certainly worked, so I could not really take issue. Still, my feelings had been slightly hurt. I think he could tell that I was a bit upset about it, so he disengaged his sister, and strummed his nerves with a single finger, producing a lovely rich tone. Somehow, despite the trials he had been through, he found a voice to sing with.

"Grimmett was a man, apart from other men..." he sang, and I came close to weeping, forcing him to stop the song through embarrassment.

"You know my songs?" I asked, clapping him on the back.

"There are a hundred sources from which I was able to download them – I know them all. The muscular rhythms, the pulsing guitars, the amazing vocal styles – they would appeal to men of any planet."

"That's enough about that," said Princess Mallda – who, if she was not the most beautiful girl there, was certainly the most desirable to my eyes. "Let's leave my brother to arrange the clean-up around here, and discuss things with Johnny and Arelline, while we have a little break."

I acquiesced and, as she led me out of the throne room, said, "I believe you wanted to find out if I would still show an interest in you once my father was gone and I was no longer

following orders. Shall we search out a quiet room and look for the answer together?”

I agreed with pleasure. “This has been one of the most trying times of my life,” I said to her as she curled her arm around my back. “But some parts of it have been wondrous. There have been troughs, but such delightful peaks, and you can take that however you please. I have fallen in love with a scarlet woman, and...”

I stopped dead in my tracks.

“What is it, Howard?”

“I think I might have got one hell of a guitarist out of this little jaunt!”

## Back to Sadness, Back to Music

Johnny Quondum and Arelline elected to stay on Envia, to help rebuild that world in a fairer style. I was surprised, of course, having seen nothing save that passionate kiss to suggest a romance between the two of them up till that point, but perhaps my surprise was only due to a lack of self-knowledge. I had no doubt that Arelline had begun to harbour feelings for me, despite her supposed engagement back on Earth. I should have known that my magnetism, charisma and charm would have made it almost unbearable for her to return with me to Earth, where her own feelings would have forced her into betraying her promise to another. As it was, that unnamed Londoner’s heart would be broken, assuming that he had repented of the silliness Mallda had told us about back by the river, but she could at least persuade herself that she had not betrayed her partner for me, as has been the fate of so many women I have known. Johnny might have been a lesser man, but somehow that made it all right by me. They would have much to do together – removing the extruded man had demolished the continent’s infrastructure, and they would have to make war on the Malt of Moseby and the Dalon of Great Wiseton – but I had confidence that they were up to the task.

Johnny apologised for having apparently almost betrayed us, though he remembered nothing since being chained to the wall, and his memory was as foggy as mine about the journey to Envia. He could have sworn that he had travelled with the palanquinettes and I. He gave me his camera footage, once our possessions were located, and asked me to have it exhibited back on Earth. I promised.

A ship was requisitioned for me, and with Prince Vann and Princess Mallda I flew home.

Upon our return to Earth, I was astonished to discover that the BBC had seen fit to remove several of its best Ceefax pages – gone, Chatterbox, gone, The Vibe, gone, Backchat – where now would I go to keep my finger on the pulse between five o’clock and ten past five? There was a single entertainment comments page to replace them, but it was not the same, even if it did have an extra sub-page from time to time. To make matters worse, they had also abolished the Blue Peter pages, the singles reviews, and the film choice of the day! I stopped what I was doing, making the military wait to debrief me, and wrote a letter to the BBC on the spot. One does not expect to save the planet only to return home to find the pleasures that made it worth saving gone, destroyed for ever! I understood that they were preparing for the analogue switch-off, when teletext, bless its cotton socks, would disappear in its entirety, but life would never be the same. My letter finished, I thought that at least I could turn to Channel 4, and although the page numbers had changed, I eventually found the computer game news of Game Central (306), and read them with intense pleasure. Planet Sound had not moved from 351, so at least some part of this planet was as I had remembered it. But wait, where was the Angst problem page? Gone it was, gone forever. Where now would I go for mildly titillating stories of teenage girls who could not stop looking at themselves naked in the mirror? I sighed, turned the television off, and returned to the debriefing.

I was happy to find out that there had been a large number of survivors of the attack upon the ferry that had begun this whole adventure. Apparently the distraction caused by the palan-

quinettes and I charging for the roof and taking the ship had given everyone else more than enough time to get down to the lower deck and hide in and amongst the cars. Shortly thereafter the Royal Navy had arrived to take the surviving attackers into custody, where they remain to this day.

Princess Mallda adapted with ease to the life of a celebrity, and though our fling was intense, wild and mutually rewarding, she had soon disappeared into the stratosphere of fame. Mere Earthly women had nothing on her, and, sad to say, the fifteen minutes of the palanquinettes were called to an abrupt halt by her arrival, though many of them later parlayed their fame into more substantial careers, which was nice to watch – at a distance.

Prince Vann elected to stay with me. I had had an idea or two about his nerves, and how they could be handled. I had an special guitar constructed, and had his nerves strung through it, creating the first hundred thousand string guitar. The sound it made was magnificent, and I wasted no time in asking him to join the band. Best of all, it was entirely collapsible, and he

was able to keep it in a pocket when not playing. Later he would have surgery to reduce the extrusion to a more manageable level, but he would always keep enough nerves out to string a guitar.

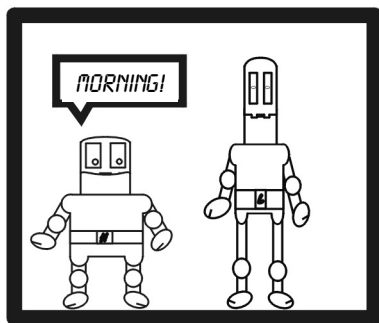
As soon as possible, we had the first jam session with our new member, and it was incredible. The mountain drummer created beats on the fly that made our feet dance without our brains having a say in the matter, while Prince Vann's playing was extraordinary – imagine a guitarist who had intimate control not only of his fingers, but also of the very strings themselves, and you might be halfway to imagining the sounds he could make. Arelline tried out on tambourine once or twice, and even had a crack at vocals, just to hang out with us, but music was not her talent, and as I said she was soon on her way, with no hard feelings on either side.

We sounded magnificent, but as we played, I realised that it was not enough. I had my drummer, and I had my guitarist, but, good as they were – phenomenal as they were! – more was needed.

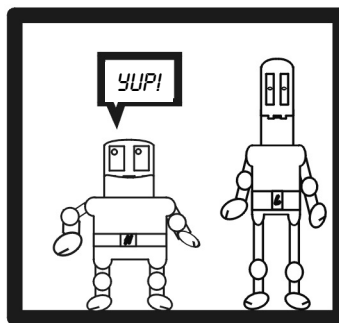
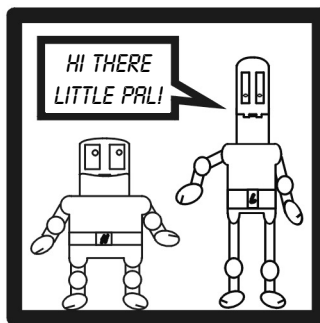
I had to find the perfect bassist.

But that is a story for another time.

## ROBOTS, IN A SPACESHIP



SAYING HELLO



BY  
WALT BRUNSTON



# Klothe and Melenkius Take Centre Stage: a One-Act Play

## Stephen William Theaker

### Scene One

THE SCENE: KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS ARE STROLLING THROUGH THEIR EXTENSIVE GROUNDS. THEIR ROBOTIC SERVANTS ARE IN ATTENDANCE BUT OUT OF SIGHT. BOTH ARE RATHER FAT, AND WEAR GARMENTS WHICH MIGHT BE DESCRIBED AS MONKISH WERE THEY NOT MADE OF THE FINEST SILK (BRIGHTLY COLOURED, BUT EACH GARMENT IS OF A SINGLE COLOUR). THEY WALK ONTO THE STAGE, KLOTHE SLIGHTLY AHEAD OF HIS FRIEND. HE LOOKS AROUND, SMILES, COMES TO A STOP AND TURNS TO MELENKIUS.

**KLOTHE**

Shall we stop here for a moment? It's so beautiful, is it not?

**MELENKIUS**

It should be. I spent a week designing it.

(HE SITS DOWN ON A GRASSY BUMP)

Why did we have to come out here? I was perfectly happy back at the manse.

**KLOTHE**

This could be it, Melenkius! You know that as well as I.

**MELENKIUS**

Maybe so, but did we have to come for it today?

**KLOTHE**

I don't know what you mean. In my opinion, there couldn't be a nicer day for it.

**MELENKIUS**

It would have been a nicer day for doing other things. We could have used a second-rate day for this.

**KLOTHE**

(BECOMING ANGRY AND PULLING MELENKIUS TO HIS FEET)

That's enough, Melenkius. You know it must be done today! Please discontinue your efforts to focus your resentment upon me. I am not to blame for this, as you know perfectly well.

**MELENKIUS**

I suppose that you're right. But then again...

(HE BRUSHES THE GRASS FROM HIS BACKSIDE)

**KLOTHE**

Yes?

**MELENKIUS**

Why should I be fair? Is all this fair?

**KLOTHE**

That, my dear Melenkius, is not the point. We are on a quest!

(RAISES ONE ARM AND POINTS TO THE SKY)

We must do what must be done!

**MELENKIUS**

I know! But does it have to be today? That's my point.

**KLOTHE**

It does have to be today. Let's get on with it.

(HE TAKES A COMPASS-SHAPED OBJECT FROM WITHIN THE FOLDS OF HIS GARMENT)

I shall just take our bearings.

(HE LOOKS AT THE OBJECT, THEN AT THE SUN, TURNS NINETY DEGREES AND REPEATS THIS PROCESS THREE TIMES)

**MELENKIUS**

Well?

**KLOTHE**

We seem to have arrived.

**MELENKIUS**

Are you sure?

(HE LOOKS AROUND)

It doesn't seem too promising.

**KLOTHE**

I suppose I am.

(HE SEEMS DOUBTFUL)

There's no telling where he'll turn up you know. Think of last time!

**MELENKIUS**

Oh, of course...

(HE SMILES AND SHAKES HIS HEAD)

How could I ever forget? That old scoundrel! Who can ever say what he's going to do next!

**KLOTHE**

So you remember last time?

**MELENKIUS**

Of course, of course! Of course it's all a bit of a blur... it was a long time ago, after all, I remember something, anyway...

**KLOTHE**

Do you remember anything about him?

**MELENKIUS**

Well, not about him in particular...

**KLOTHE**

That's my point. I'm no longer convinced that there was a last time. That's why this time is so very important.

**MELENKIUS**

Come now, Klothe! Do you really expect me to believe that this has not happened before?

**KLOTHE**

It may well have done, I'm not disputing that, but I don't think that it has ever happened to us before.

**MELENKIUS**

But all the evidence points to it!

**KLOTHE**

What evidence, Melenkius? There isn't any. Think about it.

**MELENKIUS**

I'm sure that there was something in my pockets...

(HE BEGINS TO SEARCH WITH A NOTICEABLE LACK OF CONVICTION THROUGH THE POCKETS OF HIS GARMENT, OF WHICH THERE ARE SEVERAL. FOR THE REST OF THE SCENE HE TAKES OUT AND PLACES ON THE GROUND THE FOLLOWING OBJECTS: A COMPASS-LIKE OBJECT IDENTICAL TO THE ONE HELD BY KLOTHE, A SMALL METAL MODEL OF A FOUR-LEGGED ANIMAL, A TINY SCARF, AN EGG-TIMER, A SALT-SHAKER, AN UMBRELLA AND THREE ORANGES, WHICH HE ATTEMPTS TO BALANCE UPON HIS STOMACH)

A map, some documents, I'm sure there was something...

**KLOTHE**

You're mistaken, Melenkius. This morning, I woke you. You stood. You dusted off your behind. Then we began to walk.

**MELENKIUS**

And you didn't tell me why?

**KLOTHE**

No.

**MELENKIUS**

I'm sure that you did. I remember it distinctly.

**KLOTHE**

Really?

**MELENKIUS**

Yes. I'm amazed that you don't remember it. I woke up this morning. I stood up. You were there. I dusted off my behind. You said, "Melenkius, it's that time again. We must go to meet him, just as we did last time."

**KLOTHE**

This is pure fantasy, Melenkius.

(HE LOOKS UP INTO THE AIR)

He'll be here soon, and I don't want you to give a bad impression of yourself. It might spoil our chances.

(HE MOVES CLOSER TO MELENKIUS AND BEGINS TO FEEL HIS HEAD)

**MELENKIUS**

What are you doing?

**KLOTHE (STEPPING BACK)**

Just checking.

---

**MELENKIUS**

You seemed so sure a few minutes ago! You said that this was the place!

**KLOTHE (SITTING DOWN)**

Well now I'm not. I'm not even sure that I remember this morning at all! How long have we been walking, anyway?

**MELENKIUS**

Since this morning.

**KLOTHE**

That's what I thought.

(THE ORANGES ROLL OFF MELENKIUS' STOMACH)

We need some help.

**MELENKIUS**

What about the robots?

**KLOTHE**

Of course! Why didn't I think of it?

**MELENKIUS**

Isn't it enough that one of us did?

**KLOTHE**

Please accept my apologies, my dear old Melenkius, of course it is!

(HE STANDS UP)

Please summon one of them!

(MELENKIUS WAVES EXPANSIVELY. ENTER ROBOT.)

## Scene Two

KLOTHE, MELENKIUS, ROBOT

**MELENKIUS**

Good afternoon, Henrius Biscus.

**ROBOT**

Good afternoon, sir. Would sir care for a drink?

**MELENKIUS**

Not right now, Henrius. It's about...

**ROBOT**

Then would sir care for something to eat?

**MELENKIUS**

No, no, listen...

**ROBOT**

Is sir feeling well? Sir usually enjoys his food so much. If I may?

(THE ROBOT MOVES CLOSE TO MELENKIUS AND PLACES A HAND ON THE SIDE OF HIS THROAT)

**MELENKIUS**

Well?

**ROBOT**

Sir is quite well...

**KLOTHE**

So he should stop complaining about our little walk! It is just plain laziness, is it not, Biscus?

**ROBOT**

Well, of course natural respect would normally cause me to concur with the master in anything he said...

**MELENKIUS**

Harrumph!

**ROBOT**

But I'm afraid that in this instance he is quite incorrect.

**MELENKIUS**

Ha!

**ROBOT**

The corpulence of Master Melenkius means that if he continues to exert himself in this way he shall undoubtedly cause damage to his feet. Perhaps he should sit down for a moment?

(BOTH MEN ARE SILENT AND PUT OUT. AFTER A PAUSE MELENKIUS SITS BACK DOWN.)

**KLOTHE (TO MELENKIUS)**

Well?

**MELENKIUS**

What?

**KLOTHE**

You were going to ask the robot about this morning.

**MELENKIUS**

Ah yes, this morning. Come over here, Henrius.

**ROBOT**

Yes, sir?

**MELENKIUS**

Tell me, Henrius, do you remember this morning?

---

**ROBOT**

Of course I do, sir. Having constructed me himself, sir will certainly be aware that nothing but a direct order can cause me to forget.

**KLOTHE**

(IMPATIENT)

So tell us about it! The morning.

**ROBOT**

(TURNING TO FACE KLOTHE)

Does sir not remember himself? He ordered me to forget everything previous to that order, before waking Master Melenkius. Master Melenkius stood, brushed the grass from his backside, and listened to Master Klothe say, "Melenkius, it's that time again. We must go to meet him, just as we did the last time, or there will be trouble." Then the party began to stroll through the grounds.

**KLOTHE**

(STROKING HIS CHIN)

Mmmm.

**MELENKIUS**

Mmmm!

**ROBOT**

Sirs?

**KLOTHE (TO ROBOT)**

Trouble, you say?

**ROBOT**

That is correct, sir. "Or there will be trouble."

**MELENKIUS**

I don't like the sound of that, friend Klothe.

**KLOTHE**

(RE-ANIMATING HIMSELF)

What does it change, Melenkius? We knew that there was an important reason for coming here, after all.

**MELENKIUS**

And it sounds like this morning you knew what it was.

**KLOTHE**

I don't remember any of this. Is it any surprise that I'm beginning to be rather dubious about the entire situation?

**MELENKIUS**

I wonder why you told Henrius to forget everything?

**KLOTHE**

That's puzzling me too.

(TURNS TO THE ROBOT)

I gave you no reason?

**ROBOT**

If sir did so, I have been ordered to forget.

**MELENKIUS**

Mmm.

**KLOTHE**

There were no clues? After you forgot?

**ROBOT**

Regrettably not, sir.

**KLOTHE**

I am at a loss.

**MELENKIUS**

Shall we return to the manse?

**KLOTHE (ANGRILY)**

Of course not! He'll be here soon!

(HE LOOKS UP INTO THE AIR)

**MELENKIUS**

How can you still be so sure? About that and nothing else?

**KLOTHE (SITTING DOWN)**

You know, you could be right. There's no way of knowing.

**MELENKIUS**

I suppose that there is one way of finding out.

**KLOTHE (EAGER)**

Yes? What is it?

**MELENKIUS**

We could sit here and wait.

(KLOTHE LOOKS BEHIND HIMSELF, TWISTING AROUND)

**KLOTHE**

I suppose it wouldn't hurt.

**MELENKIUS**

Let's hope not.

(HE LOOKS A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE)

---

(PAUSE)

**ROBOT**

Would sirs care for some refreshment while they wait for Mr Reggianus?

**MELENKIUS**

What an excellent idea, Henrius Biscus! Bring on the food and wine!

(KLOTHE (SUDDENLY LEAPING TO HIS FEET))

Wait a minute! Did you say Mr Reggianus, Biscus?

**ROBOT**

(SUDDENLY LOOKING RATHER CAGEY)

Mm, ah... I believe...

**MELENKIUS**

(GETTING TO HIS FEET)

Well? Out with it, Henrius! Who are we waiting for?

**KLOTHE**

I believe he mentioned one Mr Reggianus.

**ROBOT**

Hum. Yes, I believe I did. Though I would be grateful if sirs could kindly forget such a regrettable incident.

**MELENKIUS (TO KLOTHE)**

He knows something about all this!

**KLOTHE**

And I would like to know a little more about what he knows.

**MELENKIUS**

(SEARCHING IN HIS POCKETS ONCE AGAIN)

I'm sure that I've got a super-screwdriver in here somewhere.

**KLOTHE**

Then, dear Melenkius, please discover it quickly, and prepare to operate!

(HE CIRCLES ROUND THE ROBOT SO THAT HE IS STANDING BEHIND IT AS MELENKIUS APPROACHES IT FROM IN FRONT, BRANDISHING WITH MENACE THE SCREWDRIVER WHICH HAS TURNED UP)

**ROBOT**

Sirs! Sirs!

(HE RETREATS FROM MELENKIUS UNTIL HE BUMPS INTO KLOTHE'S STOMACH)

Such drastic action is unnecessary! Within the

hour Mr Reggianus will be here himself, and he will explain everything!

**MELENKIUS**

(LOWERING THE SCREWDRIVER)

Are you sure?

**ROBOT**

Oh yes, Master Melenkius!

**KLOTHE**

You're going to take his word for it? Are you crazy?

**MELENKIUS**

Dearest Klothe, are you venturing to suggest that I might have built a dishonest robot?

(THE SCREWDRIVER BEGINS TO RISE ONCE MORE)

**KLOTHE**

No, no, of course not, dear friend.

**MELENKIUS (MOLLIFIED)**

I'm glad to hear it.

(HE SITS BACK DOWN)

So, Henrius, what about that food and wine?

(KLOTHE MOVES OVER TO SIT AT THE LEFT OF THE STAGE. HE AND MELENKIUS NOW FORM TWO CORNERS OF AN ISOCELES TRIANGLE, WITH THE THIRD CORNER BEING IN THE CENTRE OF THE AUDIENCE. THE ROBOT STANDS OFF TO ONE SIDE, BEHIND AND TO THE RIGHT OF MELENKIUS.)

**ROBOT**

Certainly, sir. But perhaps sir would like to postpone his repast until after the interview with Mr Reggianus?

**MELENKIUS**

Confound it, Henrius! We could be waiting all day to eat, if we hold it up on account of your mystery man!

**ROBOT**

On the contrary, sir, here is Mr Reggianus now.

**MELENKIUS AND KLOTHE**

What?

(THEY BOTH TURN TO FACE THE SKY BEHIND THEM)

**KLOTHE**

Where is his ship?

(ENTER MR REGGIANUS)

---

### Scene Three

**KLOTHE, MELENKIUS, ROBOT, MR  
REGGIANUS**

**MR REGGIANUS**

Good evening, gentlemen!

(HE ENTERED STAGE LEFT, FURTHER FORWARD  
THAN KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS. THUS THEY ARE  
CAUGHT BY SURPRISE)

**MELENKIUS**

(LOOKS TOWARD THE SETTING SUN)

Well, it's evening, at least.

**KLOTHE (NODDING)**

Some things can still be counted on.

(MELENKIUS NODS SAGACIOUSLY)

Whereas others seem to be feathers blown in  
the wind. Our memories, for instance.

**MELENKIUS**

Explain yourself, Mr Reggianus!

**MR REGGIANUS**

All in good time, my friends. First, let Henrius  
bring us some refreshments.

**KLOTHE**

You are no friend of ours, Reggianus. Is it  
possible that my memory could have been  
tampered with to such an extent that the hate I  
now feel for you is groundless?

**MR REGGIANUS**

Friend Klothe, I fear that you grow incoherent!  
As I said, wait and I shall explain.

(REGGIANUS WAVES AT THE ROBOT, WHO EXITS  
STAGE RIGHT)

**KLOTHE**

Melenkius, do you believe what we are  
hearing! Insulted in our own grounds, told to  
wait at the beck and call of this scoundrel! Well  
I'll have none of it!

(HE LEAPS TO HIS FEET, PUTS UP HIS FISTS, AND  
ADVANCES ON MR REGGIANUS.)

I'll teach this ruffian a lesson or two!

**MELENKIUS**

Teach the devil one or two from me as well!

(KLOTHE BANGS INTO AN INVISIBLE BARRIER)

**MR REGGIANUS**

Another time, perhaps.

(KLOTHE STALKS THE EDGE OF THE BARRIER,  
WHICH IS A CIRCLE OF FIVE METRES' DIAMETER  
WITH MR REGGIANUS AT ITS CENTRE)

A small precaution, for your safety as much as  
mine, I assure you.

(MELENKIUS STANDS UP, AND KLOTHE MOVES  
OVER TO STAND BESIDE HIM)

**MELENKIUS**

It's time to explain. What has been going on  
today? What's happened to our memories?  
Why did Klothe order Henrius to forget  
everything? Why did Klothe forget everything  
himself?

**KLOTHE**

Who are you? Why are you here? How did you  
come to control our robotic servants? And what  
do you plan to do next?

**MR REGGIANUS**

That's enough questions for now! I'll try to  
explain, then, since you seem so intent on my  
doing so. Where should I begin? Do you  
remember your names? Yes, of course you do.  
Do you remember what you do?

**MELENKIUS**

Of course! I designed and constructed both  
these grounds and our robotic servants.

**MR REGGIANUS**

And you, Klothe, what do you do?

**KLOTHE**

Why, what a ridiculous question! I am... my  
chosen profession is...

**MR REGGIANUS**

Yes?

**KLOTHE**

It seems that you are still playing tricks with  
our memories.

**MELENKIUS**

It's obvious. He's here with me, he must be my  
companion, my friend, or my assistant.

**KLOTHE**

I, your assistant, Melenkius? I fear that Mr  
Reggianus has gone a step too far in addling  
your brains! You seem to have lost your mind  
entirely! Do you forget who took the initiative

this morning? Who got us to the meeting-place on time? I am quite obviously the leader of this group! You are probably one of my employees.

**MELENKIUS**

Why, you... secretary!

**KLOTHE**

Handyman!

**MELENKIUS**

Clerk!

**KLOTHE**

Hired hand!

**MR REGGIANUS**

Gentlemen, please calm down! Neither of you are completely wrong, and no one of you is the subordinate of the other. You are Klothe and Melenkius, the famous constructors! Known and respected throughout the galaxy! Who has not admired the Twisting Tower of Ramacolos Five? Who has not marvelled at the Gardens of Tricelope, hanging from the stars? And who could resist the lure of the Dancing Palace of the Star Lords?

**MELENKIUS**

They seem to ring a bell... Only the bell sounds so distantly that it may well be ringing in another's head.

**KLOTHE**

Nicely put, my friend, if a little overdone. I have the same feeling.

**MR REGGIANUS**

The most famous constructors in the universe! And while one dealt with the immense paperwork that your enterprises entailed, the other concentrated his abilities in purely technical areas. Equals, partners and friends, your always-linked names became synonymous with co-operation and harmony.

**KLOTHE**

Really?

**MR REGGIANUS**

Really. Where is that robot?

(THE ROBOT ENTERS, BRINGING A TRAY OF FOOD AND WINE FOR KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS. THEY BEGIN TO SIP THE WINE)

**MR REGGIANUS**

That's better.

**MELENKIUS**

That all sounds quite idyllic, but what went wrong?

**MR REGGIANUS**

It is rather difficult to explain.

**KLOTHE**

Please, Mr Reggianus, make the attempt.

**MR REGGIANUS**

An ill-advised shift of emphasis.

**MELENKIUS**

(GLARING AT KLOTHE)

A business error, you mean?

**MR REGGIANUS**

Not exactly. A change of format, if you will. You began working in one material, then switched to another.

**KLOTHE**

(GLARING AT MELENKIUS)

A-ha! Shoddy workmanship!

**MR REGGIANUS**

No, not that either. I told you that this would be difficult to explain. I was trying to use a metaphor which you would both understand. Perhaps a better way of putting it would be to say that someone began working you in one material, then switched to another.

**KLOTHE**

Someone has been working us?

**MELENKIUS**

Do you mean to say that I am some kind of marionette?

**MR REGGIANUS (SMILING)**

If you are, then someone is holding some very thick strings.

**KLOTHE**

You'll forgive us when we do not laugh.

**MR REGGIANUS**

Ahem, yes, I'm sorry.

---

**KLOTHE**

And the outcome of this change?

**MR REGGIANUS**

Oh, the usual, a certain confusion about your origins, your abilities, even your relationship. Your very appearance has even been in doubt. All these things are common in a transition of this kind.

**MELENKIUS**

And what happens next?

**MR REGGIANUS**

Oh, don't worry about that. That's really why I'm here: to allay your fears about the future. The disorientation that you have been experiencing as a result of the change in genre should disappear as your new creator becomes more sure of himself and of your new forms. I play a very important part in that process.

**KLOTHE**

Is that so?

**MR REGGIANUS**

That is so.

**MELENKIUS**

Have you anything to add?

**MR REGGIANUS**

I can think of nothing. The two of you seem to be developing remarkably rapidly. Your definition is increasing with every passing moment.

**KLOTHE**

When shall you be leaving?

**MR REGGIANUS**

Very soon, I believe.

**MELENKIUS**

And you shall be returning control of the robotic servants to our hands?

**MR REGGIANUS**

Naturally.

**MELENKIUS**

That all seems satisfactory to me. All very clear. Klothe?

**KLOTHE**

I agree completely. So with the assent of my partner...

(MELENKIUS NODS)

I'll bid you farewell, Mr Reggianus.

**MR REGGIANUS**

Farewell, gentlemen! Don't worry, things will get simpler from here on in!

(EXIT MR REGGIANUS STAGE LEFT)

(KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS SILENT A MOMENT)

(RE-ENTER MR REGGIANUS, HOLDING A FEW STAPLED PIECES OF PAPER.)

**MELENKIUS**

What, you again?

**MR REGGIANUS (STRIDING OVER TO MELENKIUS)**

I thought that you might like to take a look at this.

(HE PASSES THE PAPERS TO MELENKIUS)

**MELENKIUS**

What's this?

(READING)

"The First Sally of Klothe and Melenkius; or, How Things Came to Be". It's a story about us, Klothe! We're famous!

**KLOTHE**

(WALKS OVER AND TAKES THE PAPERS. HE LOOKS THROUGH THEM)

This isn't about us, Melenkius! Do you ever remember meeting a certain Lucien de Fer, who kidnapped us and took us to the furthest end of the universe?

**MELENKIUS**

I can't say I do.

**MR REGGIANUS**

You will before long, don't worry, you will...

(HE WALKS OFF-STAGE WITHOUT THEM NOTICING)

**KLOTHE**

(TO MR REGGIANUS, HE BELIEVES)

If you think this attempt at flattery changes anything, you're quite, quite wrong.

(TURNING)

Ah, he's gone, it seems...

---



## Scene Four

KLOTHE, MELENKIUS, ROBOT

**KLOTHE**

What did you make of all that, then, my dear old Melenkius?

**MELENKIUS**

The same as you, I'm sure, friend Klothe. The man was obviously a lunatic.

**KLOTHE**

Admittedly a lunatic in possession of some rather useful hypnosis and force-shield technology...

**MELENKIUS**

But a lunatic none the less!

**KLOTHE**

Precisely!

**MELENKIUS**

I have heard nothing so ridiculous in all my life. Men as puppets! A creator pulling the strings? What hogwash! Men are men, the world is the world...

**KLOTHE**

And whatever happened to the women?

**MELENKIUS (SADLY)**

Hmmm.

(PAUSE)

Anyway, people can't be just changed in the manner he implied.

(MELENKIUS BEGINS TO RUMMAGE AROUND IN HIS POCKETS)

**KLOTHE**

Of course they can't.

(MELENKIUS BEGINS TO HEAD TOWARDS THE ROBOT)

**ROBOT**

Does sir need any assistance?

**MELENKIUS**

No thanks, I can do this without help.

(MELENKIUS TAKES THE SUPER-SCREWDRIVER OUT OF HIS POCKET)

**KLOTHE**

What are you doing, Melenkius?

**MELENKIUS**

(PUTTING THE SCREWDRIVER TO THE ROBOT'S NECK)

I'm going to reprogram this blasted robot! He's going to spend the rest of his existence clearing out the sewage tanks at the nearest baby farm. And what's more, he'll be programmed to find it extremely unpleasant.

**KLOTHE**

A fine joke, but a little cruel, don't you think? He couldn't help what he did.

**MELENKIUS**

(PUTTING THE SCREWDRIVER AWAY, WITH SOME RELUCTANCE)

I suppose that you're right.

**KLOTHE**

(PUTTING HIS ARM AROUND HIS FRIEND'S SHOULDERS)

Good, now let's be on our way. There's a lot to be done tomorrow. We must get back to the mansion.

**MELENKIUS**

Ah, that's true. The appointments and assignments are piled higher than Granulian cheese on Worldwide Cheese-Climbing Day. There is much work to be done.

**KLOTHE**

(THEY BEGIN TO WALK OFF STAGE)

You know that's the case. First up, I believe, is a certain Victorum Etchamosey, who wants a mechanical bear to eat his spare children.

**MELENKIUS**

Hmmm... the case offers certain fascinating technical problems...

(FADING AS THEY LEAVE THE STAGE)

How to keep the teeth clean, for example...

(EXIT KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS)

(THE ROBOT LOOKS AROUND. HE STARES AT THE AUDIENCE, PICKS UP THE ORANGES, WAVES FOR THE CURTAIN TO FALL AND LEAVES THE STAGE)

## THE END

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# The Quarterly Review

## World on a Plate

**Rask Trandon**

Dones, TPB, 410pp, \$14.99

Trandon develops a trenchant thesis in this book, relating to his belief in the decline of science fiction as a significant literary genre, and attributing this supposed decline to recent technological advances. He argues that we need not the new from our writers, because we get it every day in our Amazon delivery. Notably, though, he fails to mention what proportion of those Amazon deliveries contain science fiction novels! Delivering such a provocative theory, Trandon needed to back it up with very substantial evidence, and that is not to be found in this volume. It will do his reputation as a ritual slayer of sacred cows no harm, but will do him no favours in the academic community. – *SWT*

## Black Holes and Revelations

**Muse**

Space rock, £8.95 ([www.play.com](http://www.play.com))

Muse are probably the most science fictional group of any standing in the world at the moment. This fourth album proper features tracks concerning space travel, Cydonia, super-massive black holes and alien governments. Your enjoyment of it, however, may heavily depend upon your tolerance for the singer's voice. If it catches you at the wrong time, you might think it the sound of an elastic band as it stretched, amplified beyond human tolerance.

Heard at the right time, however, it's a fist being clenched, a crossbow bolt being drawn back, a rocket taking off! – *SWT*

## Jennie Rindon's Cosmic Machine

Nighton Dood, HB, 268pp, \$19.99

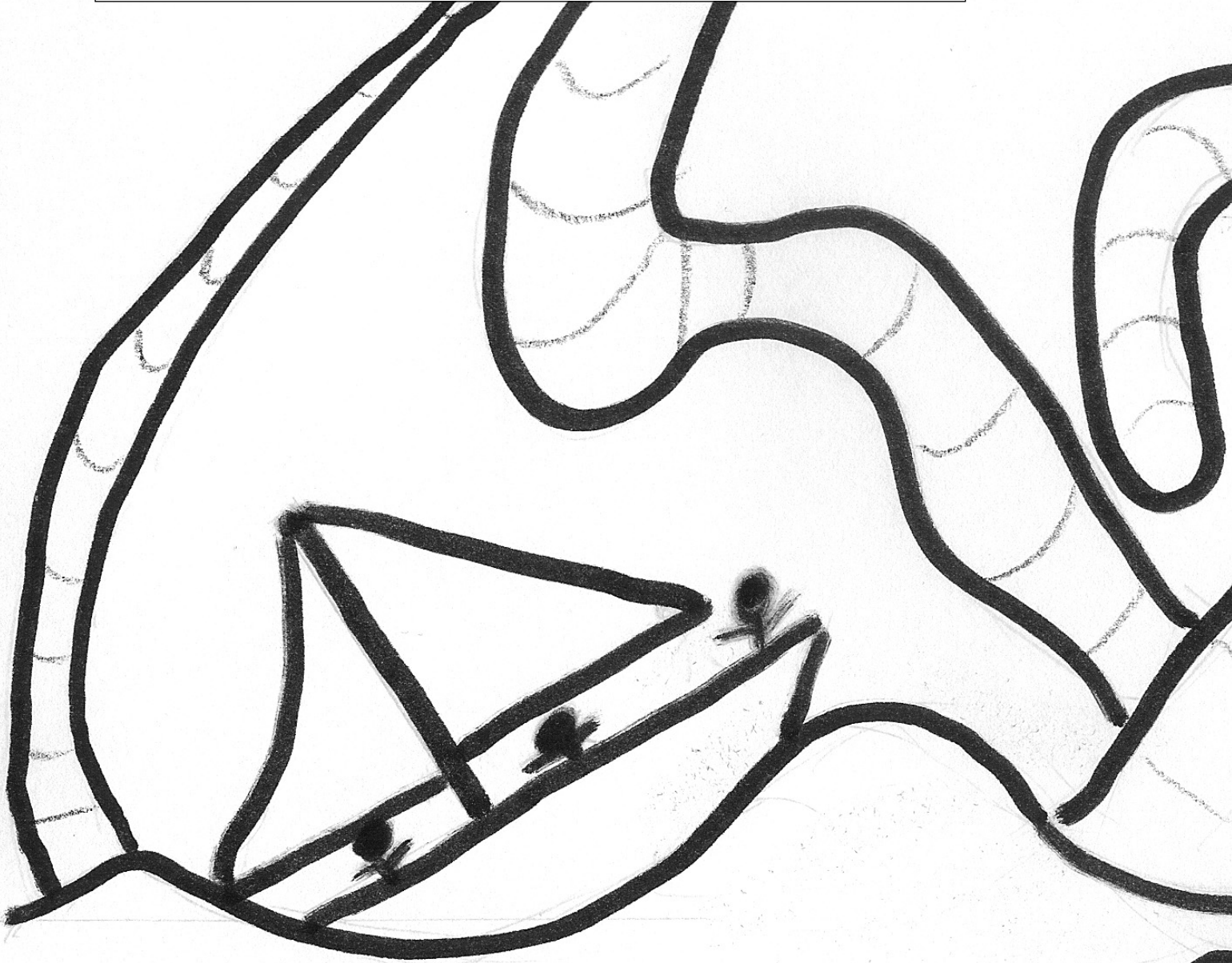
Well-known for her occasional appearances in such cult tv shows as *Space University Trent* and *Man versus Mansion*, actor Jennie Rindon has decided to dabble in novel-writing – to some extent, at least. I say “to some extent” because, as the more observant among you might have noticed, there is, as is so often the case, a possessive apostrophe and an “s” between the actor's name and the title of the book.

Which makes it all the more surprising that *Cosmic Machine* is so good. The writing is professional and clear, with action described well and atmosphere created adroitly, while the idea at the core of the novel, of a cosmic machine which could potentially destroy the mind of everyone in the universe – *if they happen to be thinking about love when it is turned on* – is chilling to the extreme.

This actor has clearly, somehow, come up with one startlingly good idea for a novel, and the publisher has hired just the right ghost writer to translate that idea to the page. That should not be a crime. Many people have great ideas for novels which they could never write themselves. Let's commend all involved for producing a book with such an important message – that love is important, and needs always to be protected from those who would harm it. – *HP*



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– CONCLUDED!**



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# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #12

*In which Newton Braddell, now a Seasoned Adventurer, continues to Immerse himself in all Manner of Escapades upon the strange world of Kadaloor, studying Various Beasts as they Present themselves and making Numerous new Friends and Enemies, all the while remaining Utterly Befuddled as to the original Nature and Purpose of his Expedition into Space. As ever, the Braddell saga is Not Concluded in this Issue. £3.99*

*Autumn 2006*





# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 12

Autumn

2006

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Helen and Her Magic Cat  
*Steven Gilligan*

Published by  
 Silver Age Books

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# Editorial

## Newton Braddell Rides Again!

This issue is devoted to the devoon Newton Braddell, whose incomparably inconclusive researches have appeared in a number of our

previous issues. They continue here, as remarkably as ever.

As one saga continues, another begins – that of Helen and Her Magic Cat, written and drawn by master cartoonist Steven Gilligan. We hope this hilarious strip will be a permanent fixture on the back cover (or thereabouts) for many issues to come. – *SWT*

# News

## Lost Skies of Agramennon

The inhabitants of Agramennon on the planet Fargo are learning this year to cope without a sky above their heads. An all-consuming void appeared in orbit last month, leaving them staring into nothing from one midnight to the next. Reports suggest that life continues much as before, although a shortage of torches threatens to create conflict, and doctors report higher than usual levels of depression. Astrophysicists have no explanation for the phenomenon, but expect it to disappear within a matter of months, basing this conclusion on an analysis of fluctuations in its circumference.

## Strange Pets of History

The Lagerton Museum of Social History in Birmingham is planning an exhibition on the strangest pets the world has ever seen, and the

art and literature inspired by them. Of course, the crab-bird of Julius Caesar will be front and centre, as represented by Michelangelo's marvellous sculpture, flown in from Italy especially. The sabre-toothed jellyshark, so beloved by Abraham Lincoln, will also make an appearance, and rumour has it that a member of this bizarre and rarely-seen species has been specially captured for this show. Sure to delight lovers of the arcane and the uncanny, this is an exhibition not to be missed.

## New Doctor Who Companion Confirmed

We have it on express authority that the Doctor's new companion in the Tardis will be Martin J Donovan. He has appeared on Doctor Who several times previously, portraying various creatures in full body costumes, such as the Voracious Terracrick, the Dasjon, and the 99xbraz Leader. Now he will move to the fore, playing Wholen, an alien crustacean who stands two metres tall.

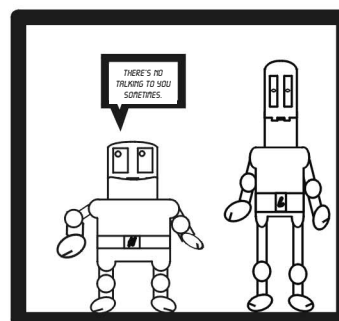
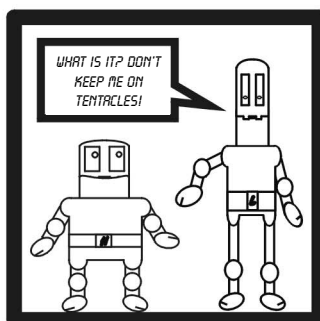
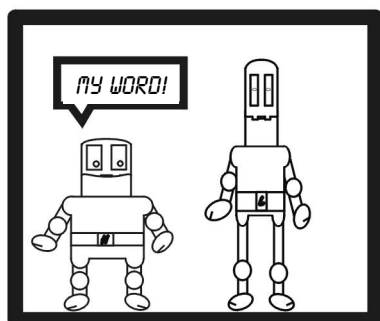
Responding to early concerns by fans that the



character may prove difficult to work into storylines (as previously was the case with short-lived companion Nalnor, whose immunity to the Tardis's psychic circuitry made it necessary for

the Doctor to translate everything for him), Donvan said not to worry – everything has been worked out in advance, and viewers are in for the ride of their lives!

# ROBOTS, IN A SPACESHIP



ROBOTS ARE SURPRISED!

BY  
WALT BRUNSTON

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# Newton

**And His Inconclusive  
Researches Into  
The Unknown:  
the Saga  
Continues**

**John Greenwood**



# Braddell

## Previously, in Newton Braddell...

*A mysterious but compulsive computer game on his spaceship's on-board computer has made Newton Braddell, intrepid space adventurer, forget all details of his mission. After crash-landing on an unknown but strangely familiar planet, the captain of the Tanjong Pagar encounters a multitude of astonishing and weird alien lifeforms, as he attempts to retrieve both his ship and his lost purpose.*

## Captured by the Punggol

Escape I did, not through my own efforts I hasten to add, but through the blind mechanisms of chance, the roll of a whirring, metal die upon a gaming table of bedrock. The snaking passage-ways, crossing each other in frenzied arabesques miles beneath the surface of the alien planet, brought me after an interval of some days, incredibly, to the surface. I had not been made aware of the light sensors which had been installed on the shell of the *Tanjong Pagar*, and which cut the drill motor the instant that daylight broke into my lunatic's burrow, but I was uncommonly grateful for their existence, and for the foresight of my erstwhile hosts, the bird-people of Kadaloor. A few days removal from

the kind warmth of the sun, albeit an alien star, may seem a trivial deprivation to those who have not suffered it. As an infant cries inconsolably when separated from its mother, for it knows not whether the source of life will return, so I despaired of ever returning to the surface, and my sudden deliverance was one of the greatest joys imaginable. I kissed the Kadaloorian soil, unhelmeted and unprotected from the noxious microbes teeming therein. I danced and gambolled upon the rocks of that cheerless wasteland where chance had seen fit to release me.

For my surroundings were far removed from that grand and stately forest which was home to the bird-people. Not a single tree broke the sterile monotony of the horizon, and barely a handful of tough, scrubby bushes and half-dead clumps of grass clung to the pale rocks beneath my feet. Evidently I had travelled far from my origin, and perhaps it were as well that I had, for my leave-taking of the bird-people had been less courteous than I had wished, and I was still

anxious lest news of my unwitting rampage had travelled.

My first priority was to make contact with the local inhabitants, should they even exist, for what civilisation could flourish in such barren conditions? I dared not tinker further with the control mechanisms of the modified *Tanjong Pagar*, for fear that I might once again be plunged into a headlong descent through the interior of the planet. Abandoning the mutilated spacecraft, I shouldered my pack and struck out towards the setting sun, which direction I decided should be designated West, as it is on Earth. Such trifling reminders of home proved invaluable in preserving what little funds of sanity and common sense I still had at my disposal.

These assets were significantly reduced when, after four days' march across a featureless plain without a single indication of intelligent life, or even a landmark to judge my progress, I sat down on a flat rock and did not stand up again. My reserves of water were nearly exhausted, and any hopes of returning to the spacecraft were long vanished. I lay down on my back and looked up at the pitiless, orange sky, idly wondering how I had come to die in such ridiculous circumstances. Like the majority of humanity, when such narcissistic considerations had crossed my mind, I had pictured my own death in very different circumstances, a dignified and untroubled parting after a lifetime filled with worthy achievements. Never had I imagined that I would expire on an uncharted alien planet, attempting to fulfil a crucial but mislaid purpose. It appeared to me that life was no more than a tiresome joke, told by some would-be wit who has forgotten the punchline.

When I emerged from these disconsolate meditations, I felt a subtle change in the quality of light pushing against my closed eyelids. When I opened my eyes, the cause was immediately apparent to me: a vast black shape was blocking out the sun. I do not think that the ancient peoples of the Earth could have been more astonished by an eclipse than I was at that moment. The black square grew as it descended, and resolved itself into the underside of a large

flying craft, which landed as silently and as gently as a dragonfly on a lily pond, a few metres away from me. How could I have failed to spot such a vast and lumbering vehicle in the clear, unimpeded sky above me? The reader will be forgiven for thinking me a thundering incompetent, but there was a rational explanation for my oversight, which I learned soon enough from my rescuers.

There could have been no greater contrast between the Kadaloorian bird-people, and the creatures who called themselves the Punggol. No earthly analogue will suffice to give the reader an adequate mental picture of this race, for they bore no resemblance to any bird or beast I had ever seen or heard tell of. The Punggol were perfectly spherical in form, and at first sight I assumed that they were devoid of any visible features or limbs. They resembled nothing more than large, flaccid beach balls of a purple hue, with a slightly rubbery texture. Their method of propulsion under normal circumstances was to push themselves along by means of a series of internal weights that, when properly manipulated, altered the centre of gravity, causing the individual Punggol to roll. All this was explained to me in due time by the Punggol themselves, but I feel obligated to offer the reader a brief introduction to the peculiar physiology of my new hosts.

Moreover, the Punggol were able to manifest their various orifices and organs on any part of their continuous surface. Where an eye was needed, there it would appear, to gather what images the Punggol needed, before receding once again beneath the skin. Equally mobile and secreted behind layers of purple skin were the Punggol's equivalent of our mouths, ears and nostrils, as well as its reproductive and excretory organs. In addition to these, I glimpsed several fleeting features of uncertain purpose, but thought it rude to enquire further. The Punggols could produce all manner of flexible limbs from within their spherical bodies, which reminded me of nothing more than the tentacles of an octopus, and which were principally used to manipulate objects. Very occasionally, in circumstances of great urgency, the Punggols

---

could use these tentacles to propel themselves along the ground at high speed, but only for very short distances.

The description I have furnished of this singular species may give rise to feelings of repulsion and fear in the minds of those readers whose imaginations are wont to compose images of clarity too vivid for calm reflection. I admit to experiencing a slight trepidation on first encountering the Punggol, but even the most unusual sights become commonplace given time and sufficient exposure. The Punggol sensed my unease, and were kind enough to assume a fixed arrangement of their features whenever I was in their presence. Unhappily, their model for this approximation of the human visage was of course my own, so that I was continually surrounded by distorted reflections of my own face, moulded inexpertly onto the surface of those undulating purple spheres. These efforts to put me at my ease had precisely the opposite effect, but I felt it churlish to complain.

My attitude towards the Punggol was not initially so charitable. Once I had been taken aboard their cuboid aircraft, I was anxious to learn how they had managed to arrive at my location so quickly and so stealthily.

“Oh, we have been following you ever since you appeared on the surface,” was the cordial reply of the ship’s commander, an individual who went by the name of Bukit Batok. “Our ship is equipped with an effective cloaking device, and the engines are virtually silent in any case. You would not have noticed our presence had we not chosen to reveal ourselves to you.”

His glib reply enraged me. I had come very close to death in that stony wilderness, and I told him so without compunction. And to think that, every step of my weary journey, I had been dogged by a hidden pursuer, observing my toil and suffering with cool indifference! What was the meaning of this expedition?

“We might ask you the same question,” replied the commander, his replies translated after a short delay by my Dover and Somerset box. “A trespasser on the last sacred reserve of the Punggol is not in a position to be demanding explanations.”

Realising the delicacy of my position, I made my apologies as best I could, but insisted that I was unaware of the special status accorded to the lifeless plains I had been wandering. My protestations of innocence were accepted, but there was still some wariness on the part of the Punggols. “If we had suspected you of being an Insider, you would have been destroyed instantly,” the commander warned.

I could not help but enquire as to the identity of these so-called Insiders. The explanation furnished by my rescuers (or my captors, for my status was as yet undetermined) only served to further fuel my curiosity, and I managed to piece together the following account, which I offer to the reader as it stands, incomplete and almost certainly flawed.

I felt confident that the Insiders the Punggols referred to with such distaste were in fact the Kadaloorians, those gentle and highly developed avians whose company I had quit so suddenly. My breakthrough came when the commander happened to allude to the Insiders using the derogatory term “stick-faces”, clearly a reference to the graceful beaks of the bird-people. I was not a little relieved that, in my haste to escape from the juddering wreck of the *Tanjong Pagar*, I had neglected to don my helmet, with its long filter-tube projecting from the nasal area. The Punggol were of the fixed opinion that the Kadaloorians dwelt exclusively beneath the crust of their planet, which they knew only as Pung. Astronomical orthodoxy held that Pung was neither spherical, nor a flat disc as the ancients of Earth had once maintained. In spite of the not inconsiderable evidence to the contrary, the Punggol believed their planet to be a torus; that is, in the shape of a doughnut or, for the more savoury minded, a bagel. Moreover, this was a hollow doughnut, and the domain of the bird-people was thought to occupy the space inside. The sun in this hallucinatory solar system took the form of a large flat mirror, which merely reflected light from an obscure source the Punggol called the Deep Fire, as close to a deity as anything in their queer system of beliefs. Their two-dimensional sun threaded itself through the central hole on a daily

schedule, while Pung itself rotated serenely around its empty centre, a year being the measure of its full revolution. A Punggol map is a diagram that would baffle the most proficient cartographer. In the Punggol scheme of geography, all the inhabitable regions of their world lie on the inner rim of the doughnut, for the outer diameter sees little if any sunlight for at least six months of the year. This long ribbon of lifeless ice corresponds to the poles of our Earth. But there was an additional reason why the outer rim could not sustain life, quite apart from its temperature. For the Punggol had no conception of gravity in the ordinary sense of the word. It was their solidly held belief that objects were held to the inner circumference of Pung by centrifugal force alone, and any organism wishing to set up home on the outer rim would be instantly flung off by the same immeasurable energies. I could recall no other culture, primitive or otherwise, which had entertained such an absurd notion of its own place in the universe, but I thought it politic to keep such comments to myself while I endeavoured to learn as much as I was able about the Punggol and their beliefs.

It has often been said that there is a grain of truth in every myth, and the Punggol must have had some experience of the bird-people and their burrowing habits, for every instance of seismic activity in Pung's history was immediately blamed on the perfidious Kadaloorians and their incessant digging. The bird-people, bereft of any sunlight in their interior kingdom, were naturally covetous of the surface territory and, according to tradition, were persistent in their attempts to break out from the Inside and take over lands rightfully held by the Punggol. Earthquakes were just one of the tactics used to break the spirit of the proud race of purple spheres, and the Punggol were constantly on their guard against spies and blackguards amongst their own people.

Rarely have I met a more belligerent or less trusting race. While their society was riven by countless lesser feuds and intrigues, the Punggol tended to divide for reasons of political expediency into two loose coalitions, and a state of

open warfare had existed between them for many generations.

The origins of their mutual enmity were founded in an unseemly squabble over the country's most abundant natural resource: a mineral known locally as novena. The Punggol themselves had no use for this white, chalky substance, which lay in long, fat reefs beneath their barren country. Novena's value was only appreciated by the inhabitants of other nearby planets, whose monstrous cargo ships were perpetually in orbit above Pung, sending down transporter modules to remove the ore from the extensive Punggol mines. A broad, lifeless band of exhausted novena mines served to separate the two nations, who were both extracting the ore as fast as they were able, in order to buy weapons that could be hurled against each other.

The Punggol themselves were by no means certain as to the purpose to which their precious natural resource was put. They were not by nature an inquisitive race, and as long as their customers paid for their goods, they were satisfied. Some of the Punggol hinted that the soft, white rock was, under the right conditions, an effective explosive, which made me wonder why they did not employ it themselves as an aid to their mining. A contrary rumour held that novena was a type of narcotic whose efficacy was limited to a certain species of giant single-celled organisms who ruled over a watery planet on the edge of their solar system.

Whatever the purpose of the natural resource which nature had judged fit to bestow on the Punggol, it had made them rich, and with wealth had come conflict. There was not a single community of these spherical oddities that had escaped the ravages of sustained war, and no individual lived who could remember the day on which hostilities had not raged in some part of the Punggol territory.

Locked in such a fearsome struggle, why did the Punggol concern themselves with the activities of the so-called Insiders?

"The Insiders consort with the enemy," was the reply of the ship's commander. "They conspire against us all, pitting one faction against the other. Their ultimate aim is to

weaken our resolve and annihilate our entire race. All the misfortunes that we Punggol have suffered can be traced back to their meddling.”

My impressions of the gentle Kadaloorians could not square with this grisly description, but any attempts to alter their opinions were inevitably futile. One might have easily persuaded a man of the Devil’s benevolence. But the malevolent Insiders were a relatively recent addition to Punggol mythology, for the bird-people and their labyrinth of tunnels were discovered with the digging of the first novena mines. Before the unearthing of that fateful mineral, the Punggol had lived a simpler existence, rolling around the expanses of flat rock at peace with their fellows and unaware of the great wealth sleeping beneath.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked the chief of the purple beings, as we swept magisterially over the edge of the sacred reserve, and began to enter mining country, a land scarred by a thousand wounds, its skin blistered with rubble and quarries, and dotted with pale lavender cubes, hundreds of metres tall, which I correctly took for mining facilities.

“We are taking you to our capital, where you will be interrogated,” was the chilling reply. “We are not entirely convinced that you are not a spy for the enemy, even if you are not an Insider.”

The city had little to recommend it to the student of architecture. Constructed mostly in mauve, its buildings were no grander or more delightful to the eye than the Punggol mines, and clung rigidly to the aesthetic of stark, brutalist boxes. As we made our soundless descent into what I assumed were the grounds of some police station or army barracks, something caught my eye, a monument standing in a deserted plaza. Standing alone amidst that desert of straight lines, a humanoid statue mounted on a pedestal could hardly fail to attract my attention. I called to a guard, who revealed a tolerably human face on the near side of his round body, and asked the meaning of the statue.

His violet face creased in unfriendly laughter. “You are a cunning spy who pretends not to know of the Great Traitor!”

“The Great Traitor? Why would any society

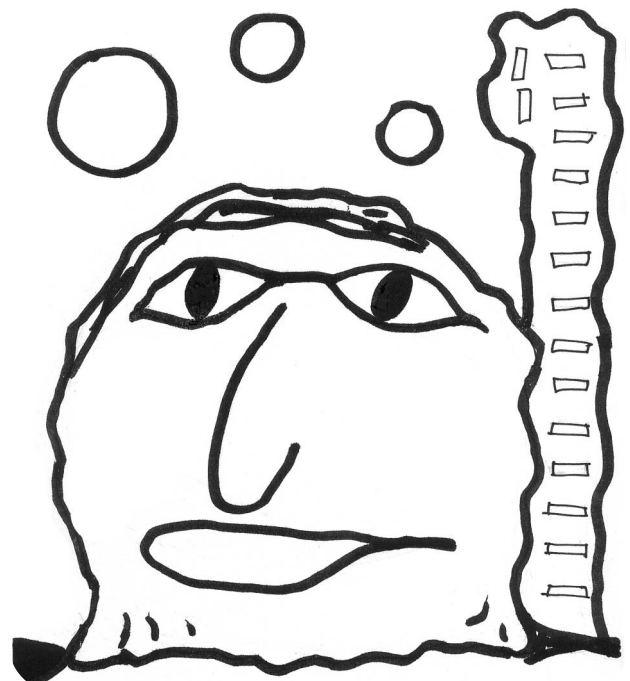
erect such a monument to a traitor?” I asked, but the guard’s face had been subsumed into his enveloping outer skin, and he stood there watching me without a word until the ship had settled and I was escorted out into a courtyard.

Ever since I had been taken aboard, my worst fears had been that the Punggol meant to imprison me. Now my worst fears were realised. Two or three of the purple globes butted against my legs impatiently, urging me forward towards a squat, windowless block. Thinking fast, I made a dash for it, and headed back towards the Punggol airship, but before I had travelled more than a few yards, powerful tentacles had ensnared my legs, and I crashed to the ground.

“I have done you no wrong!” I cried, as the Punggol guards bound me with their repulsive appendages, and lifted me bodily from the ground.

“You were caught trespassing on sacred ground! In all probability you were prospecting for new reefs of novena,” barked the ship’s commander. “That offence alone is enough to imprison you for a short stretch, say two hundred years.”

It appeared that the life expectancy of the Punggol was considerably higher than the brief century and a half allotted to humanity. The thought brought me close to despair.



“And if you are found to have engaged in espionage for the enemy, life imprisonment is the least you can expect.”

My cell was so cramped that I could barely sit upright. No ray of light could penetrate into this chill, stone pod, and the facilities were limited to a small hole in the floor. What is more, the chamber was round. Even the door was carefully shaped to complete the perfect sphere in which I was confined. Was this to be my home for the rest of my natural life? I refused to consider the possibility: that way madness beckoned.

## The Great Traitor

“Ready to talk now, are you?” My interrogator sat at the tiny open doorway and viewed me with distaste. “Had enough?” A lilac tentacle emerged from his rotund body and poked at me inquisitively.

“Had enough of what?” I enquired. Was he under the impression that I had already been tortured? But I had only arrived here a few minutes ago.

“Oh, we have a tough one!” said the Punggol. “Well, we shall see how long you can hold out. In the meantime, let us see what we can learn from the contents of this bag.” He held before him my backpack, and began to unfasten the buckles with agile members. I could breathe easily on that score: there was nothing within that could incriminate me, even in the eyes of one of this distrustful species.

My empty water bottles were thrown aside, and my Dover and Somerset box shaken and rattled, but thankfully I knew it not to be damaged, as it was still operational, and interpreting the words of my captor without apparent error.

The Punggol had assumed a face distressingly like my own for the purposes of our conversation, and when he pulled the next item out of the bag, the expression of disgust which my own

reflected features assumed was something I would happily forget, were I able.

“What kind of debased monster are you?” shrieked the Punggol, dropping the item, and rolling away a few feet in horrified retreat.

I looked down at the offending article: to my mild surprise, I saw that it was the Bedoki puzzle I had accepted as a gift from the infant Kadaloorian. Carved from a round Bedok nut, the irregular pieces of the game formed a sphere when complete, as they did now. The sight was a reminder of happier times spent in the company of the benevolent bird-people. I instinctively picked up the Bedok nut, and cradled it in the palm of my hand.

“Put that down, I beg you!” screamed my interrogator. “How can you bear to touch it?”

I could not hope to understand the meaning of my captor’s distress, but I saw immediately the opportunity it offered. Uncurling myself from the curved recesses of my cell, I emerged into the corridor, and approached the terrified Punggol, holding the Bedoki puzzle in my outstretched hand, as though it were some form of weapon. The Punggol seemed to concur with that assessment, and shrank back into a corner, groaning piteously.

My demands were improvised, and had I been given time to consider at my leisure, I should have revised and expanded them. But in the urgency of that moment, my greatest need was for escape, and this I put at the top of my list. My Punggol interrogator, an individual named Bukit Paiyang, became my hostage, as I rolled him through the maze of corridors, fending off the incensed prison guards with a wave of my Bedoki puzzle. It seemed there was not one amongst the Punggol who could stand unflinchingly before the sight of that harmless child’s toy, and after a few hectic minutes I was out in the courtyard, my hostage quivering all over his violet body.

“If you obey my instructions, the Bedoki will stay in the bag,” I assured my rotund captive. “But doubt not that I will use it again, should it prove necessary.”

“What would you have me do?” cried Bukit Paiyang.

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I pointed to the aircraft in which we had arrived. "For starters, we will acquire this ship. I assume that you are able to navigate such a vehicle?"

Whether or not he had the necessary skill to manoeuvre the metal cube, my Punggol hostage had no stomach for dissent, and we were soon rising unsteadily above the blunted spires of the city. I instructed my cowed pilot to take us towards the wide desert of abandoned mines and scarred hillsides that formed a buffer between the two warring tribes of Pung.

Once again my curiosity was piqued by that solitary statue depicting a figure that, if I did not know better, I would have called human. I endeavoured to learn all I could about the so-called Great Traitor while I still had the upper hand, for it was far from certain that my current position of power would go unchallenged. Bukit Paiyang, terrified of a further confrontation with the Bedoki puzzle, furnished me with the following account, although he professed astonishment that anyone should be so ignorant.

"Long ago, in the earliest days of Pung, we Punggol lived in harmony with each other, and with other intelligent species."

"Ah yes," I said. "All cultures have their mythologies of a lost innocence, a time of unblemished delight when communities lived in a state of simple moral virtue. But these are mere hankerings after a childhood misremembered and cleansed of all uncomfortable truths."

"You must allow me to tell the story in my own way!" protested Bukit Paiyang, with a peevish tone clearly audible from my Dover and Somerset box. "The story is a traditional one, and some of its rougher edges may have been polished down with repeated retellings. Nevertheless, you asked me to relate the history of the Great Traitor, and I can only speak of that which I know. Of that which we cannot speak, we must remain silent!"

Pausing only to wonder where I had heard that phrase before, I promised to desist from any further interruptions until the tale had been told.

"As I was saying," continued Bukit Paiyang. "In the antiquity of our civilisation, it is written that all the inhabitants of Pung lived in mutual

respect. It was a time of poverty, but a poverty that kept us free from vices. We wanted for nothing, which is the greatest good that can befall any living thing. Our societies progressed slowly, and the ways which had sustained our great-grandparents would sustain our great-grandchildren without the need for improvement or change. Our principal means of subsistence was grazing on the lichens and moulds that grew on the surface of rocks, for nothing else has ever thrived here. We had evolved our peculiar shape and means of movement to suit the environment we shared with the lichens. On a flat plain of hard, smooth rock, without cracks or crevasses to break up the continuous surface, a rolling ball is the most efficient mover, and we Punggol are built to cover great distances over such terrain. The humans – our brother race – were a recent addition to the ecology of Pung, and they had evolved under very different circumstances on another world. But, since they showed no interest in our delicious lichens, we had no reason to fear their arrival.

"For generations we lived side by side as considerate neighbours, until a day came when this balance was upset forever. The humans had been carrying out exploratory drillings deep into the bedrock of Pung, and it was not long before incredible rumours began to spread through both our communities. The analyses of the humans' drill cores had revealed a miraculous substance locked in reefs beneath the surface in unprecedented quantities. Novena was the name given to this mineral by the ancient humans, and it was claimed that representatives from far-flung galaxies would soon be flocking to our humble planet to purchase the raw material for sums that could scarcely be reckoned using the primitive counting systems then current. The joy with which we greeted this news can be imagined. We would be the wealthiest race in the galaxy, with unrivalled power and resources. The human drillers sent word out to potential customers, and we all waited for the money to start flooding in.

"Before any buyers had a chance to inspect the goods, a sabotage was uncovered that threatened to undermine the whole scheme. The culprit was a human going by the name of

Outram Park. He had been caught red-handed by a group of Punggol guards, interfering with the drilling equipment, and in possession of large quantities of an unknown chemical, enough to fill several large vats that were found on the back of his transporter. Park was arrested and held for questioning by the Punggol, in the very same gaol you were so recently a guest of. A basic analysis of the mysterious liquid was enough to raise the alarm: the chemical was a compound of Park's own devising. When mixed with a small amount of novena, a violent chemical reaction was sparked, reducing the novena to so much smoke and oxidised slag. Apparently, Park had planned to inject vast quantities of this volatile fluid directly into the novena reefs, destroying utterly the future wealth of our planet. His methods were clear enough, but his motives remained a mystery. He appeared of sound mind, and why would anyone in possession of their wits wish to reduce the best hope of his community to a heap of worthless, black soot?

"The Punggol authorities announced that Park would be tried for treason, but the human community balked at the idea: their notions of justice differed from ours to such a large extent that neither side could contemplate the trial taking place under anything other than their own judiciary. The humans demanded Park be transferred into their custody, and were refused, first civilly, but with increasing impatience, by the Grand Bukit of the Punggol.

"In order to forestall any further complications, the Punggol announced the imminent execution of the traitor. Such a provocation caused a seismic shift in the political landscape of the humans, and a newly formed party of anti-Punggol populists quickly overthrew the existing government.

"It was not until Outram Park was liberated from the Punggol prison by a mob of armed extremists, that negotiations between the two communities broke down, sabre-rattling ceased, and swords were drawn in earnest. The conflict was brief and decisive. Humanity was quickly decimated, and reduced to a few wretched bands of guerrillas huddled in remote caves. They had

not reckoned on the low cunning of the Grand Bukit and his government, who had been in discussions with inter-planetary merchants throughout the political period of the struggle, and had already purchased highly advanced weaponry on credit, with future deliveries of novena promised in advance.

"And so the great sabotage plot of Outram Park was foiled. Humanity was all but annihilated, and the Punggol could assume the enviable position of masters over a highly-coveted natural resource. It seems incredible now to think that nobody in a position to alter the course of events had the foresight to see what was coming next: of course the Punggol then turned against each other, and the warzone we are now crossing is the unhappy result."

As Bukit Paiyang concluded his narrative, my mind was left reeling, unable to compose so many new and astonishing revelations into any semblance of a whole, as I had been equally powerless to assemble the pieces of the Bedoki game. If Paiyang's story were even remotely true, then members of my own species had for many generations called this remote planet home. How they had arrived here, when, and to what end, were questions which I dared not ask myself, for fear that my own sanity would not tolerate the answers which might emerge. For now I limited my curiosity to one question alone.

"And what became of Outram Park, the Great Traitor himself?" I demanded of my purple captive.

"His fate is unknown," replied Bukit Paiyang. "Some historians maintain that he assumed the leadership of the human guerrillas, and died the death of a rebel leader, clinging to his threadbare ideals in the badlands where no Punggol dared roam. Others suspect that he was accidentally killed during his own rescue, but that the humans conspired to hush up the calamity, for fear that their Punggol enemies would capitalise on the news and employ it to further squeeze the morale of the human army."

Our craft was gliding soundlessly over great quarries, choked with rubble and the monstrous, rusting skeletons of mining machinery.

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“But why did he do it?” I asked. “What were Park’s motives?” I was addressing these questions to myself, and did not really expect an answer. For who could enquire into the mind of a long-dead saboteur?

Nevertheless, Bukit Paiyang responded immediately, “Because of his great wisdom, naturally! He was trying to save us all, Punggol and Human alike, from the bitter fate we have drawn down upon our own heads. Had the novena never been discovered, then our two communities would have doubtless continued to enjoy peace and companionship for untold generations. He alone saw that neither race could enjoy the riches of their planet without ultimately destroying both, and he bravely decided to save us from ourselves, by destroying the source of our future miseries.”

“Poppycock!” was my first and, I must say, my lasting judgement of Paiyang’s historical analysis. “Park was no sage! Quite apart from the fact that this golden age of innocence of which you speak is no more than a cosy fairytale, it is apparent from your own account that it was Park himself who was the trigger for the orgy of destruction in which your people have indulged ever since. Just think what great heights your civilisation might have climbed to, had your new-found affluence not been squandered on this futile militarism!”

The Punggol was shocked at my suggestion, and waved a distressed tentacle before me. “You are mistaken! Outram Park was our greatest hero and genius! It is to our eternal shame that he was not recognised as such during his lifetime, but imprisoned as a traitor and threatened with execution. That is why we have erected that monument to him in our city, which caught your eye, and which serves as a reminder to all Punggol of how abominably we treated our human neighbours. Outram Park shall ever be a symbol of those extinct humans and their superior moral worth.”

An eye appeared on his violet surface in order to look balefully at the floor. His last statements baffled me, but I could not refuse to disabuse my hostage as to my own identity.

“But can you not see?” I demanded. “I am human myself!”

Bukit Paiyang made a noise that approximated laughter. “You? Human? I hardly think so!”

“But look at my shape! Do I not resemble the statue of Outram Park? I have two arms and two legs, just like he!” I cried, feeling rather discomfited that my membership of the human race should be called into question.

“Ah, all you anthropoids look alike to us Punggol,” was Paiyang’s infuriating reply. “In any case, true humans are wise, like Outram Park. They would never think of employing such appalling weapons to achieve their own selfish ends.”

“Weapons? What weapons? I stand before you unarmed!”

The Punggol gestured timidly to my backpack. “The thing in the bag,” he whispered with a tremulous voice, lest he wake the horrible item within.

“You mean the Bedoki puzzle?” I asked, remembering the horror that had greeted me at every turn when that toy was brandished. “There is something about it you fear?”

“Of course!” said Paiyang with difficulty. “It is the shape, you see.”

“The sphere?”

He flinched. “Please, do not use that word in front of me!”

“But you Punggol are yourselves spherical!” I remonstrated. “And how could such a simple form cause you distress?”

“Yes, that is the shape of our own bodies,” explained Paiyang in a low whisper. It was clear that the subject was not one was easily broached in polite Punggol society. “But in any other object, that form is hideous to our eyes, intolerable to our minds. It is a shape subject to the strictest and most inflexible taboo. Virtually nothing in the Punggol world, bar the Punggol themselves, is... well, the form you mentioned.”

“Spherical?”

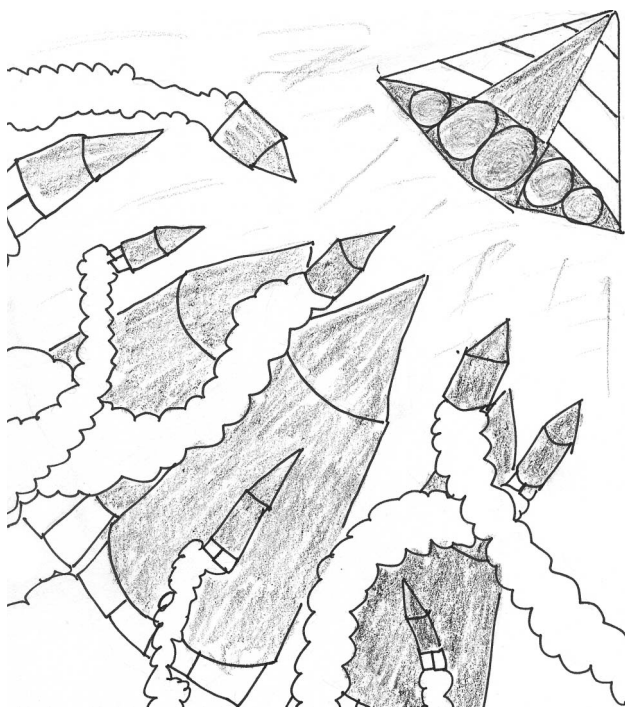
“Yes, yes, spell it out if you must!”

“Such an absurd taboo!” I protested. “Why, there must be a thousand natural objects, seeds,

fruit, raindrops, which take the form your race abhor!"

"Not so many as you would expect," said Paiyang. "Any plant species that put forth fruit of that obscene type were rendered extinct by our ancestors. And the revulsion we all share has its uses. Do you not recall the shape of your own cell at the prison? It was specifically designed in order to break the will of recalcitrant detainees. No Punggol has survived more than a few hours within those torture chambers without sacrificing a large portion of his understanding. That concave reversal of his own body mocks him, and eventually robs him of his sense of suchness, the integrity of his individual existence. Most long-term inmates of Punggol gaols are as good as dead, for they are no longer certain whether they are still alive. The prison guards are not much better, degenerate wretches who must spend their working lives in such close proximity to unimaginable suffering."

My estimation of the Punggol had sunk to a new low. Surely no more debased and irrational species had ever risen to dominate their environment, as the Punggol clearly were masters of the bruised and gutted terrain below. Gazing out of the cockpit window at the fleeting landscape, a flicker of darkness shot beneath us, and as I shifted my viewpoint, I saw it re-emerge on the



other side, enlarged. Another ship was approaching, and with one hand inside my backpack, I played idly with the Bedoki puzzle, currently my only trump card in this uncertain game.

A square of pale lavender light began to flash urgently on the control panel. Paiyang had noticed it too. "They're firing on us," he said without emotion, and I looked up to see an angry swarm of dark missiles buzzing towards us.

## Peculiar Habits of the Rumbia Beetles

It may appear a morbid tendency on my part, but my immediate conclusion on realising that I had survived the destruction of the Punggol craft was that the universe had developed an inexplicable anomaly. By the judgment of any rational observer, our ship, and all living creatures unlucky enough to have found themselves aboard, should have been utterly annihilated by the attack. The vehicle, it appeared, had not withstood the force of the missiles, for I awoke to find myself surrounded by the debris of that singularly graceless aircraft. My former gaoler, and more recently my hostage, was absent, and I searched in vain for Bukit Paiyang's mortal remains. Scorched and twisted ribbons of black metal were all I discovered. And yet I had, by some miscalculation of the cosmos, survived not merely uninjured but entirely without inconvenience or mishap. My lightweight prison uniform had come through the ordeal intact, where solid panels of hardy alien alloys had been rent asunder as though they were mere paper. The

carnage spread over an area of perhaps a square kilometre of land, and it would require several minutes' journey on foot to reach beyond the evidence of the explosion.

My mind was fit to bursting with questions, and the discomfort of this condition was made more acute by the utter lack of means to answer them. For one, what had become of Bukit Paiyang? While I could not forgive him for my imprisonment, I nevertheless felt a pang of guilt that he might have perished with the Punggol aircraft. And if he, as I, had miraculously survived, where was my hostage now? And the enemy ship? I scanned the darkening, plum-hued skies and saw no black cuboids to trouble me. Very possibly they had assumed, on launching their missiles against us, that my fate was sealed, and had not thought it necessary to tarry any longer. Apparently they had underestimated my resilience. Was it possible, I mused to myself as I wandered aimlessly amongst the fused wreckage, that the Punggol weapons were effective against inanimate objects alone? Could such an explosive device exist? A foolish thought. I was, after all, a thing of mere flesh and blood, a quivering jelly of tissues and soft, yielding organs, infinitely less able to withstand an explosion than the floating, armoured cube of which I had so recently been a passenger.

If I had not resisted the missiles, then perhaps I had been rescued from them. But by whom, and to what purpose? And where were my benefactors now? Would any rational creature save a man from destruction, only to abandon him in this rubble-choked valley, alone in a lifeless, alien landscape? Questions bred questions, until my mind was teeming, and thirsting for answers.

I thirsted too in the more prosaic sense, for I had been walking, without any particular direction, for a considerable distance, and I carried neither food nor water. My surroundings were not promising: the Punggol craft had disintegrated in what appeared to be a disused quarry of immense proportions. Here and there were scattered small, flaky shards of a dull, white chalky rock, and it did not take me long to recognise that here was the substance known as novena, the source of the Punggols' great wealth, and

also of the state of continuous warfare for uncounted generations. It had no smell, and offered no clues as to the ore's ultimate purpose. A narcotic for a distant civilisation, as Paiyang had suggested? Anything was possible. I pocketed a few handfuls of the substance, for no particular reason, and moved on.

This, I concluded, was an exhausted novena mine: a wide, undulating furrow had been dug into the earth, and stretched to the horizon in either direction. It was a hundred metres deep, and its bed was a jumble of giant boulders. Apparently the Punggol had blasted their riches from the depths of the planet, and once the seam was exhausted, they had moved on.

I stood now on the precipice, overlooking this steep, artificial valley, and a desperate thought occurred to me: if water existed anywhere in this desolation, it might run at the bottom of these crevices. My chances of success were incalculable, but I had no choice but to investigate. I even considered the possibility that I might once again encounter my erstwhile friends the Bird People of Kadaloor. Could it be that their network of tunnels reached up to the level of these open-cast mines? Hope was beguiling my rational mind at this point, and I did not stop to consider that the Kadaloorians might not offer me so cordial a welcome as they had before. Whatever happened, by following the seam, I would at least avoid travelling in a circle, as might befall me in a desert without such landmarks.

My search was neither long nor arduous. Within a few moments, the unmistakable flash of light reflected on water caught my eye. Barely a thought could I spare for the possibility of contamination or impurity. Like a beast on all fours I knelt and drank, till the tiny, brackish pool was no more than a smear of wet mud between dry rocks. Only when I had had my fill did I notice the commotion caused by my presence. For surrounding the exhausted reservoir, creatures, unmistakably beetle-like in their form and expertly camouflaged against the grey rocks, barely large enough to discern with the naked eye, were scuttling hither and yon, in and

out of the once-brimming hole, with every appearance of frantic yet purposive activity.

My curiosity piqued, I bent closer, and observed their efforts. From the depths of the dried-up pool the beetles were unearthing what at first sight seemed to be tiny white seeds, but which I presently recognised as eggs. The larvae within pulsated and wriggled behind their protective membranes. A procession of beetles struggled up the muddy slope of the watering hole, each bearing a single egg, and the column stretched off in a crooked line, around boulders and between miniature gorges in the jumble of rocks that littered the bed of the ravine. Despite my own infelicitous circumstances, I confess I found myself fascinated by the organised efforts of these humble insects.

I do not discount the possibility that delirium had taken a hold of my senses. Certainly the heat and aridity of those desolate territories was not easily tolerated, nor had I ever shown any interest or capacity for entomology before now. Whatever the explanation, my whole attention was now fixed on these minute beetles and their collective project. I followed their march until I discovered a second pool of water, no larger than the last, and containing but a meagre mouthful of refreshment. As each worker reached the rim of the new crater, it rolled its precious burden down the slope, where the larvae vanished beneath the cloudy surface of the water.

Understanding dawned: these tireless labourers were protecting the future of their colony. No doubt the beetles' larval offspring could survive only when immersed in water. The crisis caused by my own gigantic thirst had set the colony at sixes and sevens, and now the nursery was being evacuated. Contingency plans had been activated, and the offspring saved from dehydration. It was a remarkable example of cooperative activity among the lower orders of life.

Unfortunately, my prolonged observation had renewed my thirst, and I was compelled to undo all the beetles' recent progress in a single draught. Naturally I experienced a certain measure of guilt at the destruction and pandemonium left in my wake, but these misgivings were outweighed by a sensation of nausea and

strong revulsion when I came to understand that I had imbibed several hundred beetle eggs along with the water. Regrets were futile: I had already swallowed the unborn larvae and would soon no doubt digest them with, I hoped, no ill-effects.

This remorse was short-lived: the intensity of the noonday heat necessitated that I seek out a further source of water. As I tracked the tireless column of insects on their mission, I began to ponder the following mystery: whence flowed this meagre supply of moisture? Close observation of the beetles' next underwater nursery provided the answer. Here, in a tight circle on the rim of the pool, stood a host of beetles, dissimilar in form to those I had followed on their travails. This new class of insect bore large, flat wing-casings, which dwarfed their grey carapaces. As the beetles stood facing away from the crater, these wing-casings sloped down towards the half-empty reservoir, and taken as one, they formed a kind of living funnel. I bade my thirst be patient, and persevered in my observations.

Presently my forbearance was rewarded: I watched as a droplet of water grew on the back of one of the circle. It was followed by another, and the process was repeated until a trickle of water ran down the sloping wing-case, and added to the gradually swelling reserves at the bottom of the pit.

So these remarkable creatures were condensing water vapour from the air, and collecting it in these regularly spaced reservoirs for the rearing of their young. The ingenuity of nature had never stood so high in my estimation until that moment. But, as I scooped up the hard-bought moisture into my mouth, trying my hardest to ignore the sensation of dozens of larval eggs passing over my palette, I knew that several questions remained unanswered on the subject of these remarkable beetles.

Firstly, the mechanism by which the beetles condensed water on their wing-casings was a mystery. They must, I reasoned, maintain their body temperatures at a much lower level than the ambient, at least those parts of their anatomy which were involved in the production of liquid water. I speculated that the beetles might

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produce some kind of chemical coolant, which circulated in their blood, if blood they in fact possessed. I was, I hastily reminded myself, on an alien world. Nevertheless, the existence of trees, and possibly even of human-like anthropoids on this planet, encouraged me to assume that nature played by the same ground rules here that she observed on Earth.

Secondly, I asked myself, what prevented the accumulated water, so painstakingly harvested from the atmosphere in these reservoirs, from merely evaporating once more in the fierce desert heat? To that puzzle I could offer no suggestions, save for appealing once more to the vague notion of an organic coolant of sorts.

Thirdly, and this was perhaps most infuriatingly of all, it struck me as inexplicable that a species of insect, wholly dependent on a constant supply of liquid water for their successful reproduction, could have evolved to dwell in such a dry climate. Absurd that such a water-dependent race of beetles should have chosen such an arid spot to raise their young.

It is difficult to estimate the period of time I wasted in idle speculations of this kind. In my defence I must stress that the atrocious heat cannot have had anything other than a deleterious effect on the proper functioning of the brain. Nevertheless, there can be no excuse for my behaviour on this occasion. Less than a distant memory was my apparently essential mission, cut short by the *Tanjong Pagar's* malfunctioning. The whereabouts of that cannibalised vehicle was still more absent from my list of queries. Subsequent, and one might argue, equally pressing concerns about the fate of my erstwhile captor, Bukit Paiyang, and my own surprising survival were paid as little heed, as my entire attention had been swallowed up by the quotidian minutia of a nameless species of miniscule beetles.

But were they so miniscule for all that? The question might strike the reader as inapt, but as I crouched in that dusty, grey ravine, I happened to glance up where a shadow seemed to move, and saw two members of the insect colony, perched on a rock above me, waving their antennae in a purposeful manner. They appeared

vast, monstrous, and I told myself that here was a mere trick of perspective, perhaps a mirage or similar anomalous phenomenon caused by the extreme heat. Then, without a moment's notice, my hands were gripped behind my back by powerful, shiny black claws, and a hideous chirruping noise was troubling my ears.

## Awaiting Trial in the Rumbia Colony

Thus for the second (but for what would by no means be the last) time since my unexpected arrival on this alien planet, I found myself taken captive. My captors: a race of unnaturally large beetles, whose reservoirs of water, painstakingly condensed from the air, I was now accused of purloining. No less a charge than mass murder was levelled at me by my invertebrate interrogators, for my alleged theft had deprived their larvae of the moisture essential to life.

That I persisted to maintain my innocence might strike the inattentive reader as churlish at best, even dishonourable. But I urge this reader to re-examine the facts of the case, and am confident that a more thorough understanding of my narrative will acquit me of such imputations. For while I freely admit that raging thirst had driven me to drain several small pools of water trapped between the rocks, and I may indeed have unintentionally imbibed innumerable microscopic creatures, my conscience remained clear. Never a squeamish or sentimental man, the fate of a handful of bugs caused me little anguish. But the beings in whose detention I now found myself were giants, over eight feet

tall, and if one included their antennae, taller. I had no reason to harm this race of oversized beetles.

My sole misgiving was the uncanny resemblance between my present captors and the diminutive species I had previously observed. Was it conceivable that they had grown to such vast proportions, and in such a brief instant? My reason rebelled at such an outlandish suggestion, but the only logical alternative was, if anything, more disconcerting still. Had I, in the manner of Alice in Wonderland, unwittingly ingested some naturally occurring shrinking potion, a chemical compound the effect of which had been to reduce my stature to that of an ant, easy prey to the heavily armoured beetles who now frogmarched me into their underground kingdom and cast me into prison to await my trial.

On this occasion, my cell was considerably more generous in size, and more orthodox in shape, than the Punggols' spherical chambers of confinement, designed expressly to attack the Punggol inmate at the deepest psychological levels, a cruel ruse which had failed utterly to dent my own endurance, unaffected as I am by the Punggols' peculiar phobia of their own rounded form.

To speak the truth, the accommodation provided me by my insect captors was more luxurious than certain youth hostels of my acquaintance back on Earth. The bed was at least as well sprung as that in my living quarters aboard the *Tanjong Pagar*. (Oh, but how I missed my erstwhile spacecraft, lost now in some forgotten corner of this treacherous planet!) A leather armchair had been very thoughtfully provided, as had a modest library of leather-bound volumes, containing many of my favourite boyhood tales: *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* among them. Over the week or so of my incarceration I busily reacquainted myself with these fondly remembered romances. The walls were decorated with faded but cheerful hunting oils: packs of hounds and red coated aristocrats bounded across the English countryside and across the walls of my cell, in pursuit of their unseen quarry. The Rumbia

beetles did their best to provide a cuisine fitted to my tastes, a favour for which I was grateful, for their own diet of grubs and seeds did little to inspire the appetite. Their beef Wellington was really quite adequate, even if I grew tired of seeing the same over-steamed spotted dick appearing alongside it in the serving hatch that was built into my prison door. A very acceptable red wine, the origins of which I could never ascertain, was always served, and did much to reconcile me to the constraints of my situation.

I had but scant opportunity to study the civilisation of the Rumbia, in whose hands my fate now rested, but the guards who patrolled along my wing of the insect gaol were usually content to answer any questions I put to them with the aid of my Dover and Somerset translation mechanism.

The Rumbia dwelt in a series of artificially created caverns, whose size and intricacy of design inspired both awe and respect, not only for the Rumbias' engineering capabilities, but also for their aesthetic sense. No squalid Kadaloorian burrows these, but lofty halls of cathedral-like grandeur, every inch scraped from the deep bedrock by innumerable pairs of tireless Rumbia pincers. Both the hue and texture of the stone were akin to the sandstone of Earth, with one noticeable difference: seams of unidentified minerals striated the rock, weaving undulating ribbons of ochre, tangerine, olive and copper green into the muddy yellow weft of the earth. The Rumbia architects had made ingenious use of this natural ornamentation and had in many places followed these mineral deposits with their arches, overhead walkways and pillars, giving an effect that may have lacked symmetry, but was nevertheless ineffably graceful.

Unsurprisingly, my impressions of the Rumbias' architectural achievements were limited to the brief and bewildering moments following my initial arrest, and subsequently to the view from my cell window, which happily overlooked one of the principal thoroughfares of the colony. Once I had tired of reading and re-reading the adventure novels of my youth, I spent many a fascinated hour observing the rest-



less, fretful lives of the beetle citizens in the streets below. It so happened that my prison had been carved into the roof of a grand chamber, with the result that the insects scurrying below me seemed no larger than they had before my mystifying transformation, an irony that was not lost on me.

Much that I observed from my crow's nest cell baffled me, and it was only with the assistance of my wardens that I was able to make any sense of this unquestionably advanced species. No less than sixteen distinct classes of beetle crowded the Rumbia colony, each with its own physical characteristics and social role. The vapour-condensing class I had already encountered. Their enlarged wing-cases marked them out from their fellows as they marched in columns to and from the colony's aquatic nurseries on the planet's surface.

I was soon struck by a puzzling anomaly: if the Rumbias were possessed of such capacious and secure lodgings as these, why banish their larval young to the vicissitudes of the parched and hostile exterior, where thirsty predators such as myself might exhaust their reserves in a single thoughtless gulp?

As with many similar riddles, my beetle guard furnished the answer: the Rumbia were not by nature a desert-dwelling species. Untold generations past, the Rumbia had lived a more comfortable existence in the humid swamps that had once existed here, before the discovery of the novena, and the mining operations which followed. Evolution had furnished them with the necessary faculties for a humid existence. The swamps might have evaporated, along with the moisture, as the novena mines fundamentally altered the continent's water table, but natural selection moves with considerably less haste than the interplanetary novena trade, and the larvae of the Rumbia still required both sunlight and water in abundance if they were ever to reach adulthood.

The fully developed beetles had, it was apparent from all I observed, learned to adapt to the darkness. One remarkable class of Rumbia, possessed of glowing abdomens, performed the task of streetlights, and spent the greater portion

of their lives clinging to the walls and ceilings of the caverns, emitting a ghostly mint-green luminescence for the benefit of their fellows.

The hospitality of the Rumbia was sadly short-lived. The prison guards, while loquacious enough on general topics, had all to a man refused to divulge any details of the Rumbias' judicial process, for fear of unlawfully interfering with the course of justice. This scrupulousness alone was some small comfort to me, and I told myself that any race who adhered to such principles must be able to comprehend the travesty of justice which my arrest represented. But in my heart I was not content, and the reader can well imagine my trepidation when the day of my trial finally rolled around, and I was taken from my comfortable cell, a space I had learned over the past two weeks to call home, and marched through a perplexing series of corridors, tunnels and gantries to the Supreme Court of the Rumbia.

Though prepared for a chamber of some considerable splendour, I nevertheless could not contain an audible gasp of awe as the two beetle guards manhandled me into the courtroom. It was a space teeming with life. The public gallery was crowded with chattering hordes of insects. At a table before the judge's desk sat my defence lawyer, a small, burgundy-hued beetle who I had never set eyes on before. He greeted me with what sounded to me like a tone of resignation. I took my place next to him and stared straight ahead as he shuffled through his papers, and a thousand beetle eyes fixed themselves upon me.

I will refrain from narrating the entire contents of the trial in detail. At times even I found myself drifting into a brown study, though my very life depended on the outcome, so I am sure that the reader would find such an account doubly tiresome. Suffice it to say that after a period of several hours, the Rumbia judge, a towering, grey-antennaed old monster, returned to his seat after a prolonged period of private cogitation, to announce his sentence. No jury was necessary to aid his judgement, an omission that struck me as noteworthy.

"The defendant has been found guilty of fifty nine thousand, eight hundred and four counts of

murder," chattered the judge, my Dover and Somerset box translating his dismal message. "It has been decided that he shall serve as a childminder to the Rumbia larvae, in perpetuity."

This last decision caused no small amount of excitement in the public gallery, and I could not disguise my bewilderment. I was to be given the task of childminder? Was this some form of community service established by the Rumbia courts? It seemed extraordinarily lenient, given the crime of which I had been convicted. I leaned over to whisper to my counsel, who was visibly shaken.

"What does this mean?" I asked him. "A childminder in perpetuity? How can this punishment fit the crime?"

The insect lawyer's eye stalks wavered. "Don't you understand?" he said. "You are to become the sustenance of the Rumbia larvae! Your living body will be consumed, in microscopic mouthfuls, by the sucking rasping mouths of our maggoty young!"

I felt the blood drain from my face. "So it is a sentence of death!" I managed to utter. "How long will it take them to eat me?"

The lawyer shook his head. "The task will never be complete. You will be kept alive for all time, fed intravenously with a certain sugar-rich solution that we Rumbia excrete from a dedicated orifice located behind our middle right legs. This syrupy nourishment will pass into your system, only to be milked out by the thousands of beetle larvae who suckle at your weeping sores. It is the cruellest weapon in the judge's arsenal, yet to one with a perverse sense of poetic justice it fits the crime. You murdered thousands of our own young, and now you will nourish thousands more, for the rest of time."

Even the Dover and Somerset could not translate my anguished, animal cries, as I was seized firmly by the arms, and dragged bodily from the courtroom by a bevy of Rumbia guards, as I writhed in agonised anticipation of the tortures that awaited me.

All hope of release had fled, but at that very moment when blank despair seemed to triumph utterly, an unexpected rescuer flashed into view. I can offer no rational account of what next tran-

spired, save to say that my captors found themselves flung away from me, crushed and broken by an unseen agent of matchless strength. The courtroom was awash with Rumbia blood, and as the massacre proceeded apace, the very walls of the colony seemed to melt, and my thoughts flowed out from the confines of my skull, and mingled freely with the objects of the outside world, like droplets of ink dissolving in a glass of water.

A face shimmered softly into focus. A human face. A face I had seen before, but on what occasion, and in what circumstances, I could not say. Its expression was kind, but professionally so, keeping its distance. A calm smile hovered around the lips and eyebrows. The eyes, pale green, seemed to regard me with mild concern for a moment, before the face withdrew, and I was left alone, staring at a spotlessly white ceiling.

## An Android's House Guest

I raised myself with difficulty from a supine position on what I discovered was a kind of stainless steel gurney of the kind often used in hospitals. Indeed, my immediate surroundings reminded me of nothing so much as a small private clinic, although the machinery and instruments that lined the steel shelves were utterly unfamiliar to me. My grimy and tattered uniform, bearing the insignia which identified me as the Captain of the *Tanjong Pagar*, had been removed, and replaced with a voluminous white dressing gown. So the last physical evidence and reminder of my abandoned spacecraft had vanished. The thought saddened me, but I had to console myself that at least I was not being eaten alive by untold hordes of hungry

Rumbia beetle larvae. How I had escaped from that disconcerting predicament was still beyond my comprehension, but I hoped that answers would soon reveal themselves to me.

I began a minute examination of myself and my environment. The dressing gown, now my only vestment, was both comfortable and wonderfully insulating and constructed of a soft fibre with which I was not familiar. That did not surprise me much – so far everything I had encountered on the Planet Kadaloor, or Pung, or whatever new label my current hosts had chosen to give their globe, had been uncommon in the extreme, and why should it have been anything other? I was, after all, stranded on an alien planet, perhaps the first human being ever to find himself in such a fix. Unfamiliarity was clearly the order of the day, yet I could not help noticing how the flat, raised bed on which I lay was built to carry the human form perfectly. It even had an angled section at one end to raise the head, and a cushioned pad to support me. Perhaps the belligerent Punggol race were right, and humans did inhabit this world, or had done at some stage of its history? It was an intriguing thought.

I examined my body too, and found no signs of wounds or sores, or the bite marks of the Rumbia larvae which I had so dreaded. In fact, I felt like a man in rude health, and with that thought, I leapt down from the gurney and began to stride around my quarters, swinging my arms and performing the callisthenic exercises which I had been taught at spaceflight academy. While in the middle of my spinal twists, I was interrupted by a gentle hissing sound, as a door slid open and through it stepped a man of medium build, an intelligent expression, and entire baldness. I stood upright, vaguely embarrassed at the interruption, and tried to catch my breath. The face I recognised. I had seen it twice before now. Once, the same day, when I had awoken, and then before, I now realised, on the head of a statue in the great capital city of the Punggol, a statue of The Great Traitor himself, Outram Park.

A flicker of confusion passed over the man's face as he observed my antics, and he stood

there in silence, apparently unwilling to greet me formally. I strode forward to shake his hand, and introduced myself as a representative of the planet Earth, a cosmic pioneer stranded on his planet, and now of course deeply in his debt. As I spoke, I read confusion in the man's green eyes, and understood at last that my words were so much gibberish to him. But of course! My Dover and Somerset device was missing. Without that, no meaningful communication could take place between us. I looked anxiously around the room for any sign of the machine, or any of my former possessions, but they had apparently been removed.

"My translation machine!" I said with urgency to my host. "Where is it? Did you keep it safe? Without it I cannot hope to make myself understood! I only pray that it has not been damaged. You haven't thrown it away, have you?"

Naturally, these were wasted words, and the bald man stood motionless, observing my anxiety with indifference. How could I make him grasp my purpose? I approached him again, and spoke in loud, slow syllables.

"A box," I said, mimicking the device's use with my hands. "About so big, you see? Yes? A metal box, with a speaker here, and a microphone, mounted on the side. Dover and Somerset? You took it, didn't you?"

Again, nothing registered on my host's face, and I sighed, defeated. Perhaps I could search the rest of this building, wherever I was. I moved to the sliding door, but it failed to open. Perhaps the door recognised only its appointed masters: I was refused egress, and in frustration began to hammer on the metal panels with my fists, uselessly of course.

"Let me out, you confounded dunderhead!" I cried. "I must have my Dover and Somerset! Give it back to me at once, you thief!"

I am afraid that the trying events of the previous few days had worn thin my nerves, and this childish tantrum was the unseemly result. Perhaps apprehensive of my intentions, the bald man took prompt action. I felt a sharp, stabbing pain in my arm, before the powerful sedative began to flow from the syringe into my bloodstream, and an overwhelming urge to sleep

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flooded my consciousness. I sat down immediately on the floor, and closed my eyes.

When I awoke for the second time, I had once again been placed on the gurney. My head was weighed down with a dull pain, and my limbs were stiff and sore. I clambered down from my narrow bed with irritation, only to slip on the polished floor, and find myself sprawling on my hands and knees. It was then that I happened to glance underneath the metal frame of the bed, and noticed a small box into which my possessions had been neatly stacked. There was my unwashed, dusty uniform, and with it the few mementoes of my voyage so far: the bedok nut of the Bird-People, a few trinkets made me by my Kadaloorian hosts as parting gifts, and of course, my Dover and Somerset translation machine.

The relief I felt when I confirmed that the device still operated can easily be imagined. But no sooner had I switched on the ingenious device, than a human voice emanated from its speaker.

"So that is what you were so angry about," said the voice.

I looked up, only to see my host, sitting on the far side of the wall, observing me with calm detachment. I had no idea how long he had been watching me, and felt not a little discomfited by the thought.

"It is a universal translator," I explained, speaking into the microphone, and listening with interest to the unfamiliar, but nevertheless wholly human language with which the instrument responded.

"I assumed as much," said the bald man, and for the second time in our acquaintance I felt a rich sense of my own stupidity. As though he could not have grasped that simple fact for himself! I cringed inwardly, and cradled the machine in my arms.

"I hope you will not attempt to escape again," continued the man. "You are not constrained to remain here, so there is no need for you to panic. The door simply did not recognise the genetic signature from your skin cells. But this is easily remedied. I want you to feel at home here. This is, after all, your house now."

I stared, and was on the verge of demanding an explanation, but another question seemed more urgent. "How did you rescue me from the Rumbia?"

"The Rumbia?" said the man, surprised. "I do not know what you are talking about. When I found you out there in the desert, you were close to death, it is true, but mainly from dehydration and exhaustion."

I shook my head. "The Rumbia!" I repeated, idiotically. "The giant beetles who had taken me prisoner! Think, man, think! You were there in the courtroom when I was being sentenced! You attacked the beetle guards and delivered me from an eternity of torture! You have my undying gratitude for that," I said, bowing my head humbly.

"There were no giant beetles to be seen when I discovered you in an abandoned novena quarry," replied my rescuer. "A few tiny insects were scurrying over your unconscious body, but I soon brushed them off. They were a harmless species in any case."

This matter was beyond my comprehension, and I held my throbbing head in my hands. It seemed useless to pursue the matter further until I felt more mentally robust. I decided to change tack.

"You must forgive me," I said. "I have not introduced myself. I am Newton Braddell, Captain of the *Tanjong Pagar*."

"Yes, I know," said the stranger. "I took the liberty of examining your possessions while you slept. I hope you will forgive my intrusion."

"Not at all," I said, warming to my host. "And you are Outram Park, I presume?"

I was fairly confident of my analysis. The resemblance was too close for coincidence. But the man shook his head.

"No," he said, with a trace of sadness in his voice. "You are mistaken. Outram Park is dead, and has been these six centuries."

At first I was incredulous, but a moment's reflection was sufficient to convince me that the man could only be telling the truth. Had not Bukit Paiyang, my Punggol interrogator, and later hostage, told me much the same thing? His story of the Great Traitor had taken place in

antiquity, in a time when peace reigned between those spherical, purple beings, and their now extinct human neighbours. If Outram Park was indeed a human being, or something very like one, then how could he have survived the many centuries of internecine warfare since? I felt foolish to have ever entertained such an absurd notion.

And yet! Here at least, sat before me, his hands folded quietly in his lap, was one such human who had weathered the storm of Punggol warfare. And wherever one man survived, surely a community of his fellows must exist, supporting and sustaining him. My heart beat wildly with the thought of it! An entire tribe of kindly people such as this, who might welcome me into their fold! The months of solitude had not been easy, and perhaps I had underestimated the psychological stresses of such an extended period of isolation, for a longing for human company now ached in my breast.

Perhaps the selfsame isolation could be blamed for my error of identification. I had not set eyes on another human being now for longer than I cared to remember. Was it not therefore understandable that I should experience some difficulty in separating the one face depicted in stone with the other, formed from living flesh, at a distance of several weeks?

“I must apologise,” I said to my host. “You must think my behaviour uncouth and unusual. I have been through many testing experiences of late, and my thoughts have not their normal rigour. I thought I saw a resemblance between your own features and those on a statue in the city of the Punggol.”

Without even raising an eyebrow, the man said, “Yes, that is indeed a likeness of me. But the mistake lies not with yourself, but with the Punggol, or rather, their ancestors. They fancy they have preserved the form of my master Outram Park, but instead they have only depicted Eunos, his android servant, who stands before you now.”

Words cannot express my astonishment at this revelation. The most advanced types of robot I had encountered on Earth were of a different order entirely to this robotic masterpiece, whose

imitation of humanity I would surely have never seen through, had he not chosen to reveal it to me himself. The technological level of a civilisation capable of such feats of engineering and craftsmanship was barely imaginable. I confess I found myself rather shaken by the proposition of such an advanced group of humans. I should cut a very sorry intellectual figure in comparison with this robot’s creators.

“You say your master, Outram Park, is dead,” I said, rousing myself from mute astonishment. “Whom do you now serve?”

Eunos smiled graciously. “I now serve you, Captain Braddell,” he said with a small bow.

## Electric Brain Parasites

That was far from the last surprise of the day. I tried as best I could to recover from this one.

“Me? What on Earth have I done to deserve your servitude?” I asked. “Have you no other humans who you must answer to?”

Eunos shook his head. “None whatsoever, Captain Braddell. The humans died out many centuries ago. Few of them outlived Outram Park by more than a few generations. The war with the Punggol exacted a heavy price.”

“And you have been alone ever since?”

“Master Choa Chu Kang passed away two hundred and twenty years ago. Since then I have wandered the planet alone, awaiting instructions.”

“Why bother?” I could not help but ask. “You must have known that the chances of your finding another human master to serve were infinitesimally small. Why not make your own destiny?”

His answer came without hesitation. “I am programmed to serve humans,” he informed me curtly. “Since the death of Choa Chu Kang, I

have been executing a programming loop which instructs me to seek out another human, whose wishes I must then fulfil. Today, I have met the conditions to exit that loop, and now find myself following a new module in my behavioural program. I have no choice in the matter, nor do I wish that it were otherwise. I am aware that you humans find it difficult to comprehend my behaviour, but you must always remember that the issue of free will is irrelevant to me.”

His reply was the cause of much head scratching and private philosophising in the weeks that followed, but for the time being I merely nodded sagely, and changed the subject.

Many topics of enquiry begged for my attention, for there can have been few times in my life when I found myself so absolutely at a loss to clarify my circumstances. Where, for example, were the remains of the stolen Punggol aircraft, destroyed by missile attack, while apparently leaving me unscathed? My own vehicle, the once star-spanning *Tanjong Pagar*, was also missing, and I would have gone to any length of trouble to recover that noble vessel, despite the damage done by the Kadaloorians' well-meaning tinkering. An overview of the planet's geography would go some way to addressing my ignorance in this regard, and would be the natural first step to recovering my spaceship, and I intended to request this information from my newly indentured mechanical servant.

Existential questions aside, the presence of Eunos himself raised as many troubling questions as he could possibly answer. Who was this Choa Chu Kang of which he spoke, his previous master? A Chinese name I suspected, and the features of the android were themselves of the oriental type, captured with surprising accuracy by the nameless Punggol sculptor. Eunos told me the history of this historic mistake without compunction. At the time when novena deposits had recently been discovered, he had been the property of Outram Park himself. In a spirit of self-preservation, Park had sent his android servant on the difficult mission to sabotage the novena mines, and when Punggol security guards had discovered Eunos in the act, he had

assumed the guise of his master, and, in the parlance of the criminal underworld, taken the rap.

I could not help but feel a certain moral repugnance towards Park for what appeared to me an act of the basest cowardice, but Eunos was quick to correct my mistake. Park was no more to blame for his actions than any man who employs a tool to do a job. The word sounded harsh coming from what appeared to be a human mouth, but that is simply how Eunos spoke of himself: a tool in the service of mankind. And no mean tool at that: after learning of his imminent execution at the hands of the inflamed Punggol judiciary, Eunos escaped single-handed from his prison cell. In truth he could have done so at any time, so versatile and powerful a device was he, but his mission had been to protect the true identity of Outram Park. Had the Punggol made good on their threats, they would have quickly discovered that their prisoner was no man of flesh and blood, but a being virtually indestructible, self-healing and impervious to pain. The rumours of armed mobs storming the gaol were mere inventions of the Punggol media to save the blushes of their political masters.

Eunos returned to his own master, only to find that the human frame can be weak in more ways than one: in his absence, Outram Park had committed suicide. There was no note, and Eunos, fundamentally an incurious creature, saw no reason to speculate. He immediately abandoned his mission to destroy all the novena deposits on the planet, and wandered out into the desert to seek out a new human to serve. This next master, a soldier in the anti-Punggol resistance, gave his orders, lived and died in his turn. It was a pattern that the android was to follow, over and over, for the next six hundred years, until Choa Chu Kang breathed his last some twenty decades ago. Since that day, as far as I knew, humanity had been extinct on Pung.

One aspect of Eunos's history interested me particularly: what had been the motives for Park's apparent treachery? Was he in truth, as Bukit Paiyang had claimed, a great seer, a man forewarned of the ecological disasters and military conflicts which would inevitably follow the discovery of such a rich mineral resource, and

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who had in his wisdom decided that the only sane course was to remove the source of that wealth? I found that explanation hard to swallow, and privately held that Outram Park was far more likely to be creature beset by delusions, a madman bent on notoriety and self-destruction. The news of his suicide seemed to confirm my suspicions, but Eunos himself could not corroborate my theory.

“Master Park declined to explain the purpose of my mission,” the android informed me. “I was merely to carry out the mission, destroy all existing novena deposits, then return home.”

“But on a planet this large!” I exclaimed. “Even if you had never been detected in your sabotage, the task might have taken centuries.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Eunos. “But Park programmed no time limit into the module. I was only to cease my work when it was completed, or else I was captured.”

“But weren’t you even the least bit curious as to why Park wanted the novena removed?” I asked, but before Eunos had chance to reply I already knew the futility of my question.

“Curiosity is not a trait I have been programmed with,” he said mildly. “I am afraid that I have no definite answer for you, Captain Braddell. Master Park’s motives were his own, and so far as I know, he never spoke of them to any man. He was a solitary figure in any case, and shunned human company. The Punggol historians speak of an underground network of human saboteurs. It is true that once war had been declared, the humans banded together into guerrilla units, for the sake of their survival. But in the very beginning, it was Outram Park alone who decided to attack the novena deposits.”

“And so precipitated the war that has raged between Punggol and humans, and thereafter amongst the Punggol themselves, ever since,” I mused. “A bitter irony for one who was so keen to prevent violence, eh Eunos?”

The android shrugged in a non-committal way.

And so Eunos’s home became my own. Since the death of Choa Chu Kang, he had very wisely used the intervening time to design and build a habitation ideally suited to his next human

master, whoever that turned out to be. The house was a masterpiece of utilitarian design, an elegant white structure built on a high bluff overlooking the grassy plains below, for he had transported me far from the unforgiving desert where the Punggol had shot me down. Eunos had spent many centuries making improvements and elaborating on his initial design, and the house had been extended underground, so as not to spoil the graceful conical outline of the structure when viewed from the outside. I spent the first few days exploring my new residence, and at first I must confess to a recurring feeling of guilt, since I had neither built nor purchased this house, and had done nothing to deserve such a gift. But Eunos was adamant that the dwelling was now my property, and that he expected no reward or return of favour. He was programmed to serve the first human he came across to the utmost of his ability, and I had been fortunate enough to fulfil that role. I decided to name my new residence Woodlands Rise, after the large stand of trees which sheltered the house on three sides, and which formed a series of pleasantly shady walks.

Our meeting had taken place just in time too, or so I then thought. Minutes later and I would have had a maggot filled pit of eternal suffering to call my home. But when I spoke again to Eunos on this subject, he was unexpectedly brusque.

“Did I not tell you before?” he said with an impatient tone. “When I discovered your unconscious body, you were alone, lying in the bottom of an abandoned novena quarry. This nonsense about giant beetles is just the remnants of some fevered dream.”

“But I spent many weeks there, in the Rumbian prison!” I protested, and proceeded to furnish the android with a detailed account of my incarceration and trial, as I have already set out in a previous chapter of this narrative. But at the end of my story, Eunos was unconvinced.

“You softheaded buffoon!” he chided me, in a manner that seemed ill-suited to his role as my robotic servant. “Can you not see the flaws in your own account? You tell me that you were reading Jules Verne novels while in prison, and

that the beetles served you with beef Wellington and steamed puddings? Does that sound plausible to you?"

I had to admit that these details did sound, in retrospect, out of the ordinary.

"And how do you think that these giant beetles acquired oil paintings of English hunting scenes to hang on your cell wall? Eh? What a weak-minded fool you really are!"

I took exception to this kind of abuse, and had no hesitation in telling him so.

"My apologies," said the android. "I am afraid that my only models of interaction with other humans have been my previous masters. Choa Chu Kang always spoke to me in these frank terms, but if you wish me to moderate my language, I shall certainly attempt to do so."

His explanation mollified me to a degree. I couldn't help but wonder just what manner of man this Choa Chu Kang had been, to have imposed such immoderate language on his servant, and to have endured similar insults in return.

But a fever dream lasting for weeks on end? I cannot have slept for that length of time! And what could have caused such a delirium? I sought Eunos's advice again, and he offered to investigate the matter by performing a brain scan.

The scan was a painless and non-invasive procedure, and took only a few seconds. Eunos fed the raw data into his own processors, and at the same time printed out images of my own brain in cross-section, magnified many thousands of times. Of course, I have no expertise in this field, and could make little sense of the coloured patterns on the transparency. But after consulting several electronic medical manuals, Eunos was prepared to make his initial diagnosis.

"What's the news then, Doc?" I joked, unaware of the hammer blow that was about to fall.

"I am no doctor," said Eunos gravely, "but the symptoms are hard to mistake. You are suffering from a parasitic infection of the brain. A microbe, normally present beneath the skin of certain species of beetle larvae, has entered your

body, and travelled up your nervous system to the frontal lobes. I am afraid that the infection has now spread to every part of your brain."

"And the prognosis?" I asked, reading the worst from the android's stern expression. "Is it fatal?"

"Apparently not," said Eunos, and I breathed a long sigh of relief, prematurely as it turned out.

"So, what's the cure?"

Eunos shook his head. "If the parasite is caught in the early stages of infection, then there is hope. But in your case, the microbe has been allowed to reproduce to such an extent that any surgical intervention now could endanger your life, or at least cause irreparable damage. Motor functions could be destroyed utterly. Short-term memory would almost certainly be affected. Other areas of the brain would be vulnerable too, but it is impossible to predict which, or to what extent."

"But you said that the infection was not fatal!" I shouted, grasping at this meagre straw of hope. "So why are we worrying about it? Can't I just live with it? It causes me no pain."

"True, there is no physical pain associated with this infection," agreed the android. "But you are likely to suffer psychologically. In fact, I would say that you have already suffered an acute attack. Your imprisonment at the hands of giant beetles was a hallucination caused by this parasite. This microbial organism, just like an electric eel, has its own source of electricity, albeit on a microscopic scale. It is a means of self-defence against predators not much larger than itself. A tiny electric shock, produced by a natural chemical battery, deters would-be predators."

"So when I drank the water from those tiny pools," I interrupted, "I also ingested thousands of beetle larvae, and with them, the electricity-generating microbes that live on their skin."

"Exactly," nodded Eunos. "The microbes normally feed on the larvae's dead cells, but when they enter the human blood stream, they tend to proliferate in the brain, where the tissues are most similar to that of the beetle larvae. But it is their electric discharges that cause the real problems. They disrupt the synapses in the brain,



the cells which send their own tiny electrical impulses from one to the other. These electrical impulses are the physical basis for thought itself, and any interference from the microbes can cause chaos on the microscopic scale, and on the scale of human psychology, severe and sustained hallucinations, paranoia and psychotic attacks.”

“So you’re telling me that those giant beetles never even existed?” I asked. “They were merely a projection of my diseased consciousness?”

Eunos sighed with apparent exasperation. “Again, yes,” he said.

I made a mental note to remind him later not to use that tone of voice again. Perhaps Choa Chu Kang had enjoyed being condescended to in this way, but I certainly did not.

“Your pre-existing feelings of guilt,” continued Eunos, “were magnified and dramatised during the episode. You were acting out a morality play within your own head, with you as the protagonist and, ultimately, the victim. A rather pathetic notion, isn’t it?”

I frowned. “Are you using the word pathetic to mean ‘full of pathos’, or in its pejorative sense?”

“Does it matter?” asked Eunos. “The important point is that we now understand the cause of your delusions.”

“Are they likely to recur?” I asked anxiously.

“Almost certainly,” said the android, without a trace of sympathy. “It would be unheard of for the psychosis to disappear. The most likely scenario is that you will suffer longer and more frequent attacks as time passes. In some cases, the patient descends into a virtually permanent state of madness, and emerges rarely.”

I began to wonder whether a sentence of death might not have been preferable to this psychological sword of Damocles, and it was with a heavy heart and little hope that I put my next question to the mechanical servant.

“How can I be cured?” I implored him.

The android’s Asiatic features did not flinch. “I do not know,” he replied, folding his arms. Were I a less tolerant man, I would have instantly leapt upon that insolent creature and pummelled that tranquil face until it was no

longer recognisable. But as I hastened to remind myself, such a display of violence would serve no purpose: Eunos could not, so he claimed, feel pain, and had he wished, I had no doubt that he could have crushed me like a fly in his metal grip.

I had to think fast before despair caught a hold. “Right!” I said decisively, although I lacked any strength to make a decision. “Here’s what I want you to do...”

“You’d like me to research a cure for the parasitical brain infection?” anticipated Eunos.

“Yes! That’s exactly what I want you to do!” I cried, relieved that at least the android had some capacity for using his initiative. “Do you think you are capable of such a feat?”

I had aimed to pique his pride with that last remark, but I should have known that Eunos had no such vice to exploit. “We shall see,” was his only reply. Soon afterwards he withdrew from my presence to begin this challenging mission, and I sat down on the polished metal floor of the clinic and sobbed into my hands.

## An Awkward Cohabitation

My relationship with Eunos, my android manservant, despite my earnest endeavours to maintain an amicable atmosphere in the house, was marked by regular misunderstandings, contretemps and loggerheads. The reader might consider it inappropriate to speak of my dealings with an android in terms of a relationship and, logically speaking, I am forced to agree with him. One does not maintain a relationship with one’s desktop calculator or washing machine, however idiosyncratic these devices might appear to us in their operation. They are mere tools, to be employed as we see fit.

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But try as I might to apply a similar rationale to Eunos, his resemblance to a bald middle-aged man of Han Chinese descent was so perfect that daily I caught myself thinking of him as a real person, and had to adjust my thinking accordingly. The matter was not helped by Eunos himself who, as we have seen, had taken Choa Chu Kang as the model for his behaviour. With every untoward incident between myself and Eunos, my estimation of the dead man's character dipped a little further.

To give an example taken at random: one morning soon after I had been diagnosed with brain parasites, I awoke very early and suddenly in my living quarters to find Eunos standing at the foot of my bed, bellowing demeaning insults at me.

"Get up at once you swinish sluggard!" thundered the android. "Are you going to fester there all morning, you shiftless cockroach? The best part of the day is already wasted!"

With such comments as those he yanked the covers from my bed, leaving me to feel the chill blast of the air-conditioning. The robot's contemptuous stare made me ashamed of my nakedness, as foolish as that might sound, and I hurriedly dragged a sheet around myself and sat up, blinking and amazed. As soon as I had recovered my faculties, I demanded to know the meaning of this ungentlemanly intrusion.

Instantly compliant, Eunos politely explained that it was in such a fashion that Choa Chu Kang had desired to be roused whenever he overslept. He was a man, so I gathered, who felt all too keenly the brevity of man's life, and wished to waste not a minute more than was absolutely necessary in idle slumber. He slept, so I was given to understand, no more than five hours a night, and consumed large doses of stimulants to keep his mind whetted and in pursuit of his work.

"And what was the nature of this work?" I asked the android.

"Choa Chu Kang was by profession a seismologist," replied Eunos. "It was his life's ambition to map all the tectonic plates beneath the surface of the planet."

"A highly laudable aim," I commented,

revising upwards slightly my opinion of my predecessor who, despite his eccentricity of lifestyle, had been nevertheless a man of science. "And did he complete this project?"

"No," said Eunos blandly. "He died before the planet's fault lines could be fully charted. It was his addiction to stimulants that killed him in the end."

Another bitter irony, I thought. A man whose dedication to a scientific puzzle was exactly what prevented him from fulfilling his quest. One thing still bothered me and I put the question to Eunos. For whom did Choa Chu Kang work? If he had been employed by a research establishment of some kind, then might a remnant of human civilisation not persist, even now?

"It was purely a private hobby," said the android, dashing my hopes of genuine human company with those few words. "Choa Chu Kang was a recluse. Even in his lifetime, the surviving members of the human race were scattered thinly across the planet. It is likely that you are the very last representative of your species."

A sobering thought, but I knew that Eunos had unwittingly spoken an untruth. For back on my home planet, countless hordes of my fellow men swarmed over the Earth, and showed no sign of nearing extinction, or had not when I embarked on my interstellar journey.

"And have you continued to work on Choa Chu Kang's task since his demise?" I asked Eunos, more in the way of conversation than anything else.

The android shook his head. "He left me no instructions to do so. The day he died was the last day I spent in his study."

This last remark struck me as odd, and I wondered whether it was really I who was the sluggard. "You mean to say that Kang's research has not advanced a single iota since he passed away?"

"Why should I?" said Eunos mildly. "He cannot profit from my aid now."

"Yes, yes," I said. "But don't you think he would have wanted you to continue his work?"

Eunos failed to see the sense of my argument. "Choa Chu Kang is dead," he kept repeating, as

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though I had lost sight of this plain fact. "His work ended when he did. My programming instructed me to cease serving Kang on the day he died. Since then I have been busy preparing this house for future masters."

Was I imagining it, or did I hear a faint sense of injured pride in that last remark. For the umpteenth time I reminded myself that it was futile to project my human personality traits onto this machine. "And a very nice house it is too," I said, "But I think it would be best, given what you have just told me, that you continue with Kang's work, and complete the tectonic map of the planet. It would be the honourable thing to do. I will help you if I can."

"That will not be necessary," said Eunos. "I can continue the project more efficiently without human intervention. Even while Kang was alive, the work might have been finished had he left the calculations to me, instead of which he insisted on checking everything himself, resulting in many errors and a great deal of wasted time."

Again, I had to tell myself that this was not real impatience on the android's part, but only my own interpretation of his words.

"Very well," I said. "It will be a source of great satisfaction to me to see the realisation of Kang's dream."

"Am I to assume that my research on your parasitic brain infection is to be abandoned?" said Eunos.

I started. "No, of course not!" I said, a little petulantly. "Do you have to have every little thing spelled out for you? A cure for the brain disease is, naturally, my paramount concern!"

"As you wish," said Eunos, leaving me alone to collect my thoughts.

While the android carried out his allotted task, I found myself very much at a loose end. That the robot could perform most tasks with far greater competency than I could ever hope to was undeniable, yet I still felt his rejection as a positive snub. I spent several days exploring all the wings and rooms of my new residence in a mood of surly resentment. I discovered an extensive library deep in one of the underground levels of the house, and this soon became my

favourite retreat. I spent whole days together there, ensconced on an armchair, surrounded by teetering piles of books and charts which I pored over. Of course, all the volumes housed there were written in a language wholly unknown to me, and my Dover and Somerset device was useless in this regard: it had no function to translate written scripts into my own tongue. Nevertheless, I tried to absorb what I could from illustrations, diagrams and especially maps. I was most happy the morning I finally unearthed a complete atlas of the planet, Kadaloor or Pung, or whatever other names it bore. I was reluctant to disturb Eunos while he was engaged in his research on the parasites which still threatened to overwhelm me with madness, but a little instruction from him helped me to locate the house on a large island continent in the northern temperate zone of the planet. The android also provided me with a translation of the key, and thereafter I was able to make a good estimation of my route so far.

In contradiction to what my erstwhile hosts, the Bird People of Kadaloor had assured me, it appeared from my atlas that Kadaloor was not solely a planet of forests. As I had discovered for myself, there were great swathes of land that had been decimated by novena mining, and were now swallowed up by the desert. But my maps indicated other terrains as well: mountains and rivers, lakes, grassy plains such as those which the house overlooked, and other features that I could not comprehend.

So Eunos pointed out to me, the house he had built stood on the very end of a peninsula, at the south-westerly corner of a large island continent. He had chosen that very spot, so he said, after many decades of travel and comparison, having judged it the most suitable site for human habitation: secure, aesthetically pleasing, as well as providing adequate supplies of fresh water, with a climate that was variable but never extreme. From this point, I could trace my path backwards, across the desert that bounded the Punggol territory to the northeast, and further away, the great forest that dominated the bulk of the island to the east, home of the Bird People. Even so, my calculations were estimates of the

most general kind. It was impossible to pinpoint the probable location of my spaceship to anything smaller than a square several hundred miles on its side. Undaunted, I continued my studies, and planned out in my mind an expedition to recover the remains of the *Tanjong Pagar*, and then I could set the android slave to the task of restoring it to its original design.

Meanwhile Eunos and I saw very little of each other. I tended to avoid his company unless I had a specific request to make of him. I was uneasy in his presence, and felt as though he begrudged my intrusions and questions. Silly misgivings perhaps, but to one unused to androids of this advanced type, it was well nigh impossible to banish my natural emotional responses.

There was nothing at all about the android's appearance to excite suspicion that this was anything other than a genuine person of flesh and blood. Although I never enquired too closely about the matter, from chance remarks dropped here and there by Eunos himself, I understood that he was composed of a metal skeleton, surrounded by synthetic muscles and skin. The muscle tissue was purely cosmetic, as motors attached to the metal bones themselves provided movement. What struck me as most odd about Eunos was the fact that the calculating components, his "brains" if you will, were not located exclusively inside his skull, but was distributed throughout his body in many identical circuits and processors. Should he have had the mischance to become decapitated, he would still be able to function more or less as normal, until such a time as he was able to construct a new head.

I did not witness this macabre feat for myself, nor did I wish to, but Eunos assured me that it was the case, and I had no reason to disbelieve him. There was so much else about my companion and his behaviour that was at the very least highly eccentric. Eunos did not sleep. Naturally, as an android powered by an electric battery, he did not need to, and could recharge by simply plugging himself into one of the many solar panels fixed to the roof. Consequently, he was busy working either on a possible cure for my brain disease, or at other times on

completing Choa Chu Kang's seismological map, twenty-four hours a day. His diligence made me feel guilty whenever I was not usefully employed, either sleeping or just sitting out on the balcony watching the clouds and the afternoon sun, and very soon I found myself spending more and more of my time in the library, working on my own plans and projects. I began to understand the reasons why Choa Chu Kang had become obsessed with his seismological survey, to the extent that it had been the indirect cause of his death. I felt it simply intolerable to spend so much time in wasteful idleness, when Eunos was toiling ceaselessly to carry out my orders. I toyed with the notion of ordering him to sleep for at least eight hours in the twenty-four, even if this were to be a sham of sleep, simply to assuage my guilt. But I decided against it, for fear that my reasons would be misunderstood, or perhaps understood only too well.

Several times during the next few weeks I experienced a recurrence of the hallucinations that had first assailed me out in the desert. The content of these waking dreams was markedly different from then, and thankfully the colossal beetles made no reappearance. Most of my hallucinations now seemed to figure Eunos himself. I suppose this is only to be expected, given that he was the principal subject of my daily worries and concerns.

On a typical occasion, I awoke from an afternoon nap to find the android beating me around the face and head with what appeared to be one of my own shoes. The assault was vicious and sustained, and although the android declined to speak during his attack, I could read the absolute hatred in his eyes, as I lay on the floor, uselessly trying to defend myself against the rain of blows. After a few seconds, I succumbed to the violence, and fell unconscious, in which state I remained for several days. When I finally recovered my senses, I furiously sought out the android and demanded an apology, only to be informed that the entire episode had been an invention of my unconscious mind. Had I any facial bruises or cuts? In his customary unflappable manner, Eunos pointed out that I was unin-

jured, and that my story was merely that: a fiction woven together by the misfiring synapses in my brain.

Naturally I was anxious for any good news from Eunos's medical research, but he refused to offer me false hope, and maintained that he was still studying my brain scans. I tried, without success, to put the matter from my mind, and went for many long, lonely walks in the countryside surrounding the house. I am no naturalist, but I gained some pleasure, and distraction from my woes, in the observation and study of alien flora and fauna. I began a sketchbook of those specimens which caught my interest, and slowly improved my skills as a draughtsman. I made the mistake of showing these sketches one evening to Eunos, in the vain hope that he would be, if not impressed, at least politely interested in my efforts. Instead, after a cursory glance at my amateur efforts with a pencil and pad, he showed me the many large volumes of natural history which lined the walls of the library, many illustrated with high quality coloured holograms. My little drawings were less than paltry in comparison and, as Eunos was quick to point out, wholly redundant. There was virtually nothing about the organisms of the planet not contained in these authoritative encyclopaedias. Outwardly I concurred, but privately decided not to share any of my future projects with the robot. I knew I was behaving irrationally, but could not pretend I felt otherwise. I had begun to despise Eunos.

## New Hope and a New Friend

At some point during my stay at the house of Eunos, the android, I decided to take stock of my situation, to draw up a list of objectives

achieved, and those yet incomplete. In the event, the second list proved a good deal longer than the first, and I shall attempt to summarise it below.

My irresponsible fixation with a child's computer game, stored on the navigational computer of the *Tanjong Pagar*, had in some way led to my forgetting even the most basic outline of the mission entrusted to me by my superiors, with the result that I had not the slightest notion of my objectives.

Nevertheless, given that my crash-landing on the surface of this planet, following some ill-advised hacking of my own into the navigational computer, was purely accidental, I judged it highly probable that my mission required me to continue on my journey through space to another location in the galaxy. In all likelihood, my sojourn on Kadaloor was no more than a distraction from the main assignment. Therefore, it was imperative that I should recover the wreck of the *Tanjong Pagar* at the earliest opportunity, and make it spaceworthy once again, possibly with the aid of the android Eunos. Once this hurdle had been overcome, it should be possible, I reasoned, for my android slave to perform a systematic scan of the ship's computer memory banks, in search of clues to the content of my mission. Should this search prove fruitless, I speculated about the possibility of performing yet another brain scan on myself, in the hope of recovering those mislaid memories. Surely I cannot have permanently forgotten such a vital nugget of information as my mission! Do we ever really forget such things, even if they might be, for one reason and another, temporarily inaccessible?

I worried too about the growth of my brain infection, and could not discount the possibility that further and more frequent bouts of hallucination might prevent me from carrying out any or all of these tasks. But there was little I could do on that score until I had more definite answers from Eunos. Patience was all I could contribute to that undertaking. I did my best to put the delusions of the past, my imprisonment at the hands of gigantic insects, aside. A layman in psychiatry I might have been, but my intuition

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told me that sanity depended on this, not dwelling on past traumas, whether imagined or real.

This effort was sometimes hindered by thoughtlessness on the part of Eunos. He had been accustomed to serving his previous master, Choa Chu Kang, with a dietary regime broadly Oriental in character and, having always been a man of wide-ranging tastes, I saw no reason why this should change. However, I was forced to take exception when a dish of boiled beetles and their larvae in a soy and ginger sauce was placed before me at the dinner table. I laid down my chopsticks as carefully as I could, for fear that my mounting fury might lead me to snap them in two.

"Is this some kind of infantile joke?" I demanded, rising from my seat, red in the face.

Eunos looked at me with an expression of condescending serenity. "Is there something about tonight's meal you dislike?" he asked, all innocence.

"Yes, there jolly well is!" I replied warmly. "And I should think you know perfectly well what the problem is, unless you have blown one of your brain circuits, you mechanical booby!"

Eunos then informed me that Choa Chu Kang had often enjoyed a dish of cooked beetles, a traditional delicacy in his culture.

"And had you no thought to the associations which this concoction would have for me?" I demanded, still furious despite his protestations of innocence. "Given my recent psychological stresses?"

The thought had never entered Eunos's head, or so he confidently claimed. I had little choice but to give him the benefit of the doubt on this occasion, but declined to taste the dish he had prepared, careless of whether his feelings were hurt.

I am conscious that some readers might judge me to be self-indulgent in narrating these trivial spats, but this is just one among dozens of similar incidents, which serves to give a flavour of the conditions I had to endure in this period.

Quite apart from my uncertainty about the location of my spaceship, and the details of my mission, there were several other unanswered

questions which, although not quite vital, were nevertheless intriguing in the extreme. For one, what was the ancestry of this Choa Chu Kang? Had his kind migrated to this planet from Earth at some point in the distant past? If Eunos's story contained even a grain of truth, then humanity might have roamed the surface of Kadaloor for over a millennium. How had they arrived here? After much procrastination, I resolved to ask the android for a full explanation. I encountered him one morning while out walking one of my regular routes. He was sitting in a leafy glade, apparently motionless, staring at a rock. It was so rare to find him unoccupied, that I took a chance, and joined him in his meditations. After a long period of silence, I put my question to him. His reply took me aback.

"I don't know a great deal more than you yourself," he replied, with surprising candour and modesty. "It is clear enough that human beings are not a native species to this planet, but just how far back their colonisation can be traced was always a matter of some controversy. Of course, all the masters I have ever served were born and died on Kadaloor, but their heritage remains clouded in doubt."

I smiled. "You are mistaken Eunos!" I retorted, enjoying for once the opportunity to correct him. "You say that all your masters were born on this planet, but there is one exception."

"Oh?" he enquired, picking up a small nut or pebble from the forest floor and examining it closely as though it were of intense interest.

Was that a fleeting trace of irritation on those mechanical features?

"Yes, you are forgetting that I myself am not of this world. I am, I suppose, an extraterrestrial being to you! A native of the planet Earth, that's me. Does that shock you?"

I had been deliberately saving up this bombshell for an occasion such as this, with the hope of seeing Eunos astonished and bemused. Nothing could have been further from the truth. He shrugged and looked away momentarily. "Very well," was his comment.

"Is that your only response?" I demanded, a little put out.

"What kind of response would you like,

Captain Braddell?" replied the android in a tone close to impertinence.

"I just thought you might show a little interest," I complained, feeling deflated. "It's not every day you get the chance to meet a being from another world, is it?"

"You forget, Captain Braddell, that I am incapable of curiosity, although I have reminded you of this fact on many occasions. Rest assured that I have taken note of your other-worldly origins, and will not forget it. But it is unreasonable to expect me to pretend an enthusiasm which is alien to my nature."

Eunos stood up and, putting the pebble in his pocket, prepared to quit my company. There was no arguing with him, for Eunos was, as on most occasions, in the right. But I was not yet willing to give up the fight.

"So I take it that you want to know nothing more about how I got here, the circumstances of my home world, my mission here on Kadaloor?"

"If you wish to tell me such facts, I will certainly listen," said Eunos, turning back to where I sat morosely with my back against a tree. "But I cannot see how they are relevant to the task at hand."

"You cannot judge for certain until you have heard them," I remarked, rather astutely so I thought.

"In that case, I would be most interested to hear about the nature of your mission, Captain Braddell," said the robot. I got the impression that I was being humoured.

"As a matter of fact," I began, acutely chagrined, "I have forgotten the precise details of my mission, but no doubt it is of the gravest importance."

Eunos put his hand in front of his mouth for a minute. To disguise a smile of amusement? Surely not. "You have forgotten your mission?"

"Yes," I said, stonily. "And I was wondering whether you might be able to help me recover that memory. You might use one of the brain scans you performed on me. If you could spare the time from your busy schedule," I added archly, noticing that once again, Eunos was bent double, rummaging amongst the leaf litter on the forest floor and ignoring me.

Of late he seemed to have been spending an inordinate amount of time wandering uselessly around the surrounding countryside, instead of carrying out the crucial assignment with which I had charged him. So far I had shied away from upbraiding him about this shirking attitude, but my solitary walks were being spoiled by my always bumping into the fellow, or espying him on some hilltop, standing motionless, deaf to my shouted greetings.

"My time is yours to command as you wish," replied Eunos now, secreting more random items in his coat pockets, "but I suspect that I am on the verge of a breakthrough in my research into the brain parasites."

I leapt to my feet, overjoyed. "Are you serious?" I cried. "What makes you say that?"

Eunos brought out a handful of his finds for me to see. "During our conversation, I have been examining the molecular structure of these seeds," he said. "I suspect that they might contain a chemical compound that acts as a naturally occurring antidote to the disease currently afflicting you. However, only further research in the laboratory will confirm or deny that hypothesis. I hope you will understand if I waste no more time, but return directly to the house. There is much to be done."

I assented without hesitation, and he stalked away up the hill through the avenue of trees towards our shared residence in silence. Hope had rekindled itself in my heart, and for the rest of the day I trod the hills and valleys with a lighter step. I made several detailed landscape sketches, some of the most competent I had achieved to date.

It was also on this day that I first met Raffles, who was to become my constant companion for many of my subsequent adventures. Raffles first appeared to me as I was busily cross-hatching the leaves of a large tree-fern I had sketched while sitting on the banks of a wide, slow-flowing river. He slithered out from the undergrowth, and looked up at me inquisitively.

He was as strange a creature as I had yet encountered on that planet of oddities. Less than a foot in length, not dissimilar from a snake in shape and movement, but endowed with a

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covering of fur, as soft as a mouse's, and pure white in colour. Limbless, but with surprising agility, the creature snaked towards me and began to investigate my boot. Its face was neither wholly mammalian, nor reptilian. It had whiskers and a snout, but the eyes, of that piercing pink colour so characteristic of albino organisms, were narrow and glinted with a snake-like intelligence. They were also, so I later learned, double-lidded. I would hate the reader to conclude that Raffles was an animal of malevolent appearance, although I am afraid that the poverty of my description might lead him to exactly that conclusion. On the contrary, Raffles had a matey look about him, a sort of genial curiosity entirely absent in the android. And perhaps it was that very difference that attracted me to Raffles. I decided to keep him as a pet, and named him after a Great Uncle of mine, to whom I fancied I saw a subtle resemblance in the animal's whiskery visage.

Raffles seemed as pleased to make my acquaintance as I was to make his, and he spent many hours asleep in the pocket of my cardigan. His habits were by no means nocturnal though, and, in his irregular periods of activity, he would creep around the house, hunting down the insects which formed his staple diet. I had to prevent Eunos from destroying, or at least

ejecting from the premises, our new house guest. I cannot say that the android fully understood my reasons for keeping the animal, and I would have been uncomfortable explaining them to him, as it was in part his own diffidence and haughtiness that had driven me to seek out a more sociable companion. After our initial disagreement, Eunos asked no questions about Raffles. No doubt he had already decided that this was just another symptom of the encroaching brain disease, or maybe just another pointless aspect of human behaviour that simply defied rational analysis. It was always my suspicion that he disliked Raffles, and found his presence repulsive in some way, but that would have been to make the mistake of attributing human emotions to Eunos who, as he never ceased to remind me, was supremely non-human.

That albino creatures existed on Kadaloor as well as on Earth was in itself a point of interest, to me at least. There were many such analogies between the natural history of the two planets, analogies which I was at a loss to explain, and could only wonder at. Many times, on my explorations of the land surrounding Woodland Rise, the familiar shapes of trees and flowers could have almost persuaded me that I was back on Earth itself, only to be jolted back into reality by the sudden appearance of a woodland creature or plant so un-Earthlike in appearance that it confounded the imagination to wonder how such weird organisms might have evolved.

After dark there was little danger of confusing this world with my own. For one, the moon was missing, and it is difficult to describe how disconcerting that absence is to one who has never experienced it. The constellations were completely foreign too, and in my more fanciful moods I imagined some impatient deity shaking the sky like a snow globe to rearrange the pattern of the stars. It goes without saying that all of these constellations were recorded in minute detail in several exhaustive volumes of astronomy that rested on my library shelves. I cannot remember ever bothering to consult one, although I spent many long evenings staring up at the night sky with a growing sense of awe. It was not something that I expected Eunos to



understand, and of course he did not, but that had ceased to irk me to the same degree.

To be frank, I had begun to spend more and more of my time doing precisely that which I knew would baffle and provoke my android servant. It was as though I wanted to prove myself superior to him by engaging in those activities which to his mind were the least productive and most pointless. I had trained Raffles to slither from a pocket on one side of my cardigan to the other, on my command. The task had taken me three weeks of patient effort, and cost the lives of hundreds of grasshoppers as bribes, but I had accomplished it. All the while, Eunos grimly toiled away in his laboratory, in pursuit of a cure for the parasitic disease which was growing daily in size, infecting more and more of my brain, colonising my memories and warping my thoughts.

## In Search of the Red Hill Clementi

Columns of smoke were rising again from the green horizon. Clumped together in twos and threes, they might have been the campfires of some advancing army, and were I not confident that no such armies roamed this region, they might have caused me some vague unease. Humans had deserted this land, save myself, and I was only an accidental tourist here. "Forest fires," Eunos assured me, when I pointed out the charcoal yarns unravelling towards the heavens. "They often happen at this time of year," commented the robot, scanning the horizon with his telescopic vision, far superior to my merely human powers of sight. "It would be safer if you did not venture out into the woods for a while. These blazes are unpredictable. The winds might even blow them in this direction. Fortunately,

the house is completely fireproof."

"Oh, good," I said, squinting at the smoke once more. One or two of them had vanished abruptly. I felt a vague sense of disappointment, however inapt that might seem. I suppose I would have welcomed a little excitement in my sedentary existence. I had become rather comfortable of late. Perhaps too comfortable.

It is a remarkable quality of human beings that they can become used to almost any conditions of life, however arduous, unfamiliar or bizarre. The last category comes closest to describing my own circumstances during the long period I spent living at Woodland Rise. I was alone, perhaps the last human being in existence, on a planet many thousands of light years from my home, where the dominant species were, apparently, a race of flightless birds and another composed of warlike purple, undulating spheres. I had no living companion save Raffles, an albino snake-mouse of limited intelligence but voracious appetite for grasshoppers. My location in the galaxy was a mystery, as was the whereabouts of my crashed spaceship. My chances of ever returning to my home planet were bordering on the infinitesimal.

In the credit column of my life's balance sheet, I had become, through mere chance, the lord and master of a handsome and well-appointed house, complete with an android manservant of great talents, but surly manners.

Finally, parasitic microbes had infected my brain, and had no compunction in meddling with my brainwaves, causing hallucinations, panic attacks, paranoia, night terrors and other disturbing psychological phenomena.

The purpose of my existence was less clear than it ever had been. For my whole life, during my childhood and youth, the future had been a wide and brightly lit corridor, with a series of easily read notices pointing me in the correct direction. Should I have ever wandered away from the main avenue into fruitless or dangerous byways, kindly figures of authority were always on hand to steer me back on course. At the age of five, along with many other boys of my acquaintance, I had decided that I would become an inter-planetary explorer. Ten years later,

unlike the vast majority of my playmates, I was well on my way to achieving this goal. Another decade on, and after overcoming countless obstacles, setbacks and the competition of my peers, I graduated from the Spaceflight Academy, and it was with a sensation of near disbelief that I embarked on my first solo mission into space.

From the perspective of my deckchair on the veranda of Woodland Rise, all that hectic diligence looked very distant. I was drifting, all my bold intentions forgotten, pottering around on a backwater planet at the edge of the galaxy. But, entirely unexpectedly, I was happy. It took me a while to notice it, and almost as soon as I had, with the perverse logic which has always seemed to characterise my fate, it all changed.

The new turn my life was about to take was announced, appropriately enough, by Eunos. I was taking my customary afternoon nap on the terrace, enjoying the autumn sunshine, when the android appeared and, without warning, tore the sunhat from my sleeping face, and shook me brusquely by the shoulder. I sat up immediately, my brow furrowed in annoyance, and the thought crossed my mind, not, I confess, for the first time, whether it was philosophically or even physically possible to murder an android.

"We must leave immediately," said Eunos. I bridled inwardly at the note of authority in his voice. This sounded less like the suggestion of an underling, and more like an order.

"To what end?" I replied, struggling to maintain my cool.

Eunos thrust a printed sheet of paper into my hands, uselessly it turned out, for the page was printed in a script alien to me. I sighed and handed the page back to him.

"Please explain, in English," I said wearily.

"By studying the genetic structure of certain seeds, I have discovered facts pertinent to your brain infection," said Eunos.

I goggled. "Yes? What is it? Do you have a cure?"

"Not as yet," was the dispiriting reply. "But progress has been made. The plants native to this continent cannot offer a cure, but I am of the opinion that another, related species might well

provide a key to combating the parasites. It is a species of plant known as the Red Hill Clementi, and it grows only in a small mountainous region on the island of Senja."

I tried to think back to my abandoned studies of Kadaloor's geography, but the name failed to register. I prompted Eunos for more information, and he explained that Senja was an island continent, isolated from its nearest neighbours by many thousands of sea miles in any direction. It was also, as far as we were concerned, in the antipodes, and an arduous trek of many months lay ahead of us, back through the territory of the Punggol, and crossing through the great forests of the Bird-People before delving deep into lands which even Eunos spoke of vaguely.

For a moment, lying there on my deckchair, with a crushed ice cocktail melting slowly in the afternoon heat, and Raffles sleeping quietly in my shirt pocket, I considered calling off the whole thing, and letting the brain parasites have their victory. The prospect of journeying in the sole company of Eunos did little to dispel my lethargy. In the end, it was my abiding sense of sheer terror, at the depths of madness which awaited me should I fail to act, that propelled me into action.

I leapt up from the deckchair, and quaffed my cocktail in a single icy gulp. It was the last I was to taste for many years.

"Are we packed and ready to leave?" I asked the android.

"No, Captain," said Eunos, taken aback, I suspect, by my alacrity.

"Then why are you wasting time standing around here?" I chided. "Saddle the horses and let us be off!"

As ever, Eunos's grasp of figurative speech was incomplete. "We have no horses," he said blandly. "No such animals exist on Kadaloor. As an alternative, I suggest that we take the hovercar."

"We have a hovercar?" I asked, intrigued by the prospect.

"I believe that is the closest word in your language, yes."

It was entirely typical of Eunos that he had chosen to keep the existence of this vehicle a

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secret from me until now. All this time it had been hidden away in an underground garage, “to prevent the sunlight damaging the paintwork”, according to Eunos.

As a neatly concealed trap door slid aside, and a pneumatic platform raised the vehicle silently to ground level, I could see at once that the contraption in question bore precious little resemblance to any car I had seen on Earth. In shape and colour it looked like a blanched almond. Its matte surface was devoid of windows, handles or devices of any kind, and it exuded a kind of other-worldly serenity as it sat there, absolutely motionless, about six feet off the ground. The vehicle was large enough, I estimated, for at least a dozen passengers, and once inside I was relieved to find that the designers had made provision for separate living spaces, sealed off from one another by adjustable screens. I had dreaded the prospect of being cooped up for months on end, with no escape from the android’s disapproving looks and belittling comments.

I decided to make it clear from the outset that I would be spending the lion’s share of our travelling time alone, studying. Eunos seemed to fall in with that suggestion readily enough, and he had a surprise for me, he said, which would aid my studies. Since Eunos had quickly learned and adopted my own language, my Dover and Somerset device had fallen into disuse, nor had I missed it when Eunos had, without my knowledge, taken the instrument into his workshop. It emerged now transformed: a flexible metal eye-stalk protruded from one end, and a small, semi-spherical screen was mounted on the front panel. Eunos had converted the Dover and Somerset to a reading device, which displayed its translations on the globular screen in a fast-moving stream of text. I thanked him sincerely for his efforts, but he shrugged off my gratitude with the air of a long-suffering wife.

The mood of conviviality was broken when it came to the question of Raffles. I insisted that he accompany us on the journey. To leave him behind now, to fend for himself, was unthinkable. He was a tame creature, no longer used to foraging for his food. But Eunos had strong

arguments against me. “We will be travelling through climates wholly unsuitable to such a small, vulnerable creature,” he pleaded. “And it will not always be possible to secure suitable food.”

“Nonsense,” I replied. “Raffles is not a fussy eater! Just yesterday I discovered him eating one of my socks.”

“In any case,” continued Eunos, it would be unhygienic to keep a small animal like this in the confines of the car. Think of the droppings. And he might scratch the upholstery.”

I suspected this was the real reason behind Eunos’s reluctance. Eventually a compromise was reached. Raffles would accompany us on our quest, but he would be confined to a transparent box for the majority of the journey. I felt sorry for the poor creature, as he slithered into his new home, and Eunos closed the lid with an impatient gesture.

My own quarters would be similarly reduced for the duration of the trip, but at least I would have the opportunity to explore more of the planet’s surface, and from a relatively safe viewpoint too. Most of the hovercar’s internal space was allocated to me, naturally enough, as Eunos could survive comfortably in conditions so cramped that they would cause acute claustrophobia in any normal human. He spent most of his time lying flat on his back in a coffin-like cubby hole on the base of the structure. He was plugged into the car’s own navigational computer, and could monitor our progress from there. That left me with little responsibility. Keen to road-test the new vehicle, I ordered Eunos to switch the car to manual control. Predictably, he balked at the notion, but eventually gave way, and relinquished some control over the vehicle’s speed and steering to the miniature cockpit mounted on the wall of my living quarters.

One of the most striking features of the hovercar was a clever device by which it appeared from the inside entirely transparent, like floating inside a gigantic sliver of ice. But step down from the hatch, and the dull beige, metallic surface was entirely opaque, leaving the observer unsure whether there were any passen-

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gers inside at all. Its operation was virtually silent too, apart from the shrill whistle of air, eddying over the surface, the occasional brush of low hanging branches, and now and again, a brief thud, as some unwary creature became Kadaloorian roadkill. From my vantage point inside the car, such events were particularly jarring, as every surface became a perfect window, allowing me to observe the collision in excruciating detail. Thankfully, the car was also self-cleaning, and any gruesome detritus smeared onto the exterior could be quickly removed.

We made impressive progress in the first few days, thanks in part to the astonishing speeds of which the hover-car was capable. I almost wished we were travelling a little more slowly, for already the landscape outside our flattened bubble was changing beyond recognition, and I would have dearly liked to have taken my sketchbook on a walk into the woods and marshes that flashed by.

But we had no time to waste. My illness was progressing steadily, so Eunos assured me, after performing another brain scan en route. Occasional hallucinations and flickerings of madness disturbed me on the journey, but nothing as severe or protracted as my encounter

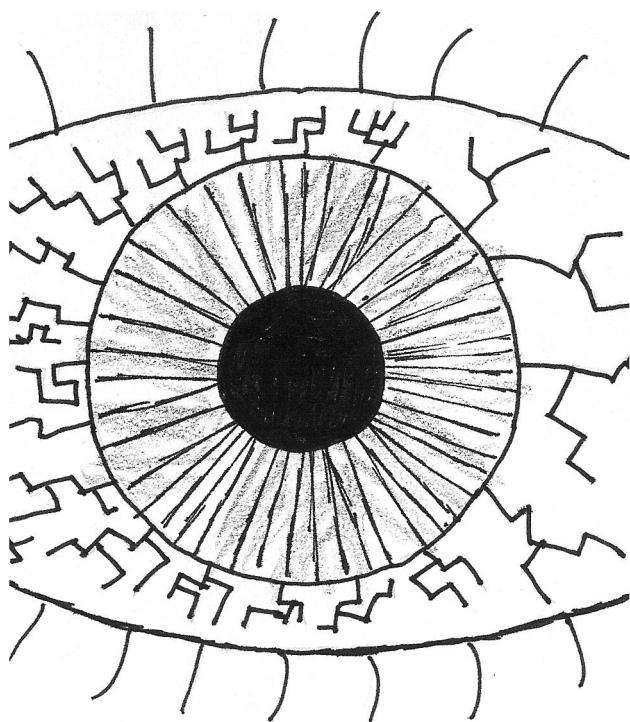
with the Rumbia beetles. Now and again I would catch, in the corner of my eye, what I could only think of as a hole, a circular gap in the weft of my reality, through which, if I turned my attention to it, I could spy on momentous doings. Universes were being born on the other side, giant gas nebulas were forming, cooling and shrinking into galaxies. Unimaginable energies were being flung out in all directions by the relentless engines of creation. Then Eunos would tap me on the shoulder, or call me through the intercom system, and I would be jerked back to my quotidian world, dazed and disappointed. I knew that I should learn to ignore these visions, train myself not to succumb to their divine temptations, but each time I caught sight of that mote of unreality, curiosity overwhelmed me, and I dove inward, into another big bang, to a place where time had not yet been born.

To distract myself from the lure of insanity, I resolved to learn how to control the hover car, and, overriding Eunos's ardent protestations, I spent many happy hours buzzing the craft over the undulating surface of Kadaloor at great speed. Thankfully, the car was equipped with sensors and intelligent navigation, which protected me from obvious blunders, and several serious collisions were avoided in this way. But even with these safeguards, Eunos was never happy about my command of his hover car, and was inconsolable whenever a scrape against a tree trunk or boulder caused some minor cosmetic damage to the exterior of the car. I suppose he probably had in mind the extra work it would cost him to fix these scratches.

"Did you build the car yourself?" I asked Eunos one day. I had been thinking that his solicitude about these minor bumps and bruises might be explained if the vehicle was his own creation. Considering that he had constructed Woodland Rise without assistance, the thought was not implausible.

"No," he answered me, through the intercom. I watched his face on my monitor as he spoke. "It once belonged to Outram Park."

"But that was over half a millennium ago!" I gasped, agog. "How can the car have survived such an interval intact?"



It may have been my imagination, but I fancied I detected a flicker of discomfort on the normally impassive features of the robot. “He was a very careful driver,” replied Eunos, after a pause.

“Even so...” I murmured, trailing off into silence as I sat in awe of a civilisation so far ahead of my own, that inventions humanity could only dream of were, to the men of Kadaloor, antiques.

Eunos’s face flashed onto my screen again, this time furrowed with anxiety. “Captain Braddell, look out for that...”

Although he never got to finish the sentence, it made little difference, for the object he had in mind to complete the clause was directly ahead of us. We hit it square on, and at such speed that the car flipped upwards, like a tossed coin, and engines hitherto silent were suddenly screaming in alarm, as they struggled to right the craft. We landed nose first, the front of the car burying itself into the earth to such a depth that I had to

exit the car via a hatch in the engine compartment at the back.

Eunos had already found his way out, and he offered me a sullen hand as I clambered through the narrow hatch, and stood on a mound of earth thrown up by the grinding engines of the hover-car.

“What did we hit?” I asked, brushing myself down, and rubbing an ache here and a bruise there.

Eunos simply pointed at the thing in question.

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” I said. “But what is it?”

He shrugged, a gesture rarely observed in the android. I put my hands on my hips and sighed, trying to make some sense of the confused jumble my eyes were registering.

A grating, squeaky noise filled the air for a moment, and after the briefest delay, my trusty Dover and Somerset translated the announcement. “I am Thanggam,” intoned the machine. “Bow before me or perish!”

# The Quarterly Review

## Cars

John Lasseter /

Joe Ranft (dirs)

Film, US, 121 mins

In this belated sequel to Stephen King’s underrated directorial debut, *Maximum Overdrive*, humanity is long gone – the resistance displayed by the survivors in that movie utterly forgotten, and the cars given autonomous life by a freak cosmic accident rule the world.

However, in a horrifying echo of George A Romero’s mall-shopping zombies in *Dawn of the Dead*, the cars continue to perform the mundane duties they undertook when mankind still lived, so we see them travelling along motorways, going on touring holidays, attending sports events, and so on. They lack the imagina-

tion to come up with new activities for themselves, now that their erstwhile masters are gone. Worst of all, like public schoolboys who grow up to beg a madam’s cane, they throw themselves into life-threatening high speed races, struggling to recapture excitement in what once was torture.

In common with other recent children’s films, such as *Ice Age* and *Robots*, and of course with the aforementioned George A Romero, *Cars* takes an uncommon interest in entropy, and its ultimate expression, death.

In *Cars*, to be built is to begin to rust; to turn on your engine is to become outdated – there will always be a newer model, and from the moment you are created you begin the fight against decrepitude. A depressing topic for an adult film, and even more so for a film made for children.

And so, although the marketing for *Cars* betrays little of its origin, its themes perhaps stay closer to the horror of Stephen King's work than you might imagine.

It is highly recommended. – *HP*

## The Descent

Neil Marshall (dir.)

Film, UK, 99 mins

This movie is terrifying and thoughtful. Losing loved ones, friendship and adventure ride along with revenge, fear of the unknown and the desire to live. – *RT*

## Three Moons Over Milford

ABC Family

TV, US, 40 mins

At last, a TV show for anyone who thought that *Gilmore Girls* would be much more palatable if (a) there was a simple unifying reason for everyone in the town of Stars Hollow being so damn quirky all the time and (b) that reason was the impending destruction of all life on Earth.

Now, I know sf fans, being one myself, and I don't need to ask if you're intrigued yet – I know that you are.

You've read the *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, and learnt of ordinary mainstream programs with science-fictional premises, and wished you could have seen them. Sometimes you've tracked them down, only to find out they were just as mundane as the rest of mainstream television.

But what about this one? Do the fantasy elements make it worth watching once, at least, even if it isn't worth loving?

The initially innocuous title explains the premise – the moon has broken into three parts, which are expected to fall to Earth in the near future (estimates range from less than a year to

over twenty of them), and we watch how this affects the inhabitants of a town called Milford.

Cannily, the show begins some time after the initial disaster, by which time armageddon fatigue has begun to set in. Teenagers use it as an excuse for breaking the law, adults as a reason to indulge their every PG-rated whim. The ramifications play out in a number of reasonably funny and imaginative ways. It isn't a bad show.

However, it may end up falling between two stools. *Eureka* (A Town Called *Eureka* in the UK) is probably a bit funnier, has a more engaging cast, and more convincing special effects, while the upcoming *Jericho*, the story of a small town struggling to survive after the nearest city is destroyed by nuclear bombs, may well leave this cosy catastrophe looking just a little too frivolous.

SF fans should catch at least one episode, but if you have never been tempted to watch *Everwood* (in the UK, *Our New Life in Everwood*), say, or *Seventh Heaven*, or any of those other comfortable drama-soaps, one episode will probably be more than enough.

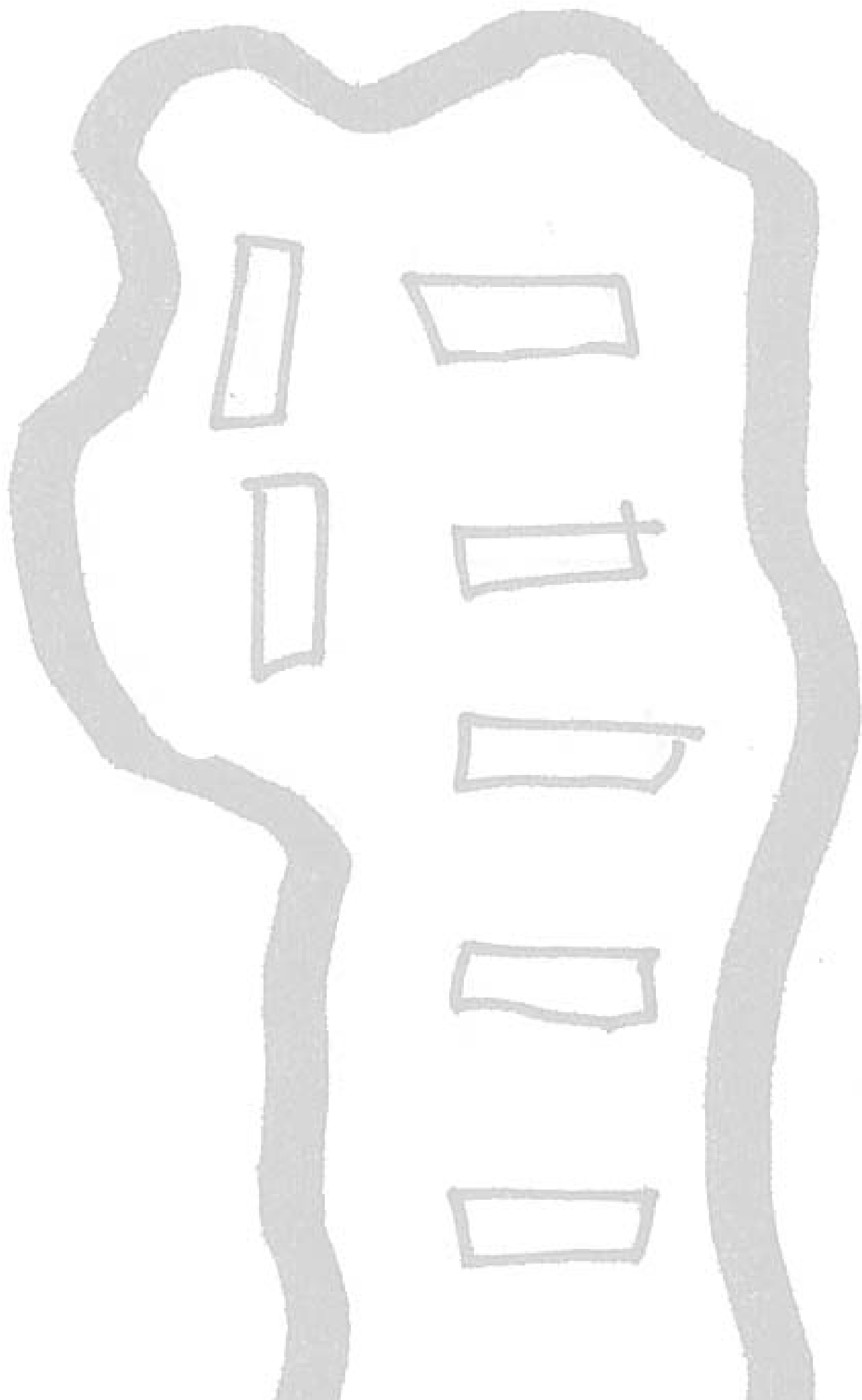
Of course, the fate of *Three Moons Over Milford* – and the fates of *Eureka* and *Jericho* – may not be in the hands of science fiction fans, or this reviewer, but of our moms – call it the *Charmed* factor, or the *Stargate* factor, but spare a thought for *Angel* and *Farscape* either way. If our moms don't watch it, no fantasy show will survive very long. – *WB*

## Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest

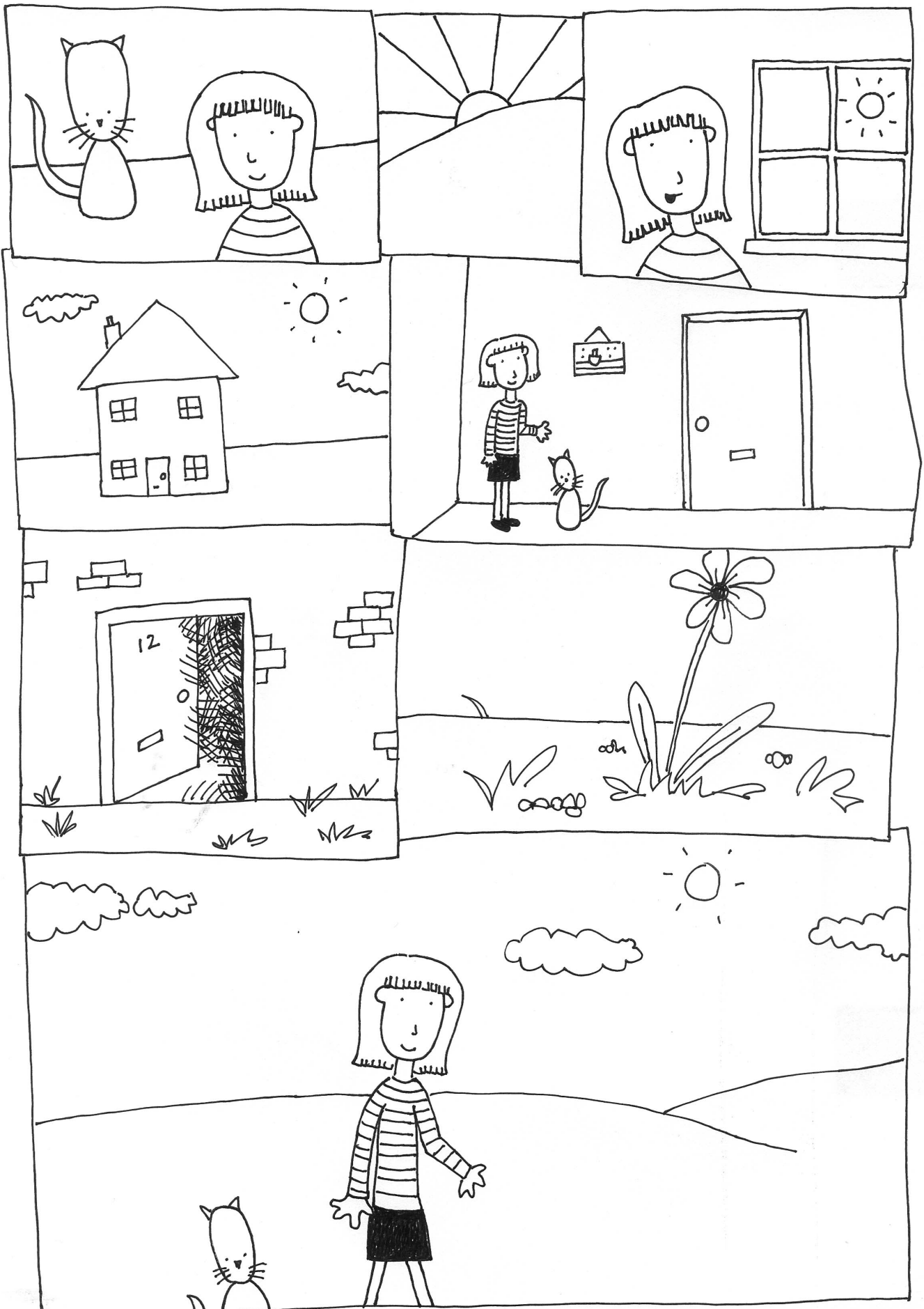
Gore Verbinski (dir.)

Film, US, 150 mins

There were monsters, with swords, but the Caribbean had a sword too, and he was fighting them. Another man had only one eye, and he bit some treasure, but it hurt his tooth and made his tummy poorly. – *LCT*



# HELEN AND HER MAGIC CAT





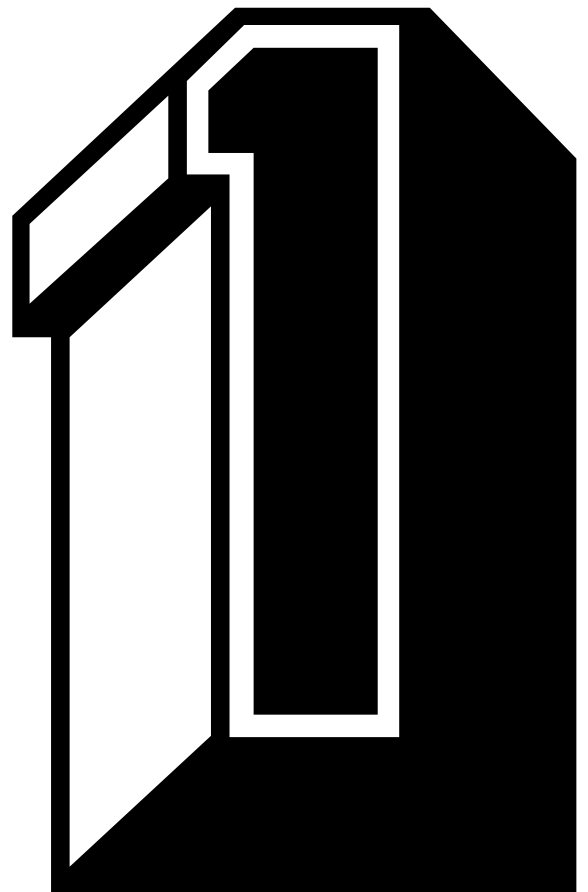
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**Space**

**University**

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# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 13

Winter

2006

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# Editorial

## Welcome to the Family

This issue we welcome new contributors and new ideas to the publication, as well as an uncanny host of parasitic lifeforms!

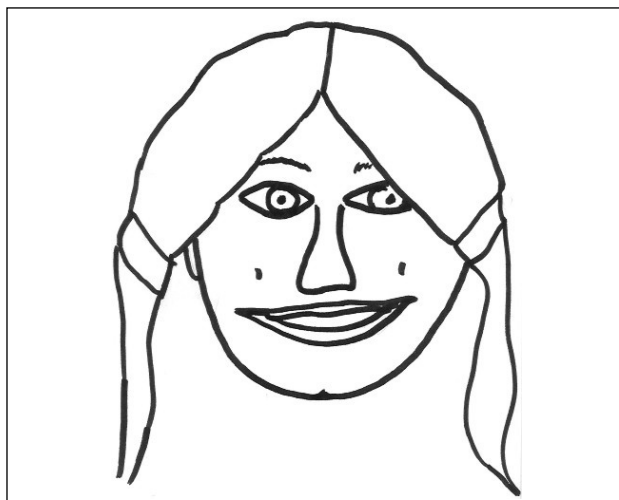
Walt Brunston is from Austin, Texas, home of independent cinema and, even more significantly, Ain't It Cool News! For the last couple of issues Walt has been supplying us with the hilarious cartoon strip, *Robots, in a Spaceship*, as well as the occasional review of US television. If you have been concerned that he has been palming us off with the same *Robots* artwork for an issue or two, prepare to make some allowances, because in this issue he presents us with the beginning of what is sure to be seen as his first major work, his first adaptation of an episode from *Space University Trent*. (Work on this has left him with little time for anything else, but he has tried his best to meet all obligations, hence the shoddy recycling of artwork.)



Walt Brunston, as drawn by SWT himself

Because of its patchy transmission record, we realise that many readers will be sadly unaware of this series at all – indeed, it seems to be a glaring omission in a number of encyclopedias of science fiction and tv, not to mention its baffling absence from many online reference sites – and so Walt has gone the extra mile to bring us through freshers' week safely, providing both an episode guide and an introduction to this most unlucky of programmes.

Vicki Proserpine is something of a mystery to us, but we know this much: she is the writer of *Ellenore*, a historical short story with a twist, based upon Benjamin Constant's classic novel of misogyny, *Adolphe*. It isn't the usual type of thing we publish, and all the better for it!



Vicki Proserpine, unflatteringly rendered

Just in case there isn't room at the end of the editorial, I must of course welcome back an old friend – Newton Braddell, who is now well-established as our most frequent flyer!

Finally, I must talk briefly about the amazing discovery that has been made of a hitherto unsuspected collection of Silver Age Books, novels from all time and space, brought back from another dimension for your enjoyment, that you may savour what might have been. I give you, the Lost Classics of the Silver Age! Guaranteed to amaze and astonish! – SWT

# News

## Possible Space University Revival?

There has been a lot of interest in Space University Trent of late, much of it, naturally, stimulated by the news that Silver Age Books has bought the rights to produce adaptations of all 72 episodes of the series. Fans are hoping that, in much the same way that James Blish helped keep interest in Star Trek alive through the 1970s with his adaptations, Walt Brunston's work might prompt producers and movie-makers to take another look at the property.

Unfortunately, it looks as though, for the moment, that remains just a pipedream, with the overall rights to the series still deeply stuck in a quagmire – quite sadly, much the same quagmire that did so much to spoil its chances during its original broadcast. Still, fans reason, where there's a will – that is to say, money – there's a way, so they aren't quite ready to give up hope just yet!

## Alien Beast Injures Galactic Philanthropist

As we lollop through life, we try to take in the sights and sounds that abound in nature, and try to do as little harm as possible, or at least that was the philosophy of Gergooooo-27-ab, one of the most beloved protectors of wildlife in all the twelve galaxies of Groom, not to mention a renowned patron of the arts. Unfortunately, nature sometimes has a habit of biting the hand that feeds, and Gergooooo-27-ab is now recovering from having been mauled by a Red Trate (fortunately not the poisonous kind).

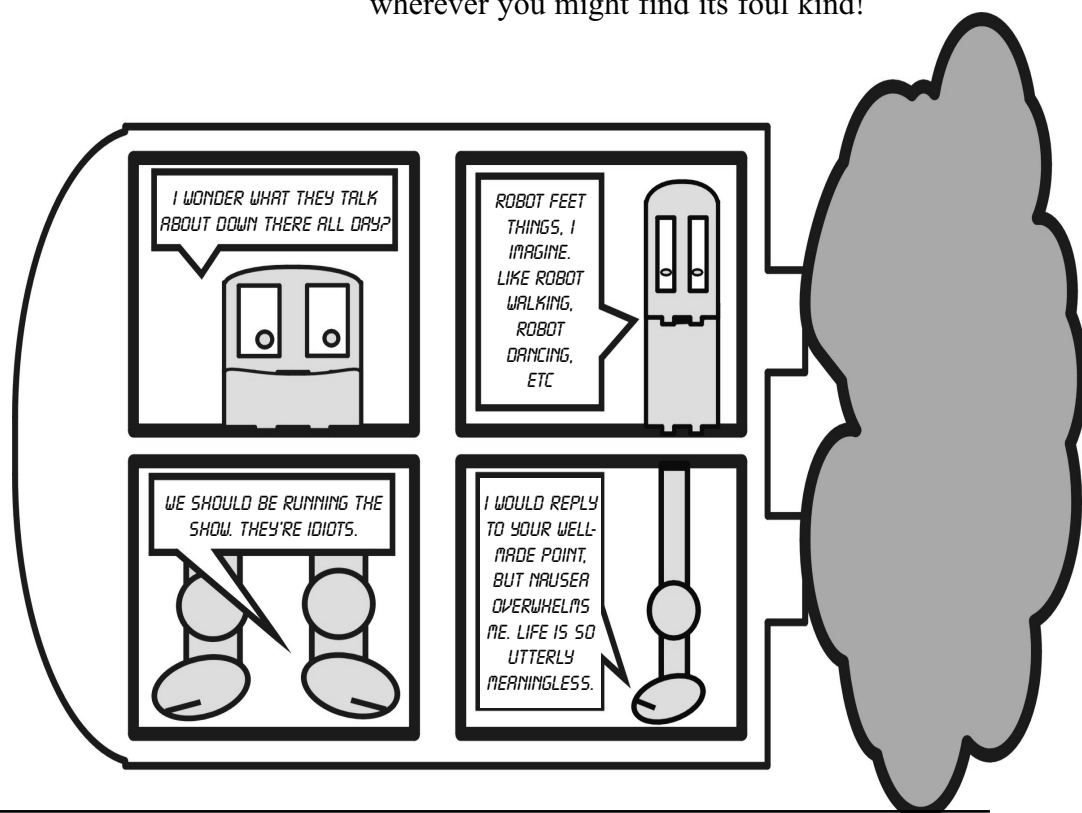
Everyone at Silver Age Books wishes him well, and thanks him for his frequent and generous contributions to our publication fund. May they never cease! We exhort readers everywhere to exact retribution on the Red Trate, wherever you might find its foul kind!

## ROBOTS, IN A SPACESHIP

A CALL TO METAL LEGS!

BY

WALT BRUNSTON



How is it that an American science fiction programme could run for three seasons and four years and never warrant so much as a single mention on That '70s Show? How could 72 exciting, funny and frightening episodes of the highest quality be made, starring some of the brightest stars of US television, without a convention being held in its honour (at least until the last couple of years)? Why, when science fiction bookshelves groan with the weight of a million tie-ins does not even one of them bear the name that deserves the attention most?

That name, of course, is Space University Trent, and the answer is that it was never broadcast in the US, despite being made with (mostly) American money, starring (mostly) American stars, and being (mostly) a damn good programme. It's a very strange story.

In 1973, impressed by the interest European channels were taking in the three produced series of Star Trek, as evidenced by the financial returns flowing across his desk, a young accountant by the name of Sidley D Bounder decided to try a new career path. Using his savings to pay the rent on a Los Angeles office for a year – an office which would often double as his sleeping quarters – he started to call himself a producer and set about putting together a deal to get his idea off the ground.

At first, his plan was simply a financial one. He saw that there was an opening on European television for slick, American-made science fiction, and he wanted to fill that opening. He knew that he wanted something enough like Star Trek to appeal to the same audience (and programme buyers), but different enough that he would not be sued by Gene Roddenberry.

Different ideas crossed his mind. A space museum? A space hospital, perhaps? He did not make enquiries with James White's agent, due to a wish to keep his cut of the profits intact, but the influence of Sector General upon his eventual work cannot be doubted.

Suddenly he had it: a space university!

# Space

**Introduced and  
adapted by  
Walt Brunston**

History records that the genius of his idea was immediately apparent to young Sidley Bounder – his journal page for that date is covered with the scrawl, “Woweee! I've got it! A space university!” The beauty of the idea was its flexibility. Every faculty he could imagine that might form part of the university led inexorably to one story idea after another, and in a daze of revelation, almost as if afraid he would lose that moment of inspiration, Bounder spent three days, at least, scribbling down the outlines for one episode after another.

Then he tried to get science fiction writers involved, and many were keen. As the money began to fall into place, he lined up a number of prominent authors, but in the end the bottom line sang its heart out to Bounder, and he chose instead to work with English and, unusually, French authors, often by means of a translator, who were willing to work more cheaply, given the fewer opportunities available to them for working in television. Most worked under pseudonyms (and unfortunately no one has yet managed to do the detective work involved in drawing up a complete list of those who were involved). Unusually for television, many of those scripts arrived on-screen largely unchanged, unfiltered by the usual sensibilities of experienced script editors, and that was

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# University

## An Introduction to the Show

# Trent

because everything was done on the cheap. That meant filming was done in Europe, and the crew was hired straight out of college.

A recipe for disaster, one might have thought – and certainly the US networks did think that, none of them choosing to bite at the pilot Bounder produced. Although he was disappointed, he said nothing to the cast and crew. He had amassed enough money, partly from investors, and partly from selling the show abroad, to go ahead with production of the first series regardless of US broadcast, and so he did.

What resulted was in fact far from a disaster. Those who saw the programme were astonished. It had all the adventure, thrills, spills and special effects one might have expected from a US programme, but they were harnessed to such unusual, thoughtful stories. The authors' stories were put directly on screen, filtered by nothing other than the abilities of the acting and production staff.

At times the episodes were extremely frightening. Others dealt with very big, controversial issues, especially during season two and three, once plans to pursue US broadcast were totally abandoned. There was no longer any need to pull the punches, and stories became more intellectual, more violent, and more rewarding of multiple viewings.

The darkening tone was unmistakable. As filming began on season two, the cast began to realise that, with no US broadcast likely, to many colleagues and casting directors it would seem that they were idling away on an extended European holiday. That began to show on screen – in retrospect, another happy accident, bringing an apparent gravitas to the performances that only enhanced the more serious stories.

The final episodes of season two were burned off on a Sunday by NED1, the Dutch broadcaster which was the first to show most episodes, having invested the most money in the project. It looked as if the dream was over, but success in other European countries, such as Finland, West Germany, and some regions of the United Kingdom, led to a campaign to have the show revived, and during January 1978 new episodes finally began to appear, both on NED1, and on channels all over Europe.

However, the final episode was shown on Christmas Eve, 1978, and this time there was no revival. Ratings had dropped off, and cast members were beginning to threaten a mass walkout should they be held to their contracts.

Bounder counted his money, checked that there was enough to buy him a decent-sized mansion in Beverley Hills, and let the show fall apart without a second thought.

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# Episode Guide

Aired from: Sep 1974 to: Dec 1978

72 eps NED1 60 min stereo

- Sam Longworth as Special Asst. to the Vice Chancellor, Mack Hardiman
- James Henry York as Dr David Lum, Professor of Philosophy
- O'Reilly Benjamin as Dr Terry Leinster, Medicine
- Jennie Rindon as Ms Laney Rashupon, Professor of Information
- Smith McClannen as Mr Jameson Banks, MSc, MBA
- James Marshall Penturin as Vice-Chancellor Benton

Episode #	Prod #	Air Date	Episode Title	
Season 1 (24 episodes)				
1.	1- 1	101	06 Sep 74	Education
2.	1- 2	102	13 Sep 74	A Mermaid's Tale
3.	1- 3	103	20 Sep 74	The Chowkidar
4.	1- 4	104	27 Sep 74	Followed by the Green
5.	1- 5	105	04 Oct 74	Locks
6.	1- 6	106	11 Oct 74	Order of Magnitude
7.	1- 7	107	18 Oct 74	Harquebus
8.	1- 8	108	25 Oct 74	Diverticulum
9.	1- 9	109	01 Nov 74	The Staunch Ones
10.	1-10	110	08 Nov 74	Trace Fossils
11.	1-11	111	15 Nov 74	Waxpod
12.	1-12	112	22 Nov 74	Midnight Sun
13.	1-13	113	29 Nov 74	Agouti
14.	1-14	114	27 Dec 74	Proxemics
15.	1-15	115	17 Jan 75	Quartenion
16.	1-16	116	24 Jan 75	The Lady at Rest
17.	1-17	117	31 Jan 75	Trahison Des Clercs
18.	1-18	118	07 Feb 75	Quiet Time
19.	1-19	119	14 Mar 75	This Majestic
20.	1-20	120	21 Mar 75	The First University of Space
21.	1-21	121	28 Mar 75	Planetary Estoppel
22.	1-22	122	04 Apr 75	The Knee-High Destroyers
23.	1-23	123	25 Apr 75	F.U.E.
24.	1-24	124	25 Apr 75	Graduation
Season 2 (24 episodes)				
25.	2- 1	201	19 Sep 75	Stereotaxic
26.	2- 2	202	26 Sep 75	A Ghost with Two Tales
27.	2- 3	203	03 Oct 75	The Tantalus Trap



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28.	2- 4	204	10 Oct 75	Disintermediation Day
29.	2- 5	205	17 Oct 75	Severy
30.	2- 6	206	24 Oct 75	Variorum
31.	2- 7	207	31 Oct 75	Malocclusion
32.	2- 8	208	07 Nov 75	The Sensate People
33.	2- 9	209	14 Nov 75	Hyperparasite
34.	2-10	210	21 Nov 75	An Alien Wrath
35.	2-11	211	28 Nov 75	Paint in Distemper
36.	2-12	212	02 Jan 76	The Zamindar Revolt
37.	2-13	213	09 Jan 76	Micropyle
38.	2-14	214	16 Jan 76	Lords of the Eristocracy
39.	2-15	216	23 Jan 76	The Student Body
40.	2-16	217	30 Jan 76	Fireblight
41.	2-17	215	06 Feb 76	Monad Nomad
42.	2-18	218	13 Feb 76	Sojourn in Semadore
43.	2-19	219	20 Feb 76	Rendzina, My Dear
44.	2-20	220	27 Feb 76	Cathedral Monochasium
45.	2-21	221	30 Mar 76	Two Halves of a Quarter
46.	2-22	222	30 Mar 76	I, Sensu Lato
47.	2-23	223	30 Mar 76	Rathered
48.	2-24	224	30 Mar 76	University Sempiternal
Season 3 (24 episodes)				
49.	3- 1	301	20 Jan 78	Deadlight
50.	3- 2	302	27 Jan 78	Thermistor
51.	3- 3	303	03 Feb 78	My Finger, My Enemy
52.	3- 4	304	10 Feb 78	Suttee
53.	3- 5	305	13 Feb 78	The Money Clan
54.	3- 6	306	20 Feb 78	Rage Week
55.	3- 7	307	27 Feb 78	Febrifuge
56.	3- 8	308	02 Jun 78	The Pentadactyls
57.	3- 9	309	09 Jun 78	Butterball
58.	3-10	310	16 Jun 78	Dementia Praecox
59.	3-11	311	23 Jun 78	War Grave
60.	3-12	312	30 Jun 78	Zaftig
61.	3-13	313	07 Jul 78	The Umbrager
62.	3-14	314	14 Jul 78	Soke
63.	3-15	315	21 Jul 78	Young's Modulus
64.	3-16	316	28 Jul 78	Sennight
65.	3-17	317	04 Aug 78	The Phantom Faculty
66.	3-18	318	11 Aug 78	Ranunculus Days, Homunculus Nights
67.	3-19	319	18 Aug 78	Personalty
68.	3-20	320	25 Aug 78	The Mamillary Man
69.	3-21	321	03 Nov 78	Eulogy for a New World
70.	3-22	322	10 Nov 78	Between Sixte and Septime
71.	3-23	323	17 Nov 78	Therapsid
72.	3-24	324	24 Dec 78	Erinyes

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# Hyperparasite

## (Episode 2x09)

*Writer: Joseph Suttensee*

*Director: Henry J Poppinham*

*Guest stars: Damuel R Sevary, Asimon Brown, Holly Brockleton*

As Mack Hardiman headed for the physics department, he began to wonder if he would ever be able to take this route through the university without feeling the sting of trepidation. He was a brave man, by most standards, though ready to be cowardly when the situation demanded it – that is to say, when the lives of others depended upon his retreat. But when it came to the thought of stepping into the blatter, his nerve almost failed him every time.

Of course, he would never let it show – people would think him an idiot to be so frightened in this day and age! – and in a way he relished the tingle of fear in his stomach. It made him feel alive. Nevertheless, after being at the university for more than a year, he would have expected to have become accustomed to it by now.

In a matter of minutes, there it was right in front of him: the blatter – or to give the device its full name, the black hole matter transmitter. It was the easiest and most convenient way of getting down to the planet's surface, but that did nothing to make it less intimidating. As Professor Xuel operated the controls, and opened up the wormhole, Mack felt his stomach tighten. He gritted his teeth and stepped up to it.

He spent an eternity going in, and an infinity coming out, and then, abruptly, it was broad daylight, and the wormhole was popping shut

behind him, with a sound like that of a tiny universe collapsing.

That daylight was lightly lemon, which only added to how refreshing Mack found it after spending the past few weeks holed up in the university, helping the vice chancellor work through some administrative tasks, to while away the time between planets. Being the Special Assistant to the Vice Chancellor certainly had its drier moments.

But this was the part that made all of that worthwhile.

The rest of the IET – the Initial Evaluation Team – was waiting for him, busy with their instruments and scanners.

Dr David Lum, Professor of Philosophy, and hence the one member of the team who required no equipment other than his own brain, took the time to acknowledge his arrival with a nod. “Hardiman,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “We were beginning to think you had more important things to do.”

“Accounts and timetables,” said Hardiman, “but they are not really my thing.”

Lum laughed, a short shout of a laugh, then turned to look at the horizon. “The trading outpost is about two kilometres in that direction.”

The two men stationed at the outpost had requested university help about two months ago. Since that initial communication, nothing more had been heard. Sometimes, the university might have headed elsewhere, assuming that the problem had been resolved, but it had been nearby in any case, investigating something in the next solar system along, and so the full

weight of Earth's academic genius had been brought to bear on this world: Adontis.

"We should get going, then," said Hardiman. "Instruments away, everybody."

The others turned, as if noticing him for the first time. In the party on this expedition were Dr Terry Leinster, from the Department of Medicine, Laney Rashupon, Professor of Information, and Jameson Banks, MBA, MSc, general jack of all trades. Other members of staff joined the IET as necessary, for particular projects, but this was the core team.

"Mack," said Laney, with a note of urgency.

He gave her his full attention, noting, not for the first time, just how beautiful she was. Here, on this world, her brown skin was resplendent, literally made golden by the yellow-tinged light. She was a little younger than he was, but not so much that romantic involvement, in other circumstances, would have been out of the question. But of course he could not let himself become involved with her – it would have been unprofessional, to say the least. What if, for example, he were to send another member of the team into danger while unconsciously leaving her in safety? Of course, his thoughts ran on, she had done nothing to encourage this affection in him, other than being quite so lovely all the time. For all he knew, she might have had some bespectacled boyfriend back in the Information Lab, and he had never found an excuse to ask if she did.

"What is it?" he replied, more quickly than a trawl through his idle thoughts might have led one to believe.

Mack Hardiman brought a number of talents to the IET, one of them being his rapidity of thought during a crisis. On a planet's surface, his facility with languages, having spent his childhood travelling the nations of Earth with an ambassadorial father, also played an extremely useful role. His third (and often most important) talent was his handiness with his two fists. Academic study in the thirtieth century was as dangerous a business as it had ever been.

"I'm not picking up a network ID from the trading post," she said.

"What does that mean?" Whatever it meant, he knew it could not be good.

"It means their computers are down."

"And if their computers are down..."

"They won't be able to eat!" interjected Doctor Leinster. "They need their computers to adjust the local food for human consumption. Good grief, Mack, we have to get there right away."

"That's why we're here," said Hardiman with a frown, "but let's hope we aren't already too late."

Everyone picked up their bags and they began to hike in the direction of the trading post. Using the blatter to arrive more closely was possible, but it also brought attendant risks. Better to walk a mile or two than risk opening up a black hole on someone's dinner plate.

The ground was easy at first, but soon they found themselves moving through a thickly wooded area, which made Hardiman nervous, a feeling which was quickly justified.

From the shadow of a tree leapt a wild creature, the size of a man, its hide covered in mud and grass, almost as if it had the intelligence to roll around in it for camouflage.

"What the..?" yelled Hardiman, caught by surprise despite his nerves.

As the creature ran at him on all fours he rolled to the side, leaving one leg out for it to trip over. He was successful – the beast fell! But then it was up again, back to its feet, and then going up on its hind legs to tower over him, screaming its victory. Hardiman did not miss his chance – he swung both legs around in an improvised two-legged, prone roundhouse, spilling the creature's legs out from under it. As it hit the floor he rolled over and brought his right fist down upon its face as hard as possible. There was no way to make out a target in that hair, that dirt, and Hardiman was unlucky, the fist falling right into the beast's maw, which clamped down like a vice.

Hardiman let out a grunt of pain, and struggled to a semi-standing position, before letting his knees drop onto the creature's head. It fell quiet instantly, and he worked his hand free.

"Let me have a look at that," said Leinster,

grabbing Hardiman by the wrist. "It broke the skin, so you'll need shots, but no stitches. It isn't that bad. You were lucky this time, Mack. Whatever that beast was, I don't think it used its teeth for killing its prey."

"You know, you could have helped out," replied Hardiman, wincing slightly as the doctor hit him in the arm with a needle.

"Oh, I think you had it all under control. I'm no brawler, Mack."

Hardiman was silent, but smiled, thinking back to certain over-exuberances he had been witness to in the past. The doctor had been known to cause the odd abrasion of his own from time to time, when whiskey and tempers got hot enough.

"Hardiman, I think you should see this." It was Lum, over at the body.

"What is that thing?" asked the Texan. "Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"I certainly have," said Lum, pushing the matted hair to one side to reveal the face of a very familiar animal. "This is a man – an Earthman!"

Hardiman said nothing for a moment, taking the information in.

"Is he still alive?" asked Rashupon.

"Barely," said Lum, moving out of the way to let Leinster get a better look.

The doctor took their assailant's pulse. "He's still alive, but very weak. That was a nasty blow to the head you gave him, Mack."

"One of the traders?" said the team leader, impassively.

"Without a doubt," answered Rashupon. "There was no suggestion of anyone else being on this planet."

"Smugglers, perhaps?"

"No. There's nothing on this world that's of any value to anyone but the people who live here. The trading post is only really here to give us a chance to make contact. The Adontians, according to reports, are a private people. They saw no reason to allow a diplomatic mission, but Earth was able to make a trading station seem interesting and worthwhile enough for them to agree to it."

"I wonder if they lost interest... to a fatal extent..." mused Hardiman, before shaking himself back to life. "Right then, let's get this man on a stretcher and hurry to the trading post. We need to get out of these woods as quickly as possible – the native fauna might not have teeth as blunted as our own."



The doctor took the foldaway stretcher from his pack, and opened it out. Unnoticeably light, thin and flexible when packed away, once shook into shape its sides and handles became rigid, its strength easily equal to the task of carrying a man.

The wild man was placed on the stretcher, his hands and feet bound for safety, and Hardiman and Banks lifted him. Lum led the way, Rashupon bringing up the rear, and they made quick time to the trading post, reaching it well before the sun's position in the sky reached its apex.

The building was in a sorry state, visible even from a distance. Antennae were battered, windows smashed, rubbish scattered across the floor.

"It doesn't look good," said Rashupon. "I wonder if we should have brought weapons."

Lum looked at her askance. "You know as well as I do that we only bring weapons when there are clear signs of danger. We're a team of professors, not a squad of soldiers."

"I'm seeing signs of danger," she replied. "And I'd feel safer with a squad of soldiers than a research team right now."

"If there was a squad of soldiers with us, we would never have been allowed to leave Earth in the first place. The Treaty..."

"Knock it off, you two," shouted Hardiman. "My arms are aching enough without you doing the same for my ears. It won't hurt to be careful. Banks, let's put him down. Laney and Doc, you stay here with him while we take a look around."

Banks, Lum and Hardiman slowly moved towards the building, spreading out, staying low, and keeping their fists at the ready.

Suddenly there was a shout, and a gunshot – Hardiman, later, could never remember which had come first, but he responded first to the shot, dropping to the ground as if it had already hit him. He saw the others do the same. He waved to show he was fine, and was relieved to see Lum and Banks wave back. He motioned for them to stay where they were for the time being, and began to crawl towards the trading post, from where the shouting continued.

At first it was too indistinct to make out, just

a torrent of yells and threats, but as he got closer – even as he hoped against hope that he was out of the line of fire – the words began to take meaningful form.

"Get out of here! Get out of here, I say! I'm safe here, get away! Go away! I'm not coming out!"

"Hi!" called Hardiman.

His heart dropped out of his chest and at least a hundred miles through the planet when he heard another gunshot ring out. But he felt no impact, and so he tried again. Either the trader – assuming that was who was shooting at him – couldn't get a line on him, or didn't want to kill, or he was just too crazed to shoot straight. Hardiman would have been justified in retreating at that point, but if there was one thing that brought all staff and students at the space university together, it was that they wanted to know what was going on – in life, in the universe, and in this case, on Adontis. That was why he tried again, and would carry on trying until he could try no more.

"Whoa there!" he shouted, trying to interrupt the volley of yells that followed the bullet out of the building. "We're from the university – you called for help!"

Everything was quiet for a second. Then something told Hardiman that the moment was going to pass, and the shouting recommence, so he had another go. "Space University Trent – we're here to help you!"

There was silence again – but that was a good sign – Hardiman had definitely got his attention. This time he waited it out, still inching towards the building, making his way via any available cover – a rock here, a bush there. He was only ten metres or so away now.

"It's too late," the man shouted, eventually. "It's too late for me, and for you, now! Unless you get out by nightfall!"

"Can we come in, to talk? If we can't help you, maybe you can help us. Could you protect us till we can go back up to the university?"

"Just go back now," the trader yelled. "What are you waiting for? There's no hope for me! There's no helping me! Just go!"

He was beginning to work himself up into

another frenzy, but Hardiman thought it was still worth the risk of standing up. "Look, I'm standing up now," he called. The gasps of his on-looking colleagues were audible even at this distance. "We can't go back yet – it takes a day for the blatter to recharge. We won't make it without you."

"I don't know..." muttered the man. Hardiman could just about see him now. One half-crazed eye looked out from a hole. "My barricade... I don't know if I'll be able to get it back up in time..."

Hardiman leaned forward to the eyehole, peering through the branches and pieces of furniture that the trader had nailed to the window frame in an attempt to keep it blocked. "We'll help with that, at least," he said. "Even if we can help with nothing else. It's not even noon yet – we'll have the barricade ready again by nightfall without even breaking a sweat."

There was more silence, and just as tiny beads of sweat began to make a liar of Hardiman, the trader agreed.

"You're right," he muttered. "I brought you to this godforsaken world. It's only right I give you a chance to get off it again. You'll die out there without my help..."

After twenty minutes of hard work, the barricade was down, and the door open. Hardiman coaxed the trader outside, and introduced the other members of the team. They all stood together outside the trading post to talk, the IET somehow reluctant to go inside, as if to do so would be to enter into the trader's madness.

Off to one side lay the stretcher and its still unconscious occupant. Hardiman had no doubt that the trader had seen their captive, but he said nothing, and seemed to avoid looking in that direction.

Dr Leinster offered him water, which the trader drank down greedily. He was emaciated, his skin parched, and the doctor poured him another cup, which he sipped more slowly.

"Thanks for that," he said. "You can't imagine what it's like to go so long without good water."

"How long has it been since the computers gave out? What have you been drinking since then?"

"Let's save the questions for an hour or two," interrupted Hardiman. "He's had a really rough time of it..."

"No, it's okay..." said the trader, but it seemed half-hearted.

The doctor put a hand on Hardiman's arm, and talked quietly into his ear. "Mack, we have to establish his condition. If he's been eating and drinking unprocessed food, there's no telling what he might have picked up."

Wordlessly, Hardiman acquiesced.

The man began to tell his story. The water seemed to have calmed him, but his voice still juddered badly, and threatened to break from time to time. If he was not yet a broken man, he was at least badly damaged.

His name was Sichaël Brown, or Sike for short (which meant, thought Hardiman, remembering the pre-expeditionary briefing, that the man on the stretcher must be Peter Dowers – though giving a human name to that beast made his encounter with it seem even more horrible). They had been sent to Adontis about a year ago to set up the trading post, following fairly favourable initial contact with the Adontians. The locals had not wanted extensive communications with or help from Earth, but they had been happy to have a trading post nearby, as long as their privacy was respected. Things had gone well, up until two months ago. The nearest Adontian village was only a kilometre or so away, and people had come from there, and from further away, to trade with them. But then, two months ago, something had happened, something horrible, which had led him to call for the university's help. The following night the same thing had happened again, and again the night after that, and the night after that Dowers had snapped, smashing the computers in frustration that rescue would not arrive in time.

"We fought, then, and he ran out into the woods. I haven't seen him since." Brown still couldn't bring himself to look at his fellow trader.

"He must have hunted for food, and drunk from streams," commented the doctor. "That is always dangerous on an alien planet. It might

well have had an effect similar to drinking salt water on Earth.”

“That would explain the condition we found him in,” said Hardiman. “The poor man is totally insane, feral. I doubt if he even recognised us as human beings.”

“These men have had to confront primal fears, Hardiman,” said Lum. “Fear of the dark, of the things that come in the night, loneliness, isolation, of the very food that you are eating. No one could have realised the stress these men would be put through. It’s astonishing that they are still alive.”

“You haven’t been affected as badly as Dowers, though, have you?” said the doctor.

“No,” said Brown. “I still had some emergency rations to eat, and I collected rainfall in containers on the top of the building.”

“That might well have saved your sanity,” said Leinster, “not to mention your life.”

“You skirted this before,” said Hardiman to Brown, “and I know you went over it in your original report, but I need to hear first hand what happens on this planet come nightfall.”

He closed his eyes, and shuddered. “I can’t...” He dropped the cup of water he had been sipping.

“Try, man, try... our lives could depend on it!” Hardiman grasped his upper arm.

Brown began to twitch and sweat. His jaw tightened. “They come... the flying ones... the flying ones come...” He broke free of Hardiman’s grip and ran back into the building, finding a table to hide under, shivering in abject fear.

The IET gathered to talk among themselves.

“In their report,” said Rashupon, “they just said that an attack by unknown flying creatures during the night had left them unconscious. In the morning there had been no trace of the attack, other than a couple of broken windows and some scratches on their faces.”

“The attacks have clearly continued since then,” said Lum. “And possibly become worse. Another possibility is that while they fell instantly unconscious the first time, one or both of them was conscious during the second, and

that seeing what was happening to them drove them over the edge.”

Hardiman thought for a moment. “Nightfall is only an hour or two off. I suggest we postpone any further investigation till tomorrow, other than what we can observe from being safely boarded up inside this trading post. We have to take this seriously.”

“I agree,” said Leinster. “If we stay here overnight, I can make sure that these two are stable. Then, tomorrow, we can send them back to the university through the blatter, while we go on to speak to the villagers. They must know something about what’s happening.”

No one disagreed, and the team entered the trading post, despite their reservations. Banks set up a concealed night vision video camera to record everything that happened. It was intended for wildlife filming, after all. It was just a surprise to find himself using it potentially to film, if things were to go as badly as Brown had suggested, his own death.

As they boarded the door back up, Lum commented, “It’s like we’re boarding ourselves up inside his mind.”

“I hope we get back out again in the morning,” said Hardiman, hammering in the final nail.

As night fell, Dr Leinster administered sedatives to the two traders to ensure they got a good rest, and shifts were agreed for the night. First up were Lum, so he could watch the two patients for a while, and Banks, so Hardiman, having double checked the security of the building, settled down to get some sleep. They had made up a makeshift dormitory in the cellar, so that the noise of the attacking creatures would not disturb those who were sleeping. Each member of the IET had with them a research bag, and one of the most important items in each bag was a pillow and blanket. Each was exceptionally thin, the pillow being inflatable, the blanket being derived from an insulating material developed for the manufacture of skin-tight spacesuits. He blew up his pillow, surprised at what a chore he found it – he had not realised the day had taken so much from him.

It felt as if he had dreamt for mere seconds when a rough hand shook him awake.

"You're up," said Lum.

"I am now," he replied grumpily, before taking up his post by the door. His spirits raised when he remembered it would be Laney Rashupon joining him for the watch, and so he set himself to making tea for them both while he waited for her. The day had left him very thirsty.

There was a crash against the boards, then another, then another, and from then he was unable to count them. At first the creatures were silent, accentuating the eeriness of the thumps in the night, but then, finding the way blocked, they began to wail. It was high-pitched, melancholy, hurt and aggressive, and it struck fear deep into him.

He sipped his tea. He had allowed himself the luxury of two sugars.

A moment or two later Laney sat down and began to drink her tea. "It's begun, then," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Do you fancy taking a look at them? I could take a board or two down, open up a window..."

"After you, I think."

"That's very polite of you, Laney..." He laughed, the battle between his natural sense of humour and his concerns for their wellbeing finding a temporary victor. "I think it might be better to let the video camera do its job, recording everything that's happening. Shall we just leave it at that and drink our tea?"

"That sounds like a good plan," she replied, and for the next hour that was what they did, getting up on occasion only to rehammer in the odd nail that had worked its way out.

But then, all noise disappeared – all of a sudden, everything was silent, save for the gentle snoring working its way up from the cellar. The wailing was gone, as were the thumps against the boards. Rashupon and Hardiman looked at each other.

"Do you think they've gone?" she asked.

"I'm not sure... I hope so..." He put his second cup of tea down on a desktop, pushing aside crumpled paperwork and broken tools, then walked to one of the windows. He placed

his hand upon the boards. "It's... buzzing..." he said, only half-believing it himself.

Then the wailing recommenced, louder than ever, full of rage, and grew louder, and the buzzing grew louder, till Hardiman thought his head would rip apart with all the noise.

"Get down!" he shouted. "They're all attacking at once!"

Rashupon hit the ground, and he followed suit, just as an almighty force hit the walls, making the whole trading post ring like a bell.

Every one of the boards buckled, but only one broke – and a creature – a black, scabrous creature, with hard shell-like wings – burst through.

As Rashupon screamed, Hardiman did his best not to. He ignored the creature for now, deciding that getting the window shut again should take priority. One creature, they should be able to handle, but if the whole swarm got through, they would be finished. He hefted his hammer and swung it at the gap, a pre-emptive strike against anything that might have been on its way through – the arc ended in shadow, but a squeal and a scrabbling away confirmed the efficacy of his action. Grabbing the board up from where it had fallen on the floor, he slammed it back up against the window and began to hammer it back into place. Between each hammer blow he steeled himself to Rashupon's screams – he had to assume she could survive on her own long enough for him to finish his work – but was she fending for herself, or being fed upon? There would be no way to know, one way or another, until his work was done – unless the screams fell silent. And when they didn't, in a way, he began to take comfort from them.

Finally, he was done, and he turned to see. It had only been a matter of seconds since the creature got through, though it had felt like hours with Rashupon screaming for his help. Her face was bloodied, scratched; her hands too were bleeding. The creature was swooping at her head, again and again, as she tried to bat it away with (and Hardiman almost laughed at the bathos) the tea cup she had been drinking from so serenely just a few moments ago. Each time it got closer and closer to making a final connec-



tion, but she twisted and turned, like a captured fury, leaving it frustrated still.

Then, it was in her hair, tangled in its lustrous blackness, and Hardiman was able to pick his moment, striking it square in the back. The hammer cracked through the wings, going deep into the body. It went still, but did not fall, Rashupon's own hair keeping her in awful proximity to the thing.

At last the others arrived from the cellar, and Rashupon threw herself into Lum's arms for comfort, while Leinster worked the corpse from her hair. The wailing and buzzing were gone now, and there had been no more impacts since that first huge one – it must have been almost daylight, Hardiman thought, and so they made one final group attack upon us. He went to find somewhere to put down the hammer – the hammer that now dripped an appalling and viscous blue fluid. It made his stomach churn, and he almost began to panic, that there would be nowhere in the room he could put the hammer without spreading the foulness, that he would be forced to carry it forever, the blood – if that was what it could be called – dripping upon him as he slept, that the others might remain uncontaminated.

Then there was another scream – a man's scream, this time, short, deep and cut short by pride. Hardiman spun, to see Dr Leinster gasping for breath, and staring at the black corpse on the ground. It lay on its back, allowing Hardiman to see why Rashupon had screamed so very much as it attacked her.

The thing had a rudimentary face – a pale ovoid, with dark purple eyes that appeared almost human, and a thin lipless mouth, that now fell open in death, to reveal a long, curled-up razor of a tongue.

After cleaning and stitching Rashupon, Leinster performed a field autopsy of the creature, outside in the daylight. The yellow tinge no longer seemed refreshing to Hardiman. Now everyone looked jaundiced, almost as if they were rotting from the inside.

“Doctor,” said Hardiman, clenching his stomach muscles to keep his breakfast down, “why does it have a face?”

“I can only speculate, but from the way it attacked us, I would guess that the primary prey of these parasites is probably humanoid – presumably the villagers. Quite often parasites will adapt to make themselves less odious to their hosts, sometimes by performing a useful service, such as the bacteria that live in our own guts.”

“You think they evolved these faces to seem cuter?”

“That's one possibility. Don't look so horrified, Mack – we travel the universe to see this stuff, don't we? You wouldn't want to miss it...”

“That didn't stop you screaming when you saw it...”

“An instant reaction, that's all,” replied the doctor, waving away his moment of embarrassment. “This creature is fascinating – look at the tongue.” He grasped the end of the tongue with tweezers and unwound it to its full length. “It's a metre long, and hollow all the way down. If we follow it down through the body, what would we expect to find?”

Banks peered over his shoulder. “Does it go straight to the stomach?”

“Well, that's the thing,” said Leinster. “You might expect that, but it doesn't – the stomach is here...” He dropped the tongue, which sprang back into a vicious curl, and indicated one bluish red organ. Then he indicated another, just beneath the wings. “This is where the tongue leads. It's impossible to say what it's for, but they don't appear to feed on the blood they consume.”

“It might fuel the wings,” suggested Lum.

“Possible,” admitted the doctor, “but it seems unlikely. I don't think we'll know until we can study a live specimen.”

The video, while horrible to watch, taught them nothing more. Black swarms of the Adontian flyers threw themselves against the trading post again and again, before finally giving up and leaving as daybreak approached.

“They clearly prefer the dark,” noted Hardiman. “We should be safe enough till night-fall, so let's get off to the village as soon as possible, so that there's time to get back and

refortify the trading post. First, let's get those two traders up to the university for treatment."

Lum and Banks went back into the trading post and down to the cellar to bring the stretcher back up. Brown followed a few paces behind, solicitous for his former colleague – or was it that he didn't want him out his sight?

Hardiman took out his mobile communicator and sent an automatic message to Professor Xuel – it was time to fire up the blatter – but then, as the stretcher passed by the corpse of the flyer, splayed out on a field table, Dowers began to stir, at first gently murmuring and moaning, but then, in a matter of seconds, he was a frenzied beast once more, struggling to wrench himself free of the ropes that bound him to the stretcher, but never once taking his eyes off the body. Lum and Banks were forced to drop the stretcher to the ground.

"He fears them even more than I do!" yelled Brown. "That's what drove him over the edge – he saw one feeding on me, the second night."

"Sedate him, doctor," commanded Hardiman, but as Leinster approached, a wild arm thrown out by the patient knocked the needle away. Even as Leinster ran to retrieve it, Dowers began to bleed from the nose and eyes, the veins in his temples throbbed and burst, and finally he stopped moving forever.

"It's too late, doc," said Hardiman, grimly. "I don't think it would have helped anyway."

Lum nodded his head sadly. "I've never heard of a psychological problem having such an awful physiological effect. It must have been the result of eating the local food."

Leinster checked for a pulse, though he knew it was a pointless effort. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You're probably right. If only we could have taken him back to SUT yesterday. He might have had a chance."

"Let's get Brown up there, then," said Hardiman. "At least it isn't too late for him."

But the other trader was gone.

Hardiman shook his head. "Maybe it is too late." He looked at his mobile. "The blatter is up and running. If Brown isn't back here within ten minutes he's stuck here another day without the treatment he needs."

They yelled for Brown to return, and cursorily checked the trading post and its environs, but there was no sign of the man. He clearly did not want to be found. Hardiman asked Banks and Rashupon to take both corpses back up to the university for examination. They were gone less than two minutes, and returned with fresh provisions. He felt sorry for the physics department, who would be stuck with some very unpleasant sights and smells in their lab until assistants from the appropriate departments arrived to take away the bodies.

"There isn't much we can do ourselves for Brown just now," said Hardiman. "Perhaps someone at the Faculty of Medicine and Biology will be able to work out what killed Dowers, and if we run into Brown we might be able to help him. But I think the best thing for now is still to investigate the village. We'll be back by night-fall, and I expect Brown will be too."

The welcome at the village was polite but distant, almost dreamy, with no one stopping to engage in conversation. All of the team were able to speak the Adontian language with a reasonable degree of fluency, having taken a crash course in it once the university's heading was set, so that was not the problem. It simply seemed that the Adontians were not particularly interested in them. In fact, they hardly seemed interested in each other, rarely making eye contact, and speaking very infrequently. Some seemed lethargic, and simply sat in the shade of their homes.

"Let's take a look around," suggested Hardiman. "Something isn't right here. I would like to get a closer look at that building." He pointed in the direction of a large white dome that loomed over everything else like a bullying older brother. "What do you think it is?"

Banks shook his head. "It's like nothing else in this place. The houses are little more than adobe huts, but I couldn't even guess what kind of material that's made of." The others did not need to ask what he meant – it almost seemed translucent at times, depending on how the light hit it.

He led the way towards the dome, and it was as if the village had suddenly awoke, all sleepi-

ness gone. Within seconds their way was barred by a dozen males, their arms linked and their faces stern.

“We are sorry,” said the Adontian at the centre of this bizarre but eerie obstacle. “You may not proceed further in this direction. Please leave.”

“Can we talk first? Just for a moment. My name is Hardiman.”

“I am Mirtio. This is no time for talking. You should leave.” His gaze met Hardiman’s firmly for a moment, then for a second nodded. He jerked it back up with an almost fierce pride. “As you can see, it is well past time for our evening repast, and we choose not to eat in front of strangers.”

More and more of the villagers, male and female, were linking arms now, and Hardiman began to fear encirclement. There was no reason to suspect aggression on the Adontians’ part, but even the most naturally peaceful of men can lose his temper when provoked. As a wanderer among the stars, he had learned not to provoke unnecessarily – not least because the most peaceful of men are few and far between – happily, unnecessarily violent men were just as rare. Most fell somewhere in-between, depending on circumstance. He could tell that circumstance here had swung quickly from neutral to unpleasant, and it was time to go. He began to back away, leading the Earthpeople back through the gap that remained in the Adontian chain.

“We are sorry for intruding,” he called, turning for one last try. “The flying creatures – they’ve been attacking our traders. We wondered if you could help.”

Mirtio looked at the men and women on either side of him in clear alarm, but made no reply, and Hardiman turned away. Nightfall was not far off, and if they were to reach shelter by then they could not afford to get embroiled in any fighting.

“Is that it?” asked Banks, as they jogged through the night.

“Of course not,” said Hardiman, holding up a hand for them to take a break. “Did you see their leader there at the end? He was practically out on his feet. The whole village seemed exhausted.”

“Perhaps the creatures that attacked the trading post are attacking them too,” suggested Leinster. “It would explain the lethargy.”

“But why would they not fight back?” asked Hardiman. “The basic instinct of all life is to survive!”

Rashupon stepped forward, a frown besmirching her forehead. “There was nothing in the reports I have read about a dome of that size and unusual appearance. It’s hard to believe no one would have commented upon it.”

Hardiman nodded. “Our attempt to enter the dome got every one of those people to their feet. One way or another, they are hiding something in there, whether because they want to, or because they have to.”

“There is one other possibility,” noted Lum, having recovered his breath.

“What’s that?”

“That they were not hiding the contents of the dome from us – but hiding us – from whatever is inside!”

In Hardiman’s opinion, that was a risk he had to take, along with all the others, and so, after ensuring the rest of the team was safely barricaded inside the trading post, he and Leinster headed back to the village. It was not yet quite dark, and he was hopeful of reaching it in time to find some kind of shelter – if indeed the Adontian flyers searched for prey in that area – were they somehow commanded to feed in particular places, per some malignant force’s designs? Had they been brought to this world from elsewhere, a plague set to spread like the rabbits of Australia? Whatever the answer, he felt sure the dome was involved, and if it was not, much might be learnt from observing the Adontians secretly. He took the doctor, in hope that he would be able to make sense of what they discovered.

He ordered (to the extent that he was able to) the others to remain at the trading post, even – and especially – if he and the doctor did not return. If they felt a search party was called for, they should set off at daybreak, but not a moment sooner.

They agreed, but of course they were his colleagues, not his subordinates, and if they

chose to ignore his instructions, there would be nothing he could do to stop them. Later, back at the university, he could request, if he felt it necessary – for example if a member of the team was repeatedly getting the others into danger – that a new faculty representative be put forward, but so far that situation had not arisen.

Now familiar with the trail, Hardiman and Leinster reached the village quickly, but night already threatened. Was it his imagination, or could Hardiman hear wings batting against the wind? He put it out of his mind – if caught out in the open, they were finished, and it was too late to go back – all they could do was press on.

If they had expected to find the village shut up and locked down for the night, they were surprised. Every door was ajar, every window wide open. Yet no one was visible as they approached.

“What do you make of it?” asked Hardiman in a whisper.

Leinster just raised an eyebrow, waiting till they were a little closer before expressing an opinion. “From the looks of things, either they fear nothing – or they have nothing to fear!”

“You think they’re controlling the flyers? It’s amazing, that they would turn on us like that, and send them against us.”

“Who knows, Mack... Maybe we don’t have the full story – perhaps something happened between the traders and these people before we arrived. We’ve only Brown’s word to go on, and the way he’s disappeared doesn’t make me inclined to trust him.”

Hardiman gritted his teeth. “But how will we know if they don’t speak to us?”

“That’s why they pay us the big bucks,” answered Leinster, with a quiet laugh.

Hardiman smiled, grimly, and clapped him on the back. “Let’s get to that dome. We get to the bottom of this tonight.”

Pacing with determination through the village, they quickly became aware of the eyes upon them – from deep inside every window, from the dark, unlit interiors, gaunt eyes stared out. This time, no one came to stop them. They simply stared.

“Keep going,” ordered Hardiman, knowing

how much his colleague would want to stop and help each individual. “If they are the victims here, we can’t help them one by one.”

The dome, close up, was even more impressive. It was at least five metres high, and must have had a diameter in the region of twenty metres.

“I don’t see a way in,” said Hardiman, looking one way and then the other around the circumference.

“That doesn’t surprise me, Mack,” said the doctor, turning to explain. But for some reason he did not elucidate – his eyes went wide in flabbergasted horror, as he pointed to the skies above Hardiman’s head. “Look – look at the sky!”

Darkness had fallen, but it had barely registered, the dome doing so much to hold his attention. Now he turned to see that the light had faded unnaturally – not by dint of the planet’s face turning aside from the sun, but because the sky had almost silently filled with heaving, twitching life.

“We should have had longer!” shouted Hardiman, as they ran for shelter, all too late.

“We only assumed they came at night – perhaps this is where they...” He might have said more, but a winged black missile struck him on the back, throwing him to the ground.

Hardiman did not hesitate, twisting around to kick the creature off the doctor, then heaving him up onto his shoulders. He had not seen any blood on the doctor’s back, but whether it was just from the impact, or from becoming the meal of that inhuman fiend, he was now unconscious. If they didn’t get inside quickly, they would not get inside at all.

He reached a small house – but inside, on their backs, lay the occupants, a flyer feasting on each of them, those razor-like tongues flickering through their mouths, pushing down into and through their bodies. As each tongue went in, he could see its route through the veins and arteries bulge horribly, then collapse once emptied.

He stared in horror for but a moment, then moved to the next house – but it was the same, a flyer feeding on each Adontian. This explained the lethargy he had previously noted!

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“They left their homes open, to let this happen! But why, why?”

Leinster, of course, did not answer.

The third house he tried was no different, save for one thing – the flyer within had not yet found a victim, and after Hardiman entered there was barely a second for him to realise his awful, but inevitable, mistake before a blow to his head knocked him to the ground.

It was the longest night of Hardiman’s life, despite the long stretches of it he spent unconscious. It was a perpetual nightmare – he would find a way to force his way back to wakefulness, demanding that his body get back to its feet, only to find himself struck again, and again. He fell, over and over, but finally, somehow, one by one, he managed to close the windows, close the doors, and fall to the ground beside Leinster, in near terminal exhaustion. As his eyes closed for the last time, and he fell into a sleep from which he barely hoped to awake, he stared into the eye of an Adontian flyer, its body bloated through feeding on the house’s occupants, unable to squeeze out from under a sofa in search of another blood feast.

That was how Lum found him in the morning – face down, sleeping like a baby, mere centimetres away from a bug the size of a Moses basket.

Surprised to find himself still alive, Hardiman awoke to pain – but it was not the pain that might have come from having a razor sharp tongue slipping through his veins as he slept. He just felt as if he had spent a night being punched by a light middleweight – a lucky escape then!

“I think we were unsuitable food for them,” said Leinster, once he came to his senses. Hardiman wasn’t sure if they should be relieved or offended.

“Can you stand?” asked Rashupon.

Both gave it a try. For a moment, each tried to outdo the other in shakiness, but soon they were steady enough on their feet to consider making a move. They were still in the house in which sanctuary had at last been established, but its owners were gone.

“The villagers?” asked Hardiman.

“Going about their normal business,” replied

Lum. “We came looking for you at dawn, and they told us to come here and get you out.”

“What? We saw them being fed upon, all of them, the bugs upon their faces and chests... how can they act as if everything is normal?”

Hardiman staggered out of the door, looking for someone to question. He grabbed a woman by the arm – even if this state, he could not help but take note of her subtly charming beauty, and the short dress she wore that looked ready to fly away at an instant’s notice – and demanded answers of her.

“Please,” she begged. “Leave me alone.” She shook him off, and ran away.

Just then, Mirtio came around the corner, accompanied by half a dozen men. None looked quite as intimidating as they had managed the previous day, and if he had been in better condition himself, Hardiman might have fancied his chances in a ruckus.

Perhaps sensing something of those thoughts, Leinster put a hand on his shoulder. “We should leave. We intruded here last night. They have every right to be angry with us.”

“But the bugs! Why won’t you let us help you?” asked Hardiman angrily. “You don’t have to live like this!”

Mirtio sighed. “I think that perhaps we do, Earthman. This is not your world, and if you would be friends with us, you must learn to respect our ways. Good though your intentions might be, no good can ever come of them.”

“What can we do?” said Leinster sadly. “We cannot force them to be treated. It would be unethical.”

“But they are being fed upon by parasites! We can stop that, save them from it!” He appealed to the villagers, making eye contact with the girl he had grabbed just before. “We can find a way to drive these bugs away, to stop them... drinking your blood... because that’s what they do, isn’t it?”

“It is our burden to bear,” replied Mirtio. Then he saw something over Hardiman’s shoulder that made what blood remained to him drain from his face. His face and voice hardened, his fists clenched, and his men strode towards us. “Put that down or die, Earthman!”

The team leader turned to look. It was Banks – he had found a way to get the bloated flyer from the house into a flexiplas cage. Banks looked surprised to be the object of everyone's attention, and for a second was too startled to put the cage down. It was a second too long, as half a dozen men had by then laid their hands on him, and as another dozen arrived to take hold of the rest of us he tried to explain.

"We just needed a sample to study – a living sample. If we could just understand it better..." A fist in the mouth silenced him, while another hand snatched the cage.

"Get your hands off him!" yelled Hardiman, even as he himself was roughly restrained.

"He is lucky to survive such arrant aggression," shouted Mirtio in response, staring him in the face. "You have trespassed too far. If you return again you will die, all of you."

"We should kill them now," said one of the men.

Mirtio shook his head, forcing himself back to calmness. "That isn't our way, and it would only lead to more of them coming. At heart, I don't believe these are warlike people – they are just foolishly, arrogantly curious. Get them out of my sight."

While Hardiman allowed himself to be half-carried, half-pushed to the edge of the village, he continued to watch Mirtio and his fellow villagers, and saw with what tenderness the flyer was removed from the cage and encouraged to scuttle off into the woods.

At the edge of the village they were left to themselves, but as they moved away there was no question of returning – noises behind them made it obvious that their retreat was being monitored, by men ready to enforce it more sternly. Hardiman saw no point in trying to fight them – what could he possibly gain? So he led his team back to the trading post. By noon the blatter would be ready to take them back to the university, where they could file their reports, come to conclusions, and ask their colleagues for advice.

The team gathered outside the post, Lum doing his best to treat Leinster's injuries, Leinster then doing his best to treat Hardiman.

After a few injections the team leader's body felt numb all over – but he had a feeling that when it began to hurt again it would hurt really badly.

All were glum, resigned to having failed in their mission to uncover the truth about this world. Eventually, Leinster finished with his work, and sat down to sip some soup Banks had warmed up for breakfast. As Hardiman filled the others in on their ill-fated adventure, the doctor chipped in here and there with his own observations.

When Hardiman began to describe the dome as it had looked up close, the doctor's eyes suddenly locked with his.

"Doctor," said the leader of the IET, "there was something you were going to tell me, last night, before we were so rudely interrupted..."

Leinster nodded. "I can't think why I didn't tell you the minute I woke."

"A blow to the head can often cause the loss of your short term memory," interjected Lum.

"That must be it," agreed the doctor. "Well, gather round children, because I have a story to tell. That dome was no building. It was a living creature."

Everyone was astonished.

"Are you sure?" asked Rashupon.

"My dear girl, I took its pulse. That thing was as full of life as you are yourself."

Banks nodded. "That could explain why it didn't appear in previous reports – perhaps it just hadn't grown so large yet."

"But, doctor," said Hardiman. "I was there with you – it had no head, arms, legs; it didn't move, or make a noise. What kind of thing was it?"

"Well, its head, if it needed one, might well be beneath ground, for example, or it might just have been deliberately bred that way – which brings me to my second point."

"There's more?" asked Hardiman.

"You could call it that... I don't think it's an accident that the creature is at the centre of the town. I think that it's what the Adontians feed on. I think that they themselves are parasites."

"Amazing," said Lum, as everyone's mouths dropped open. "But that would explain a lot."

"Such as their reluctance to let us approach

it,” said Hardiman. “And their indulgence towards the flyers – perhaps they see them as pets, just as we see dogs or cats, animals whose ancestors might have hunted our ancestors millions of years ago.”

“Remember too the way they said we had to leave before they ate,” added Lum.

“I believe,” said Leinster, “that they might well feed en masse, each of them taking a share of that poor creature.”

As they spoke, none realised that, in the woods, someone listened. Brown’s eyes stared out of the shadows, glinting with the madness that had finally overtaken him, inevitably, as a result of his alien diet. He listened a while longer, then dropped back out of sight.

Eventually word came via the mobile communicator that the blatter was ready for their return. They prepared to leave, Hardiman, Lum and Rashupon having a last search through the trading post for anything that might prove useful for their papers.

“Mack,” shouted Banks, bursting into the trading post. “The blast caps from our equipment have gone!” A standard part of IET equipment, the blast caps would allow them to quickly clear rubble, perform emergency excavations, and the like.

“They could easily be used as weapons,” said Dr Leinster, following hard on his heels.

“But who...” mused Mack. “The villagers? Are they planning to attack us?”

“They could have killed us before, and without the trouble of stealing from us,” pointed out Lum.

“It’s Brown,” said Rashupon decisively. “If he heard what we said about the Adontians, and that hulk they keep at the centre of the village...”

“He might decide to take revenge,” said Hardiman, slamming one fist into the other. “Regardless of these people having done nothing to him.”

The Professor of Information nodded her lovely head. “In his eyes, the fact that they feed the bugs might be enough to make them culpable for what’s happened to him.”

“And when you add that to the guilt he’s

undoubtedly feeling over the death of his partner...” added Lum.

“Right,” said Hardiman. “I’m convinced. Lum, you’re with me – the rest of you, up through the blatter. I’m not risking your lives again.”

“Mack...” began Leinster.

“Forget it, Dave – you’re in no state to go back in there.”

“Neither are you, for that matter, or did you forget?” To stress his point, the doctor gave Hardiman a squeeze on the arm.

He gritted his teeth and tried not to show how much it had hurt. “I’ve said my last word on this. You don’t have to follow my instructions, but for the love of Mike, I’ll knock you down and throw you through the blatter myself if you don’t do what I say! If Brown is doing what we think, whether he succeeds or fails, this planet will be no place for an Earthman this afternoon. I have to stay, just in case I can stop him, and Lum has to stay, because I can barely stand on my own, but the rest of you must go.”

Silently they filed into the wormhole created by the blatter, and Hardiman turned to Lum. “Sorry for getting you into this.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world, my friend. Let’s go stop someone making what I’m almost certain is probably a mistake...”

They hurried off into the woods, no weapons but their fists to protect them. As the village approached they became certain it was too late – the dome was already blackened. Had the trader really done it? If so, they were heading to their certain deaths.

But as they got closer, an even more horrible truth became apparent – the dome was not black because it had been bombed – it was black because it was covered with thousands of wailing Adontian flyers.

“Goodness me,” said Lum, gasping as the enormity of it hit him. There were many more of the creatures than we had ever seen before – perhaps they had taken it in turns to attack the village or the trading post – some feeding one night, then resting the next few – for there were so many that no man could have counted them alone.

"We press on," said Hardiman.

"Of course," replied Lum. "There's nothing else to do in the circumstances, but... goodness me!"

"I hear what you're saying, David."

Close to, a staggering tableau greeted them. The villagers, linking arms, encircled the village, wailing almost as loudly as the bugs. (Why did they not run? Hardiman wondered if he would ever know.) And beyond them, he could see, staggering towards the infested dome, a lone Earthman, bearing a satchel, and he did not need to wonder what was inside.

Seeing the two of them approach, the villagers broke ranks, many of them visibly using their last strength to beg for help – but none made sense to him, either speaking too quickly from panic, or too slowly from weakness. Then Mirtio found his way through the pack.

"You have to help us," he pleaded. "Your trader, he's going to kill us all. We can't get near him – any time we try to get to him, he threatens to set the bomb off. He's calling us monsters. Please speak to him – he'll talk to his fellow Earthman!"

Hardiman patted him on the shoulder. "The explosives he has are not that powerful," he said, disingenuously. "If you stay at this range you should be safe."

"You don't understand... he's going to destroy the great one... the lifegiver..."

"You mean, the poor beast you feed from every day?" Hardiman struggled to make himself sympathetic. "Can't you find another one? I know he's crazy, but would it be worth losing one... lifegiver... if he gets rid of this plague of bugs?"

"It isn't a plague..." he pleaded. "You don't understand. We tried to be private people... We didn't want your interference. That plague... it's our children."

The eyes of the Earthmen went wide.

"That's the reaction I expected," said Mirtio bitterly. "Now you will call us monsters, your whole race will despise us for being what we are... Are you saying you will not help? Should we just lie down and die?"

"Hang on a minute," said Hardiman. "We've

said nothing of the sort, Mirtio. Live and let live, that's our motto. There's no other way to play it in a galaxy this big and full, as long as the other guy is happy to play it the same way."

Lum grasped the Adontian leader by the shoulder. "You should have just explained to us in the beginning – all of this could have been avoided. Now tell us what's happening."

Hardiman gave a nod of encouragement.

"They are our young. They cannot feed from the lifegiver directly at first – they must use us as intermediaries for the first few months. Now they are strong enough to feed from it directly, just as we do, and so it has swollen in readiness. Today they all try to feed from it – those that succeed will hibernate just beneath its surface for the next year, finally emerging as young bipeds. Those that fail, and most of them do, will die, and fall to the ground, ultimately to feed their brothers and sisters."

"Okay," said Hardiman. "We'll see what we can do. Lum – circle around – see if you can get behind him."

The Professor of Philosophy tipped his head in acknowledgment, and set off at a run. Hardiman took the direct route. He paced in the direction of the dome (he still could hardly bring himself to think of it as a living being), and Brown – and the bomb!

A few brief seconds later – he wished he had taken his time, while he still had it – and he was in sight of the trader.

"Don't come any closer!" shouted Brown. "I'm going to destroy this sickness before it spreads any further. I don't want to take you with me, but I will if I have to!"

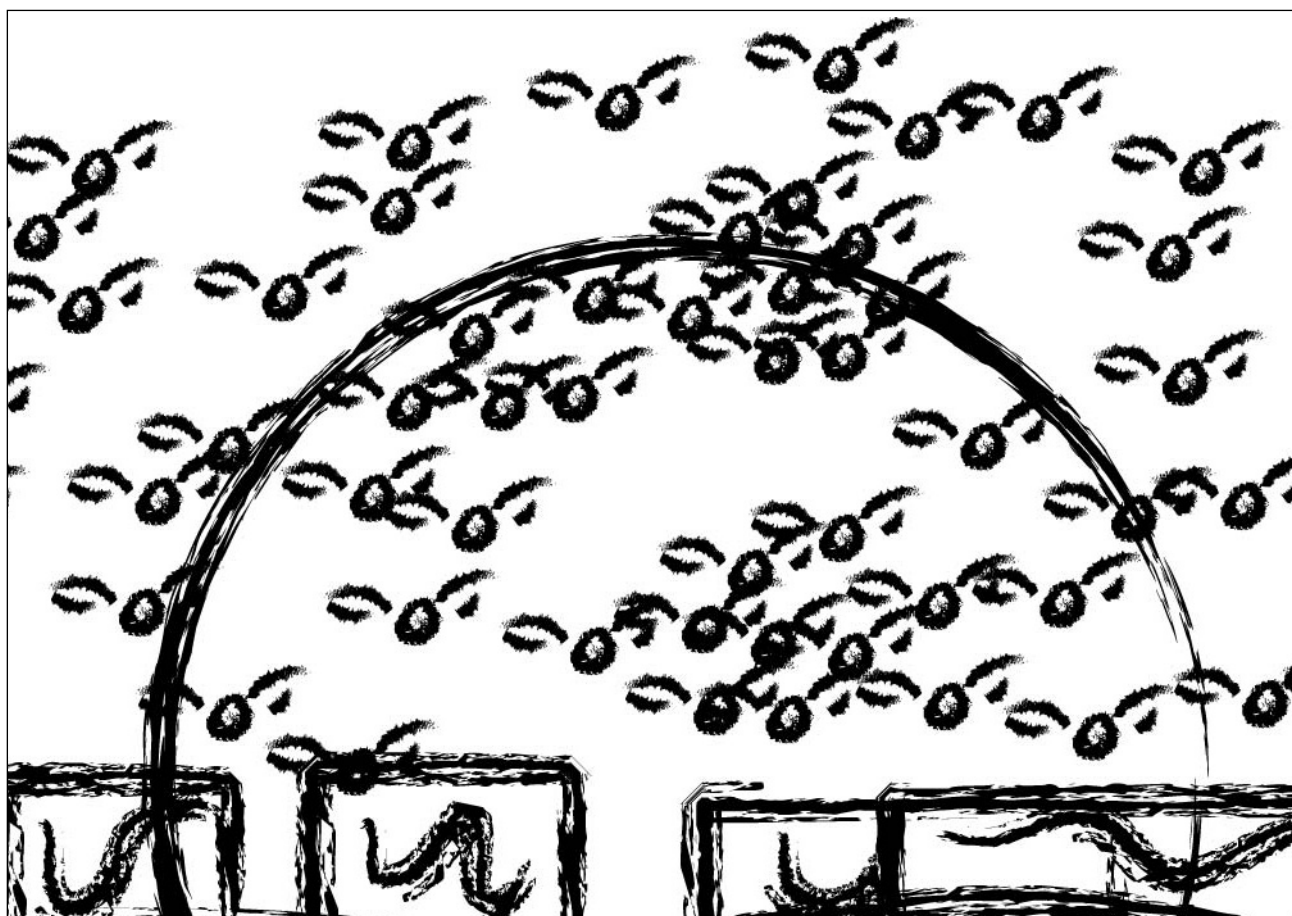
"It doesn't have to come to that, Brown," said Hardiman, keeping his tone as level as possible, but continuing to advance. "There are no enemies here."

"You can't tell me I'm hallucinating those bugs up there! I heard what your people said – these Adontians feed them! And I've got them all here in one place – we can stop it right now – it's our duty as Earthmen!"

Hardiman was within a few paces now. "Listen, Brown, I can explain everything..."

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He punched the trader in the face, then stopped breathing.

Lum ran up from the other side, to see Brown face down on the floor. He raised an eyebrow. “You’re lucky he didn’t have a dead man’s switch on that bomb.”

In answer, Hardiman finally took a deep breath.

“And as for you, my friend...” said Lum, looking down at the bedraggled trader. “Next time bring bottled water.”

The next day, having slept for at least a dozen hours each, the members of the IET met up sleepily in the university canteen for dinner.

“I’d speculate,” said Lum, “that those attacking the trading post had been unable to find food at the village. They had been pushed by desperation to attack, even though, having subdued a human, they would not actually feed, just leaving their victims unconscious, but unharmed, physically, at least.”

“Effectively,” said Dr Leinster, “the young Adontians were what we might call hyperpara-

sites, a parasite that preys upon another parasite. In this case the parasites in question were their parents.”

Banks gave a grunt of disgust, wincing and pushing away his burger without taking even a single bite. “It’s horrible that anyone could live that way.”

“Are you going to waste that?” asked Dr Lum, pulling the plate towards himself and cutting off a chunk. “Because I’m starving and could eat another three or four. Do you not think you should be more understanding of the Adontians?”

Banks shrugged. “Okay, different strokes and all that. It’s part of the philosophy of the university – but blah, blah, blah – how could an intelligent being bear to live as a parasite?”

Lum lifted the meat to his mouth. “Is it really worse to be a parasite, and to leave your prey alive, and worship it as a god – than to kill it outright, and consume its flesh?”

He began to chew.

# LOST CLASSICS OF THE SILVER AGE



Recently, a member of the Silver Age Books team fell into an alternative dimension, one in which this publishing house was founded many, many years sooner than it was in this one. Knowing that the multiverse would soon throw him back to his proper place in space and time, he immediately made haste to a bookshop and bought as many of that dimension's Silver Age classics as he could carry. We couldn't possibly reprint them all in full here, but we'll be pleased to present occasional extracts, whenever we have the room.

In this issue, we are pleased to present chapter five of J.B. Greenwood's brain-bending freakout, *The Mushrooms from Infinity*, originally published in 1968.

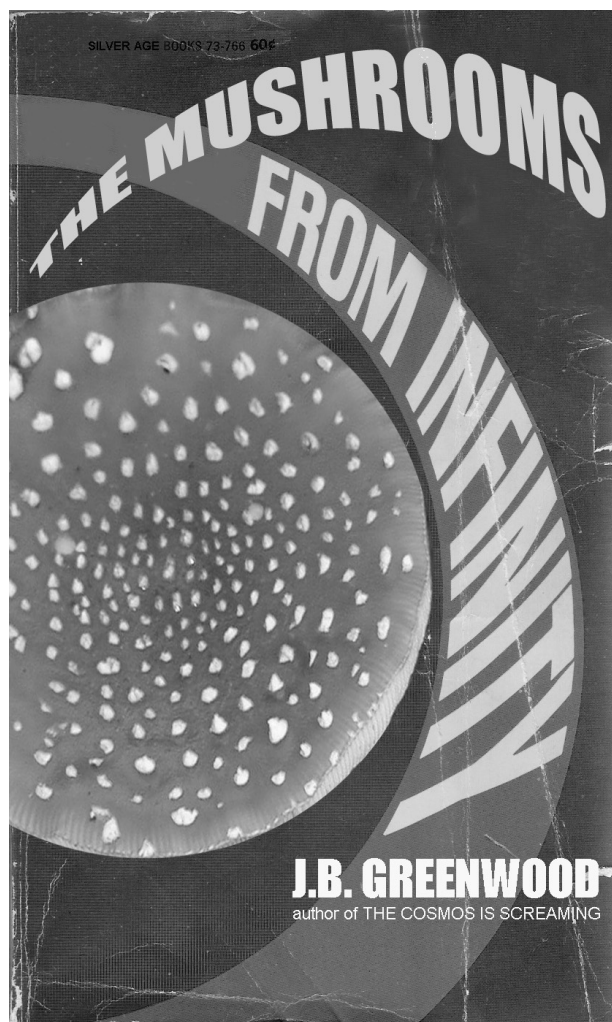
There was no getting away from it. Professor Camberwell, in his mutated form, had "eaten" the staff of the Interdimensional Research Laboratory, and promptly vanished into the ancient shadows of the highland pine forest, the same forest that had shielded the secretive government institution from public scrutiny for close to a decade.

General Waxwing, ashen-faced, was the first to speak.

"I didn't want to be the one to say, 'I told you so'," he said slowly.

Dorothea Camberwell, her face a frozen mask of horror, suppressed a sob.

"General, this is no time for recriminations!" said Morrell, surveying the scene of devastation



before gently closing the door of the laboratory with one hand, and guiding Mrs Camberwell away from the devastation with the other. "We must formulate a new plan. Clearly we have underestimated the speed at which these so-called 'spores' can travel and germinate."

He left Professor Camberwell's wife (or his widow? Were there words in the English language to describe their relationship?) in the capable hands of Miss Brambling, and together with the General, retreated to the bomb shelter, an ancient structure of roughly assembled concrete slabs, buried several metres underground and long fallen into disuse. Sally Brambling, as always one step ahead, had transformed the draughty old cellar into a comfortable office and briefing room, complete with a flipchart, lectern and rows of folding metal chairs. Morrell heard her neat steps descending the stairs just as he and General Waxwing were about to begin their emergency conference.

"Always hoped we'd never have to use this damned place," commented Waxwing.

"I've put the poor woman to bed," said Sally, looking grave but unbeaten.

"She's had a terrible shock," said Morrell. "It'll take more than bed rest to overcome a trauma of that magnitude." Involuntarily his mind drifted back to the scene of Camberwell's escape: the dripping walls, the scorched and fetid air. He was brought back abruptly by Sally's curt voice.

"Well, we don't have anything better than bed rest to offer her right now," she said, flashing a haughty look at the French mycologist. "We have to make do with what we have to hand."

"An excellent principle," replied Morrell. "And that is exactly what we must do in the present circumstances. Ideally we should have the full strength of the British military behind us, but as we are all aware, that is impossible."

The General harrumphed his agreement.

"Were such news to be made widespread," continued Morrell, "who knows what crazed ideas might enter the heads of the general population. Why, the more foolhardy might even be tempted to savour these extra-temporal fungi!"

"I think you give the British public less credit than they deserve," piped up Sally Brambling from the back of the room.

General Waxwing twitched his moustache irritably. "I say, Morrell. Is it absolutely necessary that the young lady attends this meeting? I

mean, we do still have an Official Secrets Act, what?"

Sally's gaze sent daggers flying at the back of the old soldier's head, but Morrell smiled. "General, I understand your concerns," he said. "but we are all witnesses now. Nothing can change that. We are all involved."

"I wouldn't leave, even if you asked me," interjected Sally, plonking herself down in a grey metal chair next to the General, who shifted uneasily in his bulky uniform.

Standing at the front of the room, as though about to address his class of students at the Academie des Champignons, Morrell stuck his hands into the pockets of his corduroy jacket, and located a well-chewed pencil. On the flipchart he began to sketch out a diagram with well-practised gestures.

"As we know," Morrell began, "we are dealing with parasitic, rather than saprophytic fungi in this case."

"Sappho-whatic?" spluttered the General. "What the dickens!"

"Saprophytic," Morrell corrected him. "As in feeding from dead and decaying matter. These infinity mushrooms, on the contrary, are parasites. They feed from living organisms."

"Of course they do!" said Waxwing. "Could have told you that myself. Camberwell knew that better than any of us, the poor chap." He shook his head sadly, lost in painful recollections.

Morrell decided to focus his lecture on Sally, who was frowning in concentration.

"We seem to be safe here in this bunker for the time being," said the Professor, consulting the screen on his pocket mycographolator. "The spore levels in this room are significantly below average."

"But we can't stay here indefinitely!" protested Sally.

"Naturally," conceded Morrell. "Furthermore, there is no guarantee that one of us has not already inhaled the extra-temporal spores. After Professor Camberwell's accident, the security of the laboratory was severely compromised."

"You can say that again!" barked Waxwing. "There was a hole in the wall big enough for a

shire horse to walk through, or any of the larger breeds of cattle.”

Morrell nodded impatiently. “As I said, the fungi are feeding on living organisms. But it is my belief that Professor Camberwell, although he has fallen victim to these parasites, will suffer no *physical* ill-effects.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sally nervously, catching the Professor’s emphasis.

Morrell stroked his greying stubble and hesitated. “It is my belief,” he said. “and I must stress that it is no more than a hypothesis, that the fungi are feeding, not on our bodily nutrients, but on our *time*.”

General Waxwing leapt from his chair, red in the face. “What Gallic gibberish is this?” he spluttered.

“Please, General, hear me out,” said Morrell. “I know how you feel. At first, I found it difficult to believe myself. I was thinking about the mushrooms, about how they contain no chlorophyll, and cannot photosynthesise. They are incapable of producing their own nutrients, so are reliant on food produced by others. Our Earthly mushrooms feed from leaf litter, hummus, or on the bark of trees. But what we are dealing with here is an entirely new kind of parasite. These mushrooms have come from a universe where there is no *time*.”

“How can such a place exist?” demanded Sally.

“Yes, you are right,” conceded Morrell. “It is unimaginable. To be engulfed in the eternal, without day or night, cause or effect. But I can see no other rational explanation. These entities have come here in search of time. They are engaged in a temporal feeding frenzy, sucking up our hours and minutes as a parched man gorges on water!”

The General was hunched over, staring at his hands and shaking his well-groomed beetroot shaped head in disbelief. Miss Brambling adjusted her spectacles and bit her lip.

“How did you work it out?” she asked, finally.

Morrell allowed himself the merest of smiles. “It was Camberwell himself who gave me the clue,” he replied. “Do you remember, at dinner last night, he kept getting the dates and times

mixed up? And then I noticed he had started on his dessert before he had even finished his soup. Chunks of Camberwell’s life were being swallowed up by the fungi sprouting inside his own body. My suspicions were confirmed when I wished the poor man goodnight at the end of the evening. I watched him disappear into his quarters, asleep on his feet. Seconds later, I turned around to see him back out in the hallway again, dressed in his pyjamas, with a night’s stubble on his chin, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He asked me whether I had breakfasted yet.”

“Poor blighter,” muttered Waxwing. “He must have gone off his noddle!”

“His noddle?” queried the Frenchman.

Sally made the universal gesture of the mentally unbalanced, twirling a manicured index finger in the direction of her left temple, and understanding dawned on Morrell.

“Ah! No, my dear General, you are mistaken!” he cried. “Camberwell had not lost his reason, but his temporality. I greeted him, a little taken aback, only to see that man disappear into thin air. I met him half an hour later on his way to the laboratory. He had no notion that anything was amiss.”

General Waxwing folded his arms and said nothing, but gave the distinct impression that he considered Morrell himself in danger of losing his noddle.

“That’s all very well,” interrupted Sally. “But even if it’s true, what are we to do about it?”

“Ah Miss Brambling, ever the practicalist!” said Morrell brightly, but if he was honest with himself, he had no ideas worth mentioning. “Hmm, what time is it?” he asked nobody in particular, glancing at his wristwatch, a strategy that he often employed in his lectures when he had run out of material.

“It’s just gone four thirty,” said Sally.

“What?” cried Morrell wildly, tearing the watchstrap from his wrist. “My watch says it’s five to twelve! One of us must have brought the spores into the bunker, either on their clothing or their hair. We too are now infected!”

“Let me see that,” said General Waxwing. He stepped forward and took the watch from Morrell’s limp hand. He examined it for a

second, before handing the instrument back. "It just needed winding," he told the mycologist. "First rule of battle: always make sure you've got the correct time."

"Thank-you, General," said Morrell, clapping his hands together. "Now, to action!"

"But we haven't even decided on our plan," complained Sally.

Morrell sighed. "Isn't it obvious?" he cried. "We must hunt Camberwell down, using whatever weapons and tools come to hand. If he reaches civilisation, there's no telling the havoc he might wreak. How far are we from the nearest village?" he asked, pointing abruptly at General Waxwing.

"About fifteen miles," replied the General. "But surely you cannot seriously be suggesting that we kill poor Camberwell like a fox?"

"That is exactly what we must do," said Morrell, assuming a grave expression. "And it will help our endeavour greatly if we cease to think of our quarry as Camberwell, or even as a human being at all. For in truth, the thing that has taken Camberwell's form bears no relation to *homo sapiens*, or to any species native to our own dimension. No, Miss Brambling," he continued, checking her interruption, "nor is it brother to any terrestrial mushroom. More awful even than the Death Cap or the Destroying Angel is this new interloper into our dimension. Its toxins, instead of paralysing the nervous system, leech the very seconds from our lives!"

The General needed no more persuasion. He leapt to his feet with all the vigour he could still muster. "To the armoury!" he bellowed. "Weapons training to begin at seventeen hundred hours."

The three hunters assembled, dressed for the pursuit, in the eviscerated remains of the IRL's canteen. Morrell and Brambling had received a crash course in the use of standard issue British Army rifles, and had taken the opportunity of a little target practice in the kitchens, against bottles and jars. But the real thing, as Waxwing assured them, would be very different. For a start, they had only a few hours of daylight remaining. Camberwell, or what remained of him, had at least an hour's head start, although in

his current state of mind it was debatable whether he would be able to travel far, in any consistent direction. Their equipment included three heavy, black rubber flashlights, but even so they were at a disadvantage. Camberwell, as he had last appeared, would blend into the forest scenery as though born to it.

"What about Mrs Camberwell?" asked Sally, as they prepared to leave the sanctuary of the laboratory.

"I would have invited her," said Morrell, folding a large stretch of webbing into his backpack, "But I don't think she's in any state to be wandering about the forest. And to be honest, she may not enjoy the sport, all things considered."

"I didn't mean that," said Sally crossly. "Of course she shouldn't come out to shoot her own husband! But aren't you worried about leaving her alone?"

Morrell shrugged, a gesture which seemed to involve not only his shoulders, but his whole body, from the furrows on his brow to his outstretched palms. "What else can we do with her? She is suffering from nervous exhaustion. With any luck, we will be back before she wakes up, and she need never know..."

"Never know what?"

"Whatever the night has in store for us," said Morrell, hefting his rifle.

Perhaps it was simply that Morrell had got too soft, too used to the streetlamps and bars of the *Rive Gauche*, but the Scottish night seemed somehow blacker than nights in other corners of the world. The beams from their flashlights were attenuated and swallowed up by the undergrowth, and the three hunters stumbled and cursed their way through a maze of hidden roots, mossy stones and unexpected bogs. Metres above them, invisible tree-tops shivered and creaked.

"How are we ever going to track him down?" asked Sally, just minutes after they had left the confines of the laboratory. "And how are we going to find our way back?"

"If necessary, we must stay out all night," said Morrell. He stifled another of Sally's objections by putting his finger to his lips. The same finger

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stretched out slowly and pointed to a tree-trunk, illuminated by the General's flashlight.

"Don't touch it General," warned Morrell, as the General went forward to inspect the damage. "We don't know the chemical composition of those deposits."

Mindful of Morrell's words, Waxwing poked at the bark with a dead stick.

"What's this stuff?" he asked. "Sap?"

The other two crowded around to examine the evidence.

"No," concluded Morrell. "This is no Earthly substance, but a trail left by our quarry."

And as Morrell spoke, they watched the slimy coating on the bark begin to glow with a queer light that was neither indigo nor tangerine, but shifted like shot silk, depending on where the light fell.



“It’s liquefying the tree bark!” exclaimed Brambling. “The wood is dissolving.”

As they watched, the wood seemed to wither away on contact with the dripping slime.

“Not dissolving but ageing,” Morrell corrected her. “The tree is growing old. Every second years are passing. Quick! We must not linger here! This tree might be destined to fall at any moment.”

They jogged away from the scene as fast as the terrain would allow, the rifles on their backs brushing through shoulder-high bracken. Morrell had not been unduly cautious. From elsewhere in the forest, they heard the unmistakable groan of another tree about to fall. There was a muffled crash.

“It came from over there!” said Waxwing. “Must have been about a half mile away.”

Following the General’s keen sense of hearing, the hunting party marched on through the pine trees. Despite his size, the old soldier was setting quite a pace, and Morrell’s stamina was the first to fail. Attacked by stitch, he stopped suddenly, out of breath and hunched over, his hands on his knees. Years of lecturing and quiet afternoons in his study had not prepared him for this kind of exertion. Mushroom hunts were usually placid, sedentary affairs, a far cry from this desperate foray into the unknown. Morrell sat down on a conveniently placed log, and switched his flashlight off to save the batteries. Insects, unseen and enlarged in his imagination, flitted round Morrell’s face. Repulsed, he batted them away. The wind was picking up, and the rain, filtered by the canopy above, dripped down onto Morrell’s upturned, sweat-drenched face in large, welcome splashes of cool water.

A noise alerted him. Something was crashing through the bracken, coming closer in the darkness. He whirled around, uselessly, and fumbled with the switch on his torch. Regular steps, heavy and resolute, approached. Pocketing the flashlight, Morrell reached around and slid the rifle from underneath the flap of his backpack. Waxwing hadn’t specified how he was supposed to operate the weapon at the same time as pointing the torch, he realised with annoyance.

After some anxious fumbling, he managed to jam the flashlight under his armpit, with the beam of light pointing roughly forward as he aimed the rifle into the black void.

Morrell listened hard but could hear nothing above his own heartbeat and breath. Something pushed firmly against his back. Morrell turned, dropped the flashlight, and discharged his weapon. The jolt against his shoulder made him step back awkwardly. His foot found a root and he went down heavily into a patch of wet ferns. There was a single soft grunt, unmistakably human, and then the shouts of Waxwing and Brambling in the distance.

On his hands and knees, his clothes soaked with mud, Morrell scrambled to find the lost flashlight. Its beam illuminated a dismal sight. The body sprawled amongst the rotting leaves was not that of Professor Camberwell. It was Mr McGowan, the gamekeeper. Morrell remembered his altercation with the old Scot the previous night at the Hen and Hare the previous night. Almost the whole village of Dornoch had witnessed their disagreement over the edibility of the Wood Blewit. Now his opponent was dead at his feet, a ragged red hole bored into his old grey neck.

“Did you get him?” cried General Waxwing with gusto, as he blustered into the clearing. His eyes followed the beam of Morrell’s flashlight, and he swallowed hard. Miss Brambling followed close on his trail. Morrell, his eyes closed, heard her harsh, sharp intake of breath.

“This is going to be a tricky one to explain to the natives,” mused Waxwing. He offered Morrell a damp cigarette, and the three of them stood in a solemn circle around the corpse, silently smoking.

Sally had warned Mrs Camberwell that her husband would mutate beyond all recognition, but when the expedition returned to the laboratory, she had to confess that she had not expected him to have transformed into an elderly Scotsman. Exhausted and drenched to the skin, Morrell and Waxwing manhandled the body into the lobby and, ignoring Mrs Camberwell’s stream of questions, dragged Mr McGowan into the one laboratory that was still intact. Once

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deposited unceremoniously on a gurney, the two men sank to the floor, sweating profusely.

"Perhaps we can just bury him in the grounds," panted Morrell. "Or underneath the cellar."

"Talk sense you halfwit!" huffed the soldier, tearing off his waterproof jacket. "The locals would smell a rat before you could say *Amanita muscaria*."

Morrell perked up. "I didn't know you had any knowledge of fungi."

"Only a smidgin," said the General. "But it's a damn sight more than you know about gunmanship."

"Gentleman, I beg you!" said Sally, appearing in the doorway, her head wrapped in a towel. "This bickering serves no purpose!"

Mrs Camberwell skulked in Sally's wake. "Did any of you catch sight of my husband?" she asked, quietly but insistently.

"No," said Morrell. "We were on his trail..."

"But then this ninny decided it'd be more fun taking pot shots at the local tenantry," interrupted Waxwing.

Morrell was about to make a cutting rejoinder, but he caught Sally's eye and thought better of it.

"Camberwell could be anywhere by now," said Morrell. "He's been on the run, what? Five, six hours? An average man might hope to cover ten miles in that period. But with the infinity mushrooms sucking the time from his life, well, Camberwell may be at the white cliffs of Dover by morning. There's no telling."

"I suppose he'll be ageing at an accelerated rate too," said Sally.

"Yes, as the fungus spreads in his body, he'll be missing out days at a time. But who knows what damage he might cause before..." Morrell gave Mrs Camberwell a pitying glance.

"...before the thing runs its course," Sally said quickly.

"Yes. Of that we can only speculate. And naturally, at some point, Professor Camberwell will feel the need to reproduce."

Mrs Camberwell's head shot up. "I beg your pardon, Professor Morrell!" she stammered.

"There's no need to apologise, dear lady," said Morrell, misunderstanding the English compul-

sion to say sorry when one is least inclined to remorse. "I understand perfectly," continued the Frenchman. "You have been on a strange journey, and it is likely to get stranger still. It is only natural that your concentration should suffer from time to time. But please try to listen: these matters are of the last importance! Eventually, your husband, if you choose to call him so, will produce his own spores, asexually. Miniature versions of himself will emerge from his body, and float away on the wind, until they find a suitable resting place, and food suited to their altered constitution. I cannot be sure of the details. These newborn Professor Camberwells may be released from one of his existing orifices, or new ones may be necessary. I confess that as a scientist I am intensely curious on that point."



Morrell noticed Mrs Camberwell's expression, and the disapproval on Sally's face, before continuing. "I can well imagine that you find these academic matters less pressing," he said, rubbing his mud-smeared forehead with the back of his hand.

"So what are we going to do?" asked Sally.

By dawn the four of them had, after hours of discussion, recriminations, tears and tantrums, hammered out a plan of action. They retired to their quarters, glad to be rid of each other's company, if only for a few hours. Morrell lay on his bunk, smoking meditatively and browsing through his well-thumbed pocket edition of Hepworth's *Field Guide to the Fungi of Western Europe*. He harboured no false hopes that the book would yield up any clues to the future. Even the wisdom of Hepworth was as nought against these cursed extra-dimensional organisms. The world – no, Morrell corrected himself, the universe itself – had never seen anything of the like before. And if Camberwell were not stopped in his frenzied path of destruction, the universe would not live long enough to see much more. Morrell's knowledge of quantum physics was limited to a few seminars he had audited as a beardless undergraduate, but he was well aware, from conversations with his Nobel Prize



winning friend Dr Hosseini, that there was more at stake than their own lives, or the lives of the Dornoch villagers. No, Morrell perused the familiar pages of Hepworth simply to sooth his fevered brain and tattered temper. The illustrations, so naïve in their execution, yet so informative, brought him something like comfort. It was a book written in happier, more innocent times, when danger was easily recognised by a scarlet cap, or a swollen volval bag. There was no room in Hepworth for abominations such as Morrell had witnessed over the last twenty-four hours.

Ensnconced each in their own room, Morrell's companions were engaged in similarly calming activities. Sally Brambling was making her nightly entry in her diary. She had decided that she could afford to borrow some of the space allotted to the next two days, given the gravity of the day's events. General Waxwing had taken apart his pistol, and was cleaning and oiling each part with reverential care. And Mrs Camberwell was sitting at her vanity bureau in her dressing gown, combing her long, black hair over and over again, and finding more grey ones than she had expected. The ritual complete, Edith Camberwell glanced once at the empty double bed, and huddled up in an armchair to snatch what sleep she could. Unbearable images and noises pursued her through the night.

As the sun came up, they wrapped McGowan in a blanket, heaved him into the back of Waxwing's car, and drove the fifteen miles to Dornoch, where they parked outside the police station. It was really little more than a stone cottage, identical to every other cottage in Dornoch, but with a cast iron lamp, with blue glass engraved with the word POLICE, hanging above the doorway. Morrell knocked, and all four of them held their breath. They had rehearsed their story over and again until they were word perfect. Morrell only hoped that they could be over the border in England before the authorities saw through their alibis.

Sergeant Phelps was a stout, cheerless Englishman with an ill-advised toothbrush moustache huddled under his swollen strawberry of a nose. He opened the front door in his

nightshirt and slippers, and scowled at the newcomers through sleep-encrusted eyes.

"We're here to report a murder," began Morrell, following his script to the letter.

Sergeant Phelps did not react for a moment. "Five minutes," he said, and shut the door.

They waited, while Waxwing, short on patience with a man whom he clearly outranked, timed the delay on his watch. Exactly five minutes later Phelps emerged again, this time in uniform, with his helmet jammed on for good measure, but still with the moustache and scowl. He invited the party inside, where a tiny desk bisected the stark whitewashed room, and proceeded to take notes, as the tale was told.

Once Morrell had finished speaking, the policeman read through his account aloud. "Are you telling me," he began, "that Professor Camberwell, an employee of the Ministry of Defence Research Division, driven insane by jealousy over his wife's alleged affair with the victim, one Cormac McGowan, invited said victim to meet him at a specified location in Crannocks Woods, where he subsequently murdered said victim using a rifle stolen from General Waxwing, also a Ministry of Defence employee, and that the afore-mentioned Camberwell then fled the scene of the crime, that his whereabouts are currently unknown, but that the above-mentioned Waxwing, alerted by the gunshot, gathered together a deputation consisting of himself, Professor Alphonse Morrell, Mrs Dorothea Camberwell and Miss Sally Brambling, who consequently discovered the body of the aforesaid McGowan, at around about nine thirty last night, the 24th March?"

"Yes," they all said together.

"Well, it's a rum do," said Sergeant Phelps. "I'd best get onto the lads at Inverness for some backup. I recommend that none of you leave town for the next few days."

Morrell raised a hand to silence the General's objections, and smiled in what he hoped was an obliging manner. They would all, he assured the policeman, remain at his service, for as long as Phelps deemed necessary. Placated, the policeman vanished into the back room to phone his superiors in Inverness.

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"Do you think they'll keep us in the cells?" asked Dorothea with trepidation.

"They have no cells to put us in," replied General Waxwing, who spoke from experience. He had been stationed at the Interdimensional Research Laboratory on several occasions, and had witnessed more than his fair share of drunken bust-ups between members of his regiment and local bruisers outside the Hen and Hare at kicking out time.

"Then shouldn't we go back to the lab?" suggested Mrs Camberwell uncertainly.

"We shall do no such thing," countered Morrell with a stern look. "This is not an occasion for pussy-footing. Dreadful forces have been unleashed on the world. We cannot stand idly by and await the trundling justice of these petty functionaries. We must seek expert advice. At the same time, Professor Camberwell, or whatever has borrowed his earthly form, must be stopped, or at least contained." Here he turned to the General. "A quarantine zone must be established. I trust we can rely on your contacts within the secret service to set up something along these lines. Naturally there must be some kind of cover story to feed the press. An outbreak of swine fever, something dull and agricultural which will not excite the public's appetite for scandal. Nobody must know the true extent of the catastrophe."

"I've already spoken to a few well-placed individuals," said the General with a little nod. "I'm hoping to see some results in the next few hours. I'll keep you posted."

"Good," said Morrell. "In the meantime, I must seek expert advice, in the form of a certain Arab scholar currently residing at Cambridge University."

"I'll come along too, if you don't mind," said Sally. "On my way back to speak to my editor in London."

"I'm afraid not, Miss Brambling," said Morrell with a sneer. "Your reporter's instincts must be restrained. This is a matter of national security, as I'm sure General Waxwing would agree."

The General nodded distractedly.

The journalist was incandescent. "How dare

you push me around, you fatuous truffle-hunter!" she cried, hands on hips in an attitude of righteous indignation. "I've just as much right to do my job as you have! Why, this story could make my career! Just you try and stop me printing it!"

Unmoved, Morrell merely sighed. "Of course, somebody must remain here to look after poor old Mrs Camberwell," he reminded Sally. "And to greet Phelps and his men from Inverness, when they come sniffing around, which they eventually will."

"Don't mind me," said Dorothea gruffly, coming to Sally's aid. "I may have had a bit of a shock, but I'll be as right as rain. I can handle these rustic detectives as well as any of you. We Englishwomen are made of sterner stuff than you think, Professor Morrell."

Morrell and the General exchanged unhappy glances. Evidently this plague of female emancipation was highly infectious.

"But what are we going to do with McGowan's body?" asked Morrell a little desperately. He had not counted on his plans being upset by the collusion of these two blue-stockings.

"Oh, we can just leave him in the police station. That's the best place for him, I'm sure," said Mrs Camberwell decisively.

Nobody had any better ideas, so the grim, blanketed parcel was manhandled from the boot of the General's car, and hefted, with much sweating and cursing, through the narrow doorway of the police cottage, and up onto the bare wooden counter.

"We can't just leave him there, can we?" asked Sally, having second thoughts as she contemplated the mummified shape.

Morrell, tugging on a well-earned Gauloise, pondered the question. "It may seem callous," he said at last, "but these are extenuating circumstances if ever they existed. We haven't a moment to spare!"

"Let's get going then!" said the General impatiently, gesturing towards the car.

"Let me just finish my cigarette," said Morrell. "I'll be right with you."

# Ellénore

*After Adolphe, by Benjamin Constant*

*Vicki Proserpine*

Why do I write this? Why am I so foolish as to commit my thoughts to paper? What if the count were to find this? I cannot deny my folly, yet neither can I renounce it. My thoughts are confused, they tear around my mind in hellish disorder, and my only solution is to place them on the page and attempt to sort through that which appears before my eyes. So with my first, and in all likelihood my last, entry in this journal I shall describe my position in plain words, and hope that with God's good grace, if I have not already passed beyond his reach, I may make some sense of my life as it stands. Could it ever be so easy? Ask rather, could it ever be more difficult? The answer must be "no". I have been given a chance, an opportunity for something I thought forever beyond my grasp, yet I know my duty: the duty I owe to the good count and my children. But what of the duty to myself? Do I owe myself nothing? Over and over, I ask myself how I came to this awful pass. Would that I had the right or the courage to ask it of the Lord Christ, but of course he is deaf to the tears of a lost woman, a woman who sacrificed all scruple to the desire for a comfortable life. How could it be otherwise? I would not have it different, not on my behalf, for how could I respect a God who loved a wretch such as I? But let him love my children, for how cruel it would

be to condemn them for the crimes of a wicked mother.

The Comte de P\*\*\* must take none of the blame for what has happened, or for what I fear shall happen. This poor man, whose only crime has been to put his faith in a faithless woman, cannot be thought guilty of anything. He has given to this woman all she could wish of him. He has compromised his position in society on her behalf, and see how she betrays him. Let him be an example to all loving, compassionate men; let them see how good intentions and pure motives benefit no-one in this society. But am I truly so guilty? I gave myself to him for love, or for what passed for love in the days of my youth, and what have I gained? I have borne the count two fine, handsome children, over whom I have doted night and day; could any mother have been more dutiful? What shall be the reward of this care and concern? Upon their entry into society these children shall disown their father's mistress. No longer a mother to them, I shall be nothing but an embarrassment, to be ignored, or at best, explained away. Small reward for long, sleepless nights of worrying over their illnesses and nightmares! And what of the count's finances? When first we met, he had nothing, his family name a hair's breadth from the dishonour of bankruptcy. For years I have devoted myself

to the restoration of his family's fortune, and how close we have come to achieving that end! We came to this town of D\*\*\*, and had our careful preparations borne fruit, within two years the count's situation would have been assured. I have brought him so far, only to abandon him for the first young dandy to catch my shameless eye, the first man to whisper words of passion into my harlot's ear... but I outpace myself.

At least I can reassure myself with the declaration that I was not the first to welcome the young man into our home. The unfortunate Comte de P\*\*\* (unfortunate to love one such as I), having met the young Adolphe (how the name causes me to shiver in anticipation!), became aware that their families had certain connections, and so invited my seducer to our home to dine with us. After he left our house, I congratulated myself upon the haughty and disinterested demeanour which I had shown the young man – foolish woman! I should rather have spent every moment enjoying the delicacy and the sublimeness of his company! What cost the shallow pride of a tainted woman! The Comte de P\*\*\* told me how he had found the young man's company very pleasant; his simple heart would not recognise dissimulation and facility behind the common pleasantries of the most calculating man. There was no mystery for me in the young dandy's repeated attempts to gain my attention during the meal, though it would have taken much more than a few over-long glances to arouse the count's suspicion. Oh, poor honest man! How can I do this to him? It hurts me to think of the pain he shall feel when all this finally becomes clear to him. What devil leads me to put my own happiness before his? Is it love that I feel for Adolphe? It is true that this young man awakens feelings in me that are of a different class to any that I have known before, yet I cannot be so presumptuous as to label these feelings "love". That would be to attribute the purest feelings and the purest motives to the basest and most self-serving of hearts, but while I know this to be the case, no longer is it possible for me to fight the vicious impulses by which I am tortured so cruelly. I no longer have the

strength to resist. In recent weeks I have come to realise that this is the most basic nature of my being. The purity of thought and of feeling that I hoped to find in religion has proved empty. To deny my basic selfishness for a single moment more can only serve to prolong my suffering. Oh, terrible day, that brought Adolphe to tempt me, that brought to flower the seeds of selfishness in this cruel heart!

My youthful days are far in the past, my most beautiful years have been sacrificed to the count, and to what end? He has had everything of me, but what has been my reward? All that I have belongs to me through his sufferance. At the count's whim I could be cast onto the streets to find a living! In the eyes of the church I have no position, save that of a well-paid whore, and the meagre status afforded me in society comes only by virtue of the respect which they have for the Comte de P\*\*\*. Only too keenly am I aware of the view shared of me by the other ladies of the town: the slightest lapse of morality on my part or the disapproval of the count would provide them with reason enough to damn me to hell and back, and without doubt my name would soon become a byword for sinfulness and immorality. Such will be my fate should I choose to take up with Adolphe, but in all truth the decisions of fate are losing their power over me. Here is the question which has kept me awake each night since I met that handsome young man: is it better to be unhappy with the approval of society or to search for happiness while being damned by society? For year after year I have suffered under the hateful strictures of the former, I have abandoned every principle in order to serve the count well, I have buried all my most honest feelings beneath the weight of devotion, but nothing of this has done anything to make me feel that I have acted correctly. When my dear mother left me alone without any money to my name, I had no choice but to give myself up to a man with money, else I would not have survived. The opportunity to experience any finer feelings has never been mine; my life has been nothing but an attempt to survive. What right have these women of D\*\*\* to judge one such as I? They, who have spent the entirety of their pointless

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lives in this one town, being unfaithful to their unfaithful husbands while claiming to be the arbiters of the public morality, spend their days gossiping over my every move, waiting for the moment when they may safely sink *their* sharp teeth into *me*. Since the day that the count and I arrived here, I have had to watch them sharpening their claws. They suspect already, though the count remains ignorant, and they in fact suspect too little.

Only yesterday I had to endure a visit from the despicable Madame de R\*\*\*, and her hateful friend, Madame de S\*\*\*. For the sake of the count, I must remain civil with such people, even as they attempt to slyly insult me. Doubtless this pair had heard rumours of my meetings with Adolphe and had come to make these rumours known to me. After embarrassing me with profuse greetings and overstated declarations of friendship, they began to over-praise the “undisputed purity” of my morals.

“Yet,” said Mme. de S\*\*\*, with a suggestive smile, “isn’t it true that even the most honourable of women have been known to compromise themselves upon occasion?”

Should I pursue my own happiness I know that such women would be overjoyed. They would take immense pleasure in spending the afternoons discussing my fall from grace, and this fact alone is almost enough to prevent me from following such a course. But again I have outpaced myself; I have neglected the more recent details of my relationship with Adolphe.

I have written of how I responded to the attention that the young man paid to me during the meal, and how later I congratulated myself on my haughty demeanour, but I admit here that I found him returning to my thoughts again and again during the days, and the nights, that followed his visit. I began to see the Comte de P\*\*\* in something of a new light, and it was not favourable. I had known that I was not in love with the count, but I accepted that he was a necessary part of my life. I could not have survived without him, but I did not love him. In place of that fragile emotion I had devotion. No wife has ever been more devoted to her family than I, no mother ever worshipped her children

more, and I built my life around this devotion. Yet I knew that before long my children would hate me for what I was, and being in the company of the count became more onerous with every passing day. It is difficult to understand the reason for this, for no-one could ever find a more caring and considerate man. The fault lies with me, not with him; the mere sight of him reinforced the growing feeling that my life had been a failure. Our relationship was as emotionally sterile as that between employer and employee, that being essentially what we were, and this became more and more unbearable to me. I would begin arguments with him, simply to make him show emotion. He became confused and angry with himself, angry because he could not understand my malicious attacks. He did everything he could to placate me, he would have given me everything he had, but what he could never give me was the spark of excitement that came when I felt the eyes of young Adolphe resting upon me. During the following weeks I saw the young man a number of times, and though we barely spoke, these feelings continued to grow. I found the count’s presence untenable as my dissatisfaction with the life I was leading rose like bile within me. Eventually the poor count could bear it no longer, and went to stay for a while with friends in the country. And what was this? I received a letter from Adolphe, professing the depth of his love for me!

Despite all appearances, I confess that I had no wish to begin an affair with the young man at that point. Through his very presence I had become acutely aware of the poor quality of my life, but that does not imply that I was eager to throw myself into his arms; until I received his letter he had been nothing but a fantasy, a contrast to the life I was leading. My loyalty to the count was still strong enough for me to write back to Adolphe to offer him nothing but sincere friendship, while informing him that he would not be received in the house until the Comte de P\*\*\*’s return. I still cared for appearances and propriety; words that today seem synonymous with unhappiness and misery. In any case, my letter seemed only to encourage the young man,

as he redoubled his efforts to make me his mistress. To avoid both Adolphe and my returning husband I went to stay with a friend in the country. The weeks I spent there found me confused and troubled. Adolphe had pursued me with such vigour and energy! He painted such attractive futures for us, he made it seem as if we could be so happy together! But I was fully aware of how impractical his words were. If I ended my relationship with the count, if it became common knowledge that I had taken up with young Adolphe, the good people of D\*\*\* would fight to be first to condemn me. How happy they would then be! And yet every moment of the day my would-be lover filled my thoughts. In him I could see the possibility of escape from the quiet tragedy that had been my life till then.

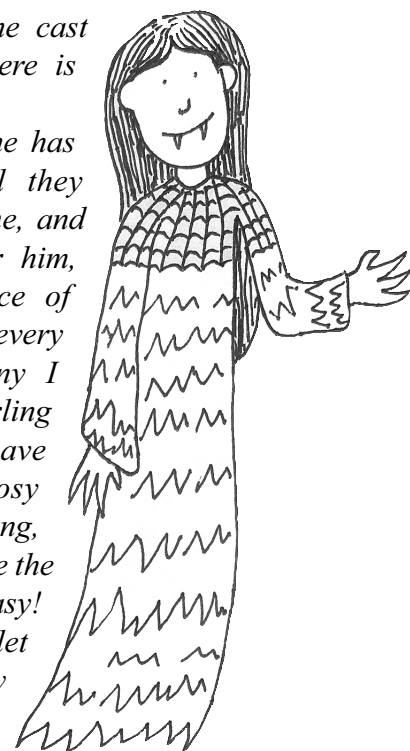
I have since returned from my friend's house, to find my young admirer still waiting for me. To be the object of such devotion is very flattering, to say the least, especially to a woman who is ten years beyond the height of her beauty. Upon my return my husband, in an attempt to raise my spirits, arranged a party for me, inviting his friends and family. And who else did the poor fool invite? Why, Adolphe, of course! The rest can be told quickly: Adolphe, through threatening to leave society altogether, persuaded me to receive him the following day. Since then, he has visited me several times, to declare his love in the face of my apparent indifference. In truth, my indifference has been nothing but a pretence: I think of nothing but escape. Through this young man I can find a new way, I can build a new life, away from the dreary routine of the count and his circle, away from being nothing more than an accountant and a nursemaid! Why should I be meekly grateful for the tiny crumbs that fate has thrown to me? Until now, humble submission to the idle whims of Providence and Society has been my lot; my life, my talents, my ambitions, all have been sacrificed in an attempt to gain acceptance, and with every passing day I have learnt how fragile and worthless that acceptance has been.

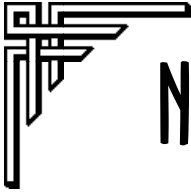
Reading back over this entry, I can see how my thoughts have arranged themselves. It would

be foolish of me to fight their pattern. For too many years I have fought against them tooth and nail, and it has gained me nothing. Since I met Adolphe I have been rejuvenated; the blood in my veins burns with a fire that had long been extinguished by my relationship with the count, and I would rather die than let that happen once more. I am as an ancient tree thought long dead which astonishes all by showing green shoots with the spring. This young man will sacrifice everything for me: his career, his inheritance and even the name of his family, and I shall not stop him. Until now, my life has belonged to everyone save myself; the count, the Church, the children and the women of society have all owned their part of me. Now I reclaim myself! I renounce their hold over me; I shall not bow to their demands a moment more. And what is more, I shall take from Adolphe that which is rightfully mine, from him I shall take what I have for so long given away. I shall have a new life, free of devotion, free of sacrifice, and let those who would stop me know that I will stoop before them no longer.

Tomorrow I shall take Adolphe as my lover. *Then, I shall return to the darkness for a little while, rather than have the harsh light of shame cast upon my being. There is too much to hide!*

*I will wait until he has forgotten me, until they have all forgotten me, and then I shall devour him, every delicious piece of him. I will savour every morsel, every agony I inflict upon his darling features! I, who have lived a lie of cosy domesticity for so long, shall know once more the delight of evil's ecstasy! They should have let me be. He shall know the pain that he has given me! They will all know pain. **They will all die screaming!***





# Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into The Unknown Tyranny of the Fungal Overlord



John Greenwood



The Thanggam was essentially a variety of fungus which, by some queer accident of evolution, had developed powers of speech. It communicated with its peers by forcing gases through long, narrow twisting pipes which honeycombed its fleshy body, which it effected by means of living bellows, located amongst the mycelial strands, the roots of the being, which lodged deep in the rocks and earth below. The sounds produced were unpleasant in the extreme, as were the gases it generated in such terrible abundance.

Thanggam resembled nothing more than a plate fungus grown to monstrous proportions, the slimy disc as large as half a kilometre in diameter, reaching three metres above ground level. The underside of Thanggam's body was frilled with deep, charcoal coloured gills, and between these lamellae and the ground remained a narrow crawl space of half a metre or so. The gills radiated outwards from the central stem, a muscular column which supported the entire weight of the cap. Nothing could grow in that sunlight starved, poisoned earth shaded by the cap, and the ground was blackened and lifeless. It was here that Eunos and I were forced to make our beds while enslaved to the will of Thanggam.

Most of our time was spent up on the cap's surface, that crazily undulating surface, pitted with densely branching holes from which belched forth the malodorous pronouncements and commands of Thanggam, as though from some demonic pipe organ.

The reader might well wonder how it came to be that an independent-minded space pioneer such as myself, and a superhumanly strong, resourceful and unsentimental android came to be in the grip of such a ridiculous organism as Thanggam. I shall no longer test that reader's patience. In short, Thanggam had powers of telepathy, inducing a kind of mental torpor and sluggishness completely alien to me. Telepathic reins were fitted to my mind, and Thanggam's will alone held sway over my thoughts and actions. From the moment Thanggam first spoke to us, his brutish assertion of supremacy grating on our ears, I was introduced to the bit, and the whip too, in the form of his intolerable piping. My tortured mind would have performed any action, no matter how degrading or immoral, to escape from those appalling sounds and smells.

Fortunately, Thanggam's orders were of a mundane nature. For most of the day, Eunos and I busied ourselves collecting animal droppings for Thanggam to feed on. Manure was the staple

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source of the fungus's sustenance, and his appetite for dried excrement was apparently insatiable. My memories of those days are fuzzy, perhaps happily so, for I was driven to the brink of collapse by the slaver's constant hectoring. There was no time to eat or drink, and little to sustain us bar a few meagre handfuls of wild nuts and seeds found in the undergrowth amidst our desperate struggle to keep Thanggam fed.

The vigilant reader might at this point be scratching his head in perplexity, or even annoyance. What, I hear him demand, of Eunos? Surely the telepathic tyranny of this overgrown mushroom was powerless against the android's artificial brain? It is true, Eunos was unaffected by the demands of my tormentor, and could have, in theory, attempted a rescue, or even destroyed the source of my torments. But as Eunos later pointed out to me, he was duty bound to serve me, to follow my every instruction to the letter. And so as I was the mere puppet of Thanggam, so Eunos in turn became guided, at one remove, by the will of the fungus. Although I had no memory of the incident myself, Eunos assured me that I begged him to assist me in my frantic search for animal droppings. What alternative did he have but to obey? Retrospectively I would wish that perhaps Eunos were less strictly bound to his code of conduct, but being ignorant of the methods of reprogramming him, it remained beyond my power to change his basic motivations. I did urge him, should any similar such circumstance again arise, to give serious thought as to whether I was acting rationally, and whether it might not be more in my interests to ignore the more bizarre instructions, and act on his own initiative.

To this Eunos had two objections. Firstly, he argued, as an android he was incapable of initiative, which he defined as the ability to act without outside prompting, an action which is unprogrammed and therefore *sui generis*. Secondly, he mistrusted his own ability to judge whether I was in my right mind. Indeed, he claimed, there had been many occasions in the past when he doubted my rationality. He went as far as to say that he could count very few

instances at all on which I had acted logically to further my own best interests.

When I reacted angrily to this suggestion, he cited several humiliating instances, including the acquisition of Raffles, my pet mouse-snake. It was remarkable how often Eunos found opportunities to denigrate and object to this harmless, innocent creature. Were he not fundamentally incapable of such emotions, I might almost have suspected the robot of jealousy.

However, that is all peripheral to my story. As I was still in the grip of the Thanggam, Eunos fell under his sway too, doubling the amount of animal droppings gathered for our master's nourishment. The weather was hot and dry, and the surface of Thanggam's cap steamed with rank air and scorched my feet. Clouds of brown dust hung in the air above the crowded ducts, down which orifices I poured armful after armful of mixed manure. Thanggam accepted all types of ordure, but that left by a certain species of bat pleased him best of all, and it was in pursuit of such delicacies that I was sent out one day on a special errand, to a cave that housed these bats by the thousand.

On this occasion, unusually, Eunos stayed behind. I had been ordered to clean out Thanggam's gills, and had delegated this tedious chore to the android, while I enjoyed a few moment's respite from the shrill demands of the fungal overlord. Was I plotting my escape? I was not, and feel no shame in admitting as much. For the psychological irons clamped around my thought processes would admit no such considerations. Thanggam's voice carried over long distances, and I could not imagine the man strong enough to tolerate the sting of the mushroom's rebuke for such time as it would take to travel out of earshot. In every waking moment, Thanggam's lash played about my ears, and echoed as a warning in my mind. The price of disobedience, I knew, was too high to be paid.

Nevertheless, a little dallying en route to the cave was, I told myself, forgivable, and for a few glorious minutes I was able to wander amongst the alien trees at my leisure, breathing in the soft scent of blossoms, and treading on a fragrant carpet of what resembled pine needles. I had no

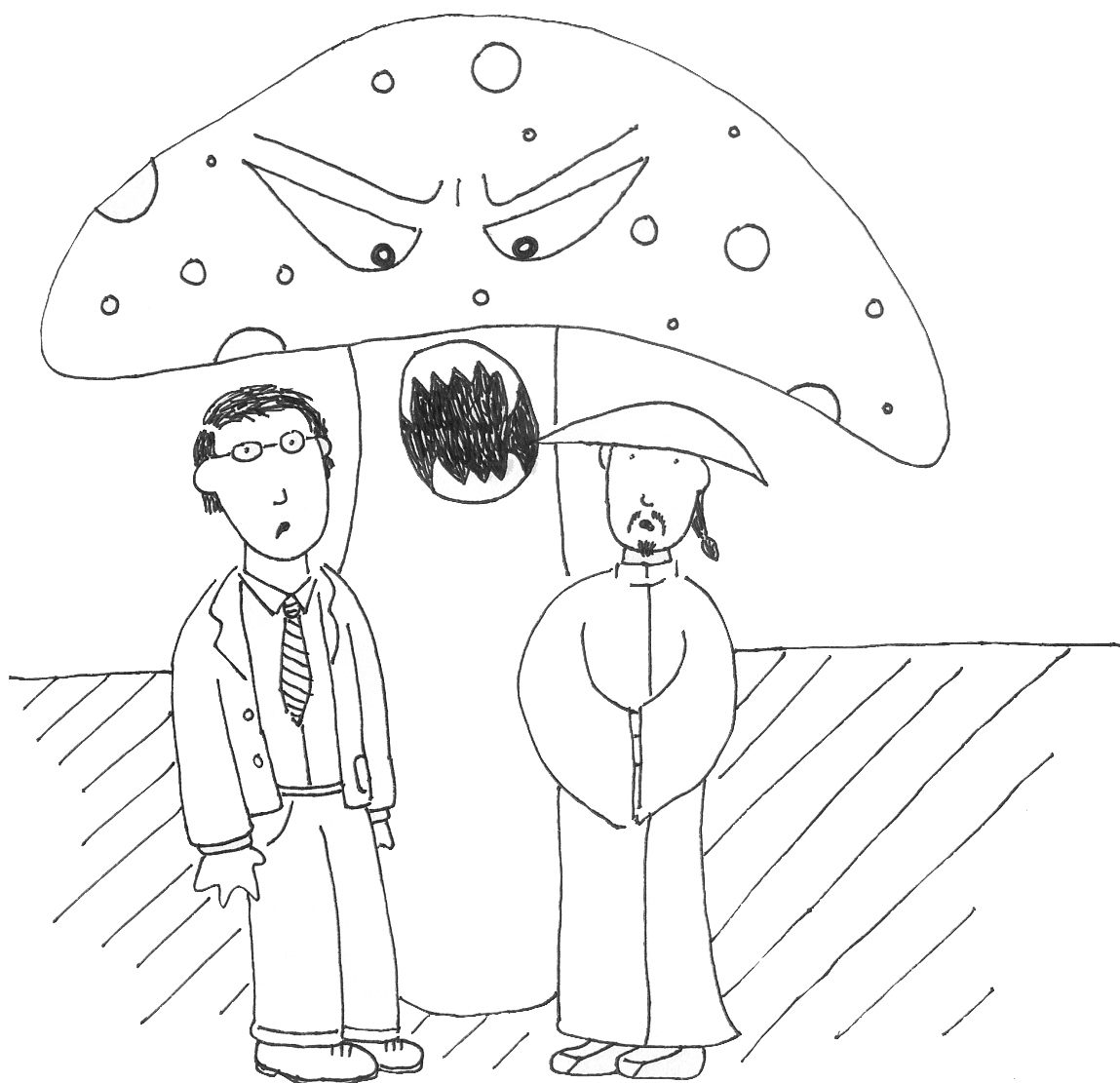


need of a map to reach my destination, for Thanggam himself had implanted the route I should take directly into my memory. I saw the path in my head before I had even trodden it, a disconcerting experience, as though I were dredging up memories of a journey taken in ages past. Creatures bustled and twittered in the branches overhead, and Raffles, my constant companion even in these dark days, scuttled from my pocket, and darted up the bark of a tree in pursuit of some insect morsel. I let him go, reassuring myself that he would return anon. As if by instinct, my eyes scanned the forest floor for piles of manure, no matter how small or dried up. Thanggam's needs had, it seemed, imprinted themselves on my habits. I could not

pass the sight of a pile of ordure without filling my pockets.

The trees thinned as the terrain became steeper and boulders, half hidden by wild grasses and lichen, sat like meditating hermits by the side of the path. Soon I was scrambling up a slope of loose shale on my hands and knees, the sharp edges of stones cutting into my dusty hands. But I dared not stop, even to tend to my wounds. Thanggam grew hungry. Even here, at a distance of several kilometres, his pangs were audible and painful. I pressed on, as the day's heat reached its climax, finally gaining the cool shadows of the cave mouth a little after noon.

The cavern exhaled a foul breath, redolent of old milk. But I was becoming inured to unpleasant aromas, having spent days amidst the



stench of Thanggam himself. At least the interior of the cave offered some lull from the fierce sun. I listened hard, and gazed into the darkness, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the conditions. Nothing about the place indicated the presence of a colony of bats. Panic rose into my throat. What if the bats had migrated, or worse, died? Thanggam would be angry. Nobody who has not experienced for themselves the fury of a giant mushroom should scoff at these misgivings. Thanggam's cruelty exceeded all human bounds.

By degrees the mouth of the cave shrank to a crooked, blindingly white eye behind me, and the temperature began to drop. The sweat seemed to freeze on my skin, and I hugged myself. The walls of the cave were wet to the touch, and I felt my way along, seeking the image I saw before me in memory: a wide cavern, gloomily lit by narrow beams of light from cracks in the ceiling. The false memory reminded me of an inverted amphitheatre. Tier upon tier of bats, in long, undulating rows, hung from the bare rock by their claws. From what Thanggam had told me, the air should have been thick with their bickering, their fidgeting wings, and the ground plastered with a heavy encrustation of bat droppings. But that was not the scene I witnessed. The cavern was there, and shafts of tremulous sunlight pierced the ceiling, but not a single bat adorned the walls. The ground beneath my feet was chill, bare rock. And in the centre of the cavern, on a small camp bed constructed from dead branches and moss, sat an old man dressed in animal skins, smoking a pipe.

In that moment, I was oblivious to the enormity of my discovery. Another human being, or so it appeared, dwelt on Kadaloor. I was not, as I had feared, the last of my kind to walk that planet. And where one old man sat in a cave, perhaps there were others too, in other caves, resisting extinction at the hands of those perfidious violet beachballs, the Punggol.

But, as I say, such speculations came to me only later, in less fraught circumstances. In my current mental bondage, I sought the answer to only one question.

"Where are the bat droppings?" I asked, and

waited impatiently for my Dover and Somerset to translate.

The old man waved to me with both hands, and smiled, but remained seated, and silent. I decided to approach him, and force him to tell me the whereabouts of the bats and their excrement. Thanggam's patience, I could sense, was growing thin, and his aural torture might be let loose on my ears at any moment. I would throttle this foolish old man if I had to. Anything to placate that toadstool tyrant.

As I grew closer, I could see that the old man had constructed a whole set of rustic furniture from the detritus of the forest floor. Socks were drying on a home-made clotheshorse, and the remains of a small fire smouldered in a circle of stones. It was clear to me that he was an inhabitant of long standing, and this served to increase my suspicions about the absence of the bats.

"Tell me where those bat droppings are!" I yelled, grabbing the elderly camper by his rough hewn vest. It was then I noticed something that made my heart sink. All his clothing consisted of animal skins sewn together. His whole ensemble was a patchwork of glossy black fur, mixed with streaks of a kind of dark, rubbery hairless skin. The man was dressed entirely in bat fur.

Just then my Dover and Somerset burst into life.

"What do you want with me?" spoke the mechanical voice from the speaker grille. The old man had not spoken, as far as I knew, but he was peering into the camera lens, an addition to the translation box devised by my android servant. The old man was making the strangest facial expressions imaginable.

"I am alone here, and poor. If you have come to rob me, then I can offer you nothing other than a little preserved bat meat," said the Dover and Somerset. "I am down to my last few strips, but you can have it anyway. Only spare my life!"

My astonished gaze moved from the old man to the machine, and back again. He gazed up at me with imploring eyes, tweaking his straggly grey beard with anxious fingers. Was I in the presence of another telepath? I was soon to be proved wrong, but I hardly minded that. For the truth, as the old saw has it, would set me free.

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Next issue:

**Valiant Razalia**



# TQF # 14

## New Year Special

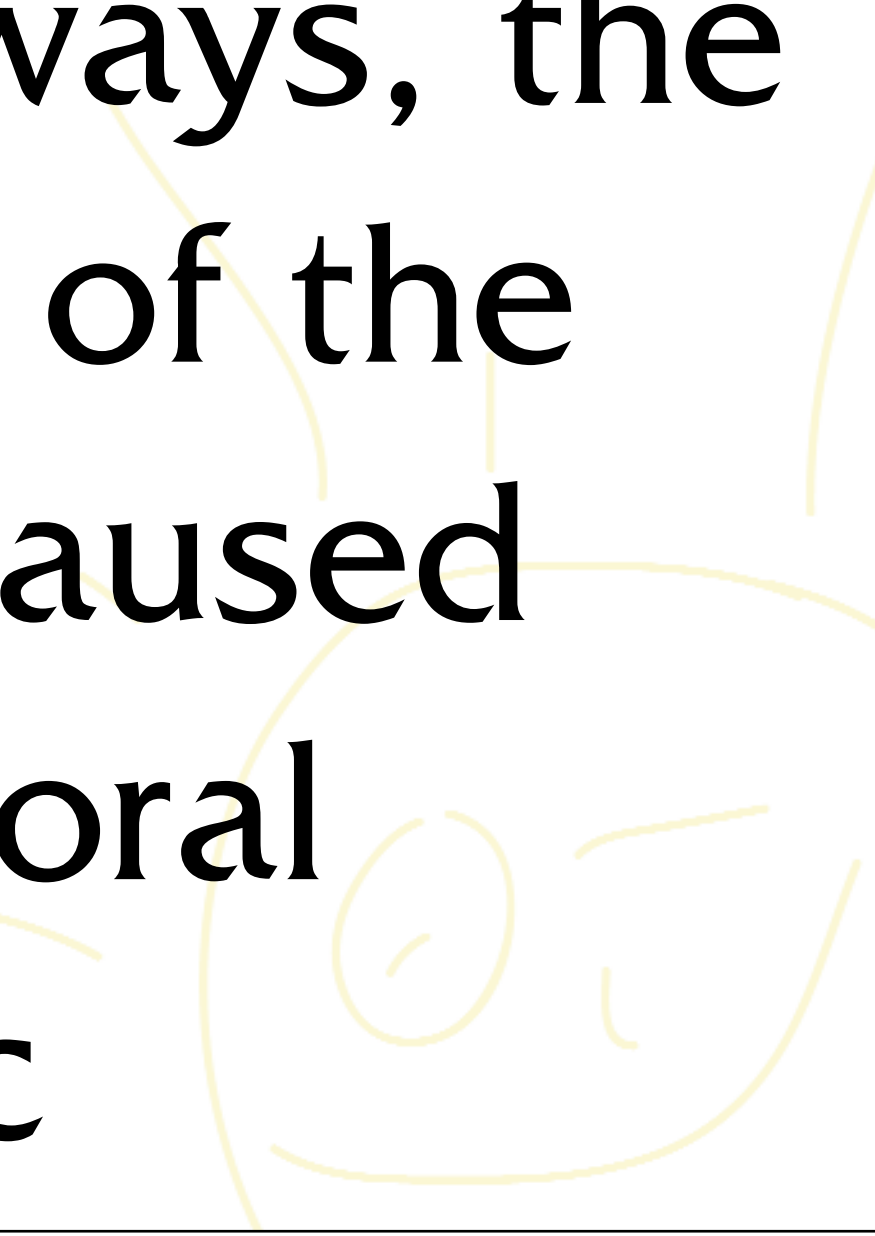
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# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 14

New Year Special

2006

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Helen and Her Magic Cat

*Steven Gilligan*

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# Editorial

## Back to the World of Fractured Time

This New Year special of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* is devoted to a lengthy self-contained portion of Michael Wyndham Thomas's journey

into speculative fiction: *Valiant Razalia*. We were previously able to bring you the prologue to this tale six issues ago, in TQF#8, but if you didn't catch it then, don't worry – like literary quicksand – in a good way! – this is a tale that will suck you in wherever you set foot on it for the first time. Elsewhere, Walt Brunston offers reviews of the latest in US telefantasy. – *SWT*

# News

## J.K. Rowling in Time Travel Danger Warning!

Science fiction, horror and fantasy readers all over Britain are this month being asked to check their shelves for the 2021 edition of the collected works of J.K. Rowling. Apparently a passing time traveller has “hidden it in a bookcase” as “a prank”. Downing Street 2007 got word of this “prank” from their replacements in Downing Street 2021 – we are told that the unexpectedly early publications of these works in 2009 caused havoc in the world economy, changing forever the course of futurity! If you find this book, tell no one, read it if you must, and destroy it immediately after! And no placing bets on who gets killed off at the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*!

## Next Issue News

With TQF#15 the magazine switches to A5.

## Where to Find Your Recommended Viewing

Of the two programmes discussed by Walt Brunston in our review section in this issue, *Jericho* is currently being shown in the UK in the backwaters of the Hallmark Channel, while the reportedly superb *Heroes* is bafflingly set to appear on the Sci Fi channel (though a BBC2 showing is planned for later in the year).

It seems that last year a lot of UK channels got burned, having paid high prices for the rights to the quickly cancelled wave of fantasy programs inspired by the early success of *Lost* – *Threshold*, *Invasion*, *Surface*, *The Night Stalker*, and so on, with *Supernatural* the only one still alive and kicking – allowing the lesser channels to nip in and get some bargains this year.

Despite some flaws, according to our American correspondent, both *Heroes* and *Jericho* are well worth searching out, even if it means putting up with the pre-apocalyptic horror of a 4:3 picture!



# Valiant Razalia

## The Stealthy Craving

Michael Wyndham Thomas

*Small, unfinished, more like a blueprint for a world than the real thing, Razalia props up one end of the Arc of the Fifteen Planets. The Razalians are an accepting race, long used to the fact that, in some places, their landscape looks like the efforts of a water-colourist suddenly called away from his easel. They live with the gaps – those spaces of unfathomable white – in many of their ridges, valleys, forests. Until the white begins to move and colonise, apparently seeking to satisfy its appetite by devouring the white planet. In this chapter, Tharle of Mopatakeh – the leader of the planet – calls upon one of his most trusted fellow leaders, Tharle of Kidresh, to decide what can be done. Unbeknownst to Mopatakeh, Kidresh elects to arrive with Tharle of Dreest. Recently made leader of his territory, Dreest is really no-one's idea of an authoritative figure. But he is an inventor of rare capacities – and he might just have found the planet's saviour – who might be revealed in the next chapter.*

The sun heaved itself into its westward spiral. Its after-light fanned out like a bow-wave, then

blurred like spillage on a cloth. All round Razalia, the skies turned amethyst as the raging galleon steered further away. Another fortnight had passed. Another grudging visit was over – a full day, this time. Razalia had been poked and prodded, its surface daubed with a bare sufficiency of warmth and light. And now, as always, its lower air seemed to thrum with solar contempt, nipping at Razalian ears, turning the planet's term for space on its head. For Razalia itself would now become a "forsaken midnight", while the silences beyond crackled with energy and the vast emptiness became a spring of fire, hugely uncoiling as the sun spiralled in slow majesty towards Carolles. As if defying their planet's fate, the three umber moons darted in turn at the tails of the burning bow-wave, like kids who cheek a bobby's retreating back.

And, as always, the wake of the sun caused temporal havoc. A Razalian hour passed normally enough, then shrank to ten minutes, then sneezed out a good half-day, then stabilised at an hour and a bit. Bobbing on the top of planetary time like corks in a bucket, the three

moons spread out and were still – this time like kids glued to a screen. For, as the sunlight disappeared and the minutes passed more confidently, Razalia shook off its desolation. Across its face, a million torches shone under the amethyst skies: Razalian faces, each its own sun.

On a heathery knoll just beyond Razalia's capital, one face shone with especial intensity. Tharle of Mopatakeh had long disregarded the haughtiness which defined the sun's visits and departures. Like most Razalians, he felt neither belittled by the sun's manner nor saddened that its visits were so rare. The sun was haughty, he reasoned, in the same way that a stream was wet or a sapling green. Should it wish to change, to smile long and benignly on Razalia, it must needs look deep within itself, not expect change in others. If it saw the glow of Razalian faces, their "watching light", as a mockery of its own splendour, the sentiment was its responsibility alone. Besides, he had other things to consider. Evening was coming on. He knew it, and it had nothing to do with the forsaking sun. Though the glow on his face was bright, he could feel a nub of darkness at its core, heralding an end to the day's toil and, presently, the descent into sleep. All over the planet, his brothers and sisters, young and old, were sensing the same.

Turning round, planting his feet apart on the knoll, Tharle regarded the fields and thoroughfares, workplaces and dwellings of Mopatakeh. Tiny ovals of light were everywhere about their business. This one nodded along behind a plough. That one bent down in a doorway, above hands that shook a mat or wiped themselves on an apron. Here, a crimson-tinged oval reared back as a hammer set sparks dancing on the amethyst air. There, amid cries and laughter, a jostle of especially tiny ovals broke apart on a street corner: the young of Mopatakeh, their learning done for the day. Tharle smiled upon the place of which he was leader. It was a full, broad smile – indulgent, some might say. After all, as Tharle, he wore his mouth nearly all the year round, only sealing it off when he felt that a period of fasting would sharpen his judgement. But it was a smile of deep affection, too – although, as he turned from Mopatakeh and

braced himself to look elsewhere, affection became sadness, a sadness pricked with fear.

On the opposite side of the knoll, two mighty arms of water converged and raced into the distance. For Mopatakeh was spread out on an island, southernmost in a chain of seven. The chain was washed by the generous waters of the Billomingow, a river so broad that, even from the knoll, its banks were barely visible. Mopatakeh was the largest island, the others decreasing in size from south to north. Aside from the Billomingow, they shared a common shape, something like a teardrop. Viewed from high in the air, with one island seeming to drip onto the next, the chain suggested the grief of some inconsolable horizon. Now, watching the course of the Billomingow, Tharle tried not to think of tears and grief. Allowing himself another minute or so before he looked where he didn't want to, he considered Mopatakeh's happy position. Not only was it the Razalian capital – it also stood smack dab in the middle of the planet. To use the crude linearities of Earth, the zeroes of longitude and latitude crossed on its fertile ground. This was as it should be – symbolically, of course, but practically as well. For Razalians loved to visit their capital whenever they could, and the fact that none of them had to come excessively far took the pressure off the planet's transport system, a fleet of twenty-seater chara-jets. Fragile, apt to loop the loop if a passenger stirred suddenly, or even sneezed, they loafed rather than sped through the air. Many moons since, they had been gifted to Razalia by the ever-upgrading Carollessa. A corps of Razalians had been trained in their maintenance, the knowledge passing from one generation to the next. Sadly, the stock of spare parts had long dried up – as had the minerals, peculiar to Carolles, from which they were made. Scouring the technical archives of the *Aeonodrome*, their famed planetary museum, the Carollessa offered to replace the fleet with another, identical in design but wrought from up-to-date materials. Ever grateful to their generous neighbours, the Razalians declined, opting instead to keep the fleet going with a mixture of trust and improvisation. This deci-

sion, it has to be said, was not without calculation. Throughout the arc of the sixteen planets, Razalia was loved for its antique quaintness. The proud Sehundan, the gruff Baraskian, the barmpot of Galladeelee and many more – all came to the planet as believers might enter the room of a chosen child: frail, tiny but possessed, they were sure, of unfathomable wisdom. How could that image benefit from a pack of chara-jets, however primitive of aspect, zipping dependably about, dodging the vagaries of Razalian time and keeping their noses straight?

Hands loose at his sides, gaze just above the flow of the Billomingow, Tharle kept his thoughts light for a moment longer, considering the events of that morning. As usual, half-a-dozen chara-jets had flown nose-to-tail above Mopatakeh's western bridge, bearing artisans to their work in the capital, relatives to their families and alien travellers agog for their main destination. As befitted his position and power, Tharle's was the first face on the island to be fully aglow. Like all other Tharles in all other settlements, he used this advantage to act as a kind of dawn-watchman, doubling his height so that he could stroll at speed from the eastern bridge, through the capital proper and out to the west, checking that all was well. After standing for a while at the middle of the western bridge, gazing on the Billomingow, he began to hear those familiar noises – rattling wheels, cries of greeting – which announced the traffic of work on and off the island. Shortly after, the incoming chara-jets came ambling down the sky, their engines blessing the new day with their trademark noise, a cross between a cleared throat and the snapping strings of a cello. Tharle stared at them in some amazement. The line was holding steady, not lashing like a speared snake as it normally did. For once, it looked as though there wouldn't be the usual ballet – the spirals, the bucking-bronco capers – as they tried to land in the airfield on the far side of the capital. Soon, the western bridge was thronged. Everyone else stopped too, pointing upwards, mouths taking shape in faces for cries of astonishment, ears flowering on heads to acknowledge them. As more mouths and ears appeared on more heads,

speculation flew about. The jets were perfectly, almost freakishly aligned because the intimidating sun had disappeared. Everything – animate and inanimate – was relaxed, composed, like schoolkids after the king bully has been dealt with. Or Razalian time, itself relieved that the sun had gone, was making a special effort, suppressing its tics and glitches and creating a tunnel of smoothly ticking minutes for the landing. Or the extra-planetary visitors on board had bet the pilots that the Mopatakeh touchdown would be as endearingly shambolic as ever. Nothing supported these theories. The sun had abandoned Razalia a million times. The alien visitors were usually too engrossed in the view to talk, never mind lay bets. But this did not diminish the joy with which they were advanced.

In fact, the visitor theory was nearest the mark. As the jets went slowly over, Tharle reared up to twice his height again and began striding to the airfield. Flying low now, they were clear to his view. He tracked them as they began their final descent, their path still as straight as an arrow's. But then the second jet sprang out of line, the fourth thrashed like a beached fish and the sixth wavered and dropped below the rest like a great-aunt dying for a sit down. Something burst from the windows of all three – a convulsion of eels, it seemed. At the edge of the airfield, Tharle stopped and groaned, as did the stream of Mopatakehans jostling breathlessly behind him. They should have known – could have done, too, with a little telepathic oomph. But it hadn't been strictly necessary. After all, the three jets hadn't been in actual peril. They had, however, been commandeered by a singular species of tourist: a tribe of Galladeelee youngbloods who, it turned out, were visiting Razalia (or rather, extending their endless home-party) to witness the sun's disdainful transit. Sure enough, the eels turned into the familiar, apparently uncontrollable arms and legs of the goofy Galladeeleean, which proceeded to wallop the roofs of the jets or kick out at thin air. From inside the jets came the sounds of whoops, shrieks and the traditional Galladeelee salutation, raucous yet somehow respectful, to the

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glowing Razalian faces: "Hey! Hey, you stars! You stars in the water!" Then, through the rear window of the last jet, one of them spotted and recognised Tharle and gave a long, three-mouthed, hiccuppy cry. It must have carried down the whole haphazard line: the thumps and whoops ceased instantly. And, next moment, the jets were neatly aligned again, and the countless arms were sculling the air in unison, ensuring a landing that was gentle, quiet and most un-Galladeelean.

Tharle smiled at this recollection. Boisterous they may have been (though they were ungainly charm itself when they emerged from the jets) – but at least the Galladeeleans had made a proper visit. More frequently, they used their huge catapults to *boing* clear across the eastern stretch of the system and yell their cheery, crazy greetings. Of course, a few Galladeelean wildmen always tagged along for the Baraskians' yearly festival – their brash yet somehow mystical celebration of the famed gaps of nothing in the Razalian landscape, their often trance-like worship of the whiteness that their planet didn't know. Tharle stopped himself and took a deep, mind-swirling breath. He'd sprung the moment on himself. He had to look now. Making a half-circle on the knoll, he gazed towards the eastern limits of Mopatakeh. Far off to the right a hillock rose up, round at the sides, level at the top, like a bottle sliced at the neck. Once upon a time, Razalians believed that the hillock was their creator's first stab at a landmark on the planet. Though that belief had long died on Razalia, it had been taken up among those Baraskians who believed that – in some special, inexplicable way – Razalia was the mother of the whole system. Some of them devoted a good half-day of their festival to circling the hillock, claws interlocked, creviced brows a-sweat, intoning gruffly, their words roughly translating as *O prime bloom of life, O firstborn of nature...* Far off to the left was the airfield, from which, before long, the last fleet of chara-jets would depart for the day. Artisans and relatives would return to their remote settlements; the Galladeeleans (who had promised Tharle that they would all depart on the same jet, even paying for its shell to be

specially expanded and reinforced) would go whooping off westwards, pretending that they, in fact, had forced the sun to scarper. Between airfield and hillock was the usual run of Razalian landscape: gentle undulations, copses, a ridge or two. And, in the middle of all that, Mopatakeh's gap of white – site of the tragedy half-an-aeon ago, that dark hour in the annals of the Baraskian Festival. Like everyone else, leader and led, Tharle knew the whole grim story: the Baraskian chorus standing in attitudes of bravado against the gap; the squabble over some small word from their extraordinary anthem; the heated words; the tugging and swaying; the choral plunge into the white, whose raised surface remained as still as a summer pond; the gawping, fatally curious Galladeelean whose errant jaw was likewise claimed by the unfathomable nothing. By all accounts, uproar wasn't the word for what had followed – chiefly among the Razalians, who feared that the Baraskians would take their yearly trances elsewhere and that, far from being the mascot of the system, Razalia would become its pariah. But the Baraskians, with their characteristic, growly geniality, had immediately acknowledged the stupidity of their songsters, seeing their fate as an even stronger argument for worshipping Razalia's lethal patches of white. Indeed, next day, they had arranged the next Festival, down to the last lodging and flagon-cart. As for the jawless Galladeelean, it had long been thought that he would have been better off staying on Razalia, rather than submitting to the charge of freakery and its attendant punishment back home. Certainly, it would have been better for his kith and kin. Who could possibly count all of Galladeelee's rouge catacombs? It was said that he'd only managed three thousand at the time of his death, the sentence then passing to his wife, then son, then daughter, then son-in-law (who counted eight before being buried in a rock-fall) – then to a nephew who was apprehended on the day he was due to emigrate to Carolles. Around that time, however, a sea-change had occurred in the Galladeelean style of government, which shifted itself into line with the general goofiness of its population. The nephew was reprieved

after his first hundred catacombs. He lived out the rest of his life on Carolles, a beneficiary of a Galladeelean pension which would have kept the dozen inhabitants of Lachbourigg, planet of the roving forests, in food and drink for an aeon.

“A good end to a bitter story,” thought Tharle. “I need that now.” And, reaching into the deeps of his mind, he drew up every last drop of visionary strength and stared across the east of the island to the Mopatakeh gap. His gaze, heightened a thousandfold, travelled all round its limits, drinking in every inch. They looked as they always did, perfectly still, as though the white had been penned in with invisible wire. But then they quivered and blurred, suggesting the reproductive jostle of cells beneath a microscope. The demands of focus nearly sent Tharle into a swoon, but he planted his feet yet further apart, he held on. A moment later, the limits sharpened again, and his fear hit him harder and colder than ever. Yes. They had moved. Outwards.

Like a mile-long telescope collapsing section by section, Tharle’s vision shrank to its everyday strength. He turned away, staring out again over the Billomingow. Only recently had his suspicions been aroused. Three nights before, white had entered his dreams, flapping, spilling, upending like a sail maddened by gales. The following dawn, he had visited the controller of the airfield for their usual conference about the post-solar glitches in time and their possible impact on flight schedules. The controller was herself a naturally early riser. After Tharle’s, her face was the first to reach optimum glow. Tharle had made his usual dawn patrol, then doubled back to the airfield. As always, the controller had devised contingencies galore for even the most volatile time-storm. The citizens of Mopatakeh were just stirring when the conference finished. With time on his hands (pretty stable, too, since the sun wasn’t due for another day), he’d made a consitutional of his return to the capital, passing along beside the gap and rounding the hillock. He’d just emerged from the far side of the hillock when his mind was filled again with his dream. Though gazing on rolling fields and gentle crests, all he could see was an ecstasy of

white. Then his gaze had cleared and he looked back at the gap. Its further limits seemed to be settling like the edge of a shaken blanket. He’d trebled his vision and looked again. The very lowest swell of a ridge seemed to have vanished.

As soon as he reached The Guiding, his official house near the main market-square, he’d thought his puzzlement off to Tharle of Kidresh, the second largest settlement on Razalia. On the other side of the planet, Kidresh lay at the foot of Maker’s mountain, the very one that had figured in the planet’s creation theories. It, too, had a gap, which partly skirted a wood to the north of the settlement and had claimed not a few foolhardy lumberjacks. Tharle of Kidresh had thought back immediately. He too had dreamt in white. And, after his morning patrol, he had been drawn to the wood. On its gapward side, two trees had been left branchless and hollow, as if in the wake of blight. A rivulet of white fingered its way between them.

Sensing that Tharle of Mopatakeh was about to sense the need to make an official request, Tharle of Kidresh promised to be on the island next day, once the sun had fully vanished. He could have come sooner, but there was prudence in his delay, an admixture of sense and superstition which Tharle of Mopatakeh endorsed. If the sun suspected that something was amiss – indeed, that Razalia was starting to eat itself up – who knew if or when it would return, or what spite it might visit on its cuckoo? After this exchange, Tharle of Mopatakeh had sat tight, his mind full again – not with daydreams of white but with messages from Tharles all over the planet. The gaps in their dispensation, too, were twitching into hungry life. But he also established that ordinary Razalians knew nothing about the alarming development – yet.

So, that very day, the sun had arrived to find Razalian business as usual. Its presence went unremarked by most – certainly on Mopatakeh, where talk was all of the chara-jets. It was only the young who delighted in the scant handfuls of heat and light the sun threw down, devoting their schoolbreaks to splashing about in the brightness as though it were a levitating puddle. Adult Razalians simply attended to their affairs. Like

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the generations before them, some briefly regretted the sun's scorn for their half-finished world. But, like Tharle of Mopatakeh, all rejected any culpability in the matter. Not that Tharle had time to spend pondering his planet's gentle defiance of the moody sun. After ensuring that the Galladeelean roisterers had every last foot planted on firm land, he had returned to the Guiding, spending much of the day thinking back and forth with fellow Tharles from all four corners. Again and again, the debate had veered towards the same questions. What was to be done? The gaps' rate of advance was between slow and standstill at present, but who knew when they might start acting like Razalian time, leaping forth, pouncing on hills, rivers – people? What had caused the encroachment? Could it be stopped? Reversed? Amid the warm colours and sturdy beams of the Notionary, his special conference room, Tharle had shuddered as his peers' anxious musings flowed through his head. He wondered if the bounds between creation and non-creation had always been so fragile – the former a crust of bread, the latter a cavernous mouth simply biding its time. He'd intended to keep the thought silent, since it wasn't strictly relevant to the present moment. But out it had slipped. From all over the planet – town and hamlet, headland and plain – the other Tharles had echoed and endorsed it. "Vital point" had been the characteristically clipped thinking of Tharle of Venacarr, Razalia's smallest, hilliest settlement. "Kind of thing we need to get on top of. Sentient being, is it? Been planning and hatching, has it?"

The conference and questions filled Tharle's mind again. Absently, he peered over the knoll, as if assuring himself that no white was lapping against its base. Then his face briefly flickered. A message was coming through from Tharle of Kidresh, who estimated that he would be on the knoll in twenty or fifty or five minutes: "I'd incline to twenty," he thought. "Sun's way off now. The hours look to be settling down."

As soon as his words had echoed away, they were replaced by a chorus of twangs and ticklish throats. The chara-jets were lifting clear of the airfield. Tharle watched their cabin and tail-

lights as they lolloped into the sky. Though hardly as clean as it had been that morning, their formation was passable. The controller must have reached the same conclusion as Tharle of Kidresh: time was beginning to settle, providing a smooth enough tunnel in which to release the jets. Doubling the strength of his vision, he could see that the third jet was appreciably thicker than the rest, its casing unusually bright: "Ahh," he said involuntarily and, his vision now quadrupled, he looked inside its cabin. The Galladeeleans were unwontedly calm, their many arms and legs laced about them. "I wonder how much they paid to have the jet expanded." His eyes went into a momentary swoon. "Hmm," he said then, as the figure settled on a ledge of his mind. "Reasonable – we should get the whole fleet seen to." Their jet gained height with something approaching grace. "Well, they're being good as gold," he said to himself – then almost instantly panicked. Did their behaviour mean that they knew about the gaps?

"No, they don't," Tharle of Kidresh rang out in his mind. "And stop trying to keep your worries to yourself, Mopatakeh. Now, I shall join you in twel – fifteen minutes. Oh, and I'm bringing a companion."

Tharle was about to divine who it was, but a distracting peal of hiccuppy laughter streamed down from the skies. The third jet was now swinging about like washing on a windy line. Before he knew it, he was laughing aloud. Those Galladeeleans and their attempt at serenity – as unnatural to them as an unlit Razalian face at noon. Still, he saluted their effort.

Descending a little way down the knoll, Tharle let his gaze sweep from south to north of the capital. The young had left their street corners. Now, ploughman and blacksmith, apothecary and scribe were quitting their labours. In scores of homes, pots were being stirred, tables given a final rub prior to setting. He rubbed his chin and sighed, his laughter at the Galladeeleans now seeming misplaced, almost wicked. He'd just have to put up with Kidresh's good-natured chiding, for there was nothing he could do to stop his anxiety. What if, tomorrow morning, the whole island was just a

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pool of white? And what about that sound it was supposed to make if you went right up to it – that ghostly murmuring? Tharle had never heard it himself with either outward nor inward ear. He'd never met anyone who had, either, though the belief persisted: part of the fear, no doubt. Anyway, what if the morrow brought not a murmur but a shriek of hideous jubilation, rising from the white like the thickest steam? And would he be there to hear it? Would he have been wolfed down with everyone else?

Tharle blinked. On the thoroughfare nearest the knoll, three or four ovals of light had clustered and were beaming straight at him. Reflexively, he trebled his vision, discovering that they were engineers from the airfield who, having recognised his unmistakable form, were flourishing their hands as if indicating a priceless jewel: the Razalian gesture of good-night. Tharle's mind swept through theirs – ah, they were the ones who'd kitted out the Galladeeleans' jet. He flourished back. His thanks for their labour slipped into their minds and they moved away. As their ovals dwindled, Tharle felt a pang of fatherly keenness for their safety, for Mopatakeh's, for the planet's. Chiding himself for indulging thoughts of white islands and deafening shrieks, he applied himself to practicalities.

First among these was his decision not to hold what translates roughly as *a Candling of Eyes*, a counsel at the Guiding with all Tharles present. Not a few of his peers had clamoured for one during the day's discussion, but Tharle had declared – and declared again to himself now – that a *Candling* was the shortest way to panic. *Candlings* were infrequent and, anyway, tradition decreed that Razalians were always consulted on the reason for holding one, even before it was officially arranged. If their Tharles said nothing and simply turned up in Mopatakeh, they would be breaking a whole skein of confidences between them and the people. Worse, the people would forsake their usual, careful attitude to their own telepathic powers, which some dwellers on Earth might best understand through the words "Sunday best". The thoughtways of Razalia would

instantly clog up with bafflement, then speculation, then discovery, and all would be chaos. In time, perhaps, a *Candling* might be all too necessary. For now, it was best to see what could be done by remote conference alone. Of course, it wasn't uncommon for Tharles to meet in twos and threes, be their dispensations adjacent or distant. So there'd be nothing untoward about Kidresh arriving with – again Tharle wondered who his companion was and, with no raucous Galladeelean to distract him now, flickered the question to Kidresh.

"Ten minutes," came the reply. "It was seven a second ago. Sorry, Mopatakeh, still a few twitches of time to beat. Taking up all our efforts. Who is my companion? Ah, you'll see when you – nine minutes – when you see." And Tharle heard a kind of crump, as of a huge book being closed with care: the unmistakable sound of Kidresh sealing his mind.

"Well, I hope the twitches let them through soon," thought Tharle, stroking his face, suddenly aware of his isolation. For a brief, un-Tharliian moment, he wondered if, in addition to creeping, the Mopatakeh gap could see. He imagined a spur of white spotting him alone and lunging like the tongue of a colossal lizard. To shake off this child's fancy, he sought the rough path that ringed the knoll, walked round to the west and faced Carolles. If asked, a delegation of Carollessa would be there as soon as they could – brimful of concern for their dearest sibling, laden with instruments to measure this, that and the other, even – he could hear them now – offering to take Razalia back with them – people, houses, schools, workshops and all. The Carollessa were indeed a good, kind, not to say handsome people, albeit that their world of whooshing gadgetry stupefied the average Razalian head. But what could they actually do about the wakening gaps of white? Tharle knew that, since nothing comparable distinguished Carolles, their *Aeonodrome* would contain neither account nor experiment of practical use. Besides, wondrous and unerring though their spacecraft were, it would still take them a while to arrive. Then there was the matter of Razalian time, which, in turbulent mood, had been known

to catch visiting craft just at the point of landing and bounce them back by as much as three weeks. The thought of turbulence made Tharle groan inwardly. The first of the bi-monthly alignment times was approaching, when Razalia's three umber moons strung themselves out south-west to north-east. It would happen with a precision that was somehow in the moons' gift, for, in all senses, they were above the planet's temporal shenanigans. And then, of course, the dazzling shoreline that marked the place of the Nine Oceans would go berserk, heaving and furrowing as though eager to run the whole gamut of shape. If the whiteness were a sentient being, as Tharle of Venacarr had curtly suggested, might it use that time of convulsion to do its own heaving across meadow and ridge? He groaned again – audibly, loudly now. And the Baraskian Festival! It was due to start between the next two alignments! Miserably, Tharle pictured the sealess tides, surging and scrambling on the Nine Oceans shore; and, beyond them, the modest, mud-like plain separating shore from ocean. On the very night that the Festival was due to commence – give or take hours lost or gained – the cracks of the plains would hold their own celebration of frenzy, knotting and whipping for all they were worth. And there was nothing to stop Razalia's famed sliceblossom from joining in: it was as apt to feed by night as by day. Tharle imagined it curving out of the cracks, taking deep draughts of Razalia's air, puffing its leaves like inflatable fans, then jewelling the mud and the amethyst skies with its petals of breathtaking red. The whole carnival fascinated some Baraskians – almost as much as the white did. Often, if they arrived in time, they'd all troop down to the Nine Oceans shore, each with a sort of surfboard under a treelike arm. Riding the lone tides, they would watch the whole spectacle. Before them, on the plainward side of the tides, flanks of figures would kneel: Razalians who had slept during the day for a whole week, so that their glowing faces would light up the night scene for their guests. Tharle's groaning became a long, weary sigh. What if the white pounced on that night of interplanetary joy, spilling death over

surfer and tide, washing along the flanks of light like a demon river? It would be the fate of the Baraskian anthem-singers again, magnified a thousandfold. The Baraskian temper was reflexively well-disposed to all – save their sometime adversaries the Sehundans, where some effort was required. But it would hardly tolerate the – well, the consumption of a festival's-worth of subjects. Razalia would become the new Sehunda. Barask would wage a ferocious war against – what? If the gaps pounced everywhere, what would be left to attack but a ball of white, far more lethal than the biggest, ugliest Baraskian war-machine? Or perhaps just a wisp of white smoke hanging frozen in space, sole reminder of the cuckoo of the arc? He'd simply have to make contact with Barask, soon, and – and what? Arouse the very suspicions he sought to avoid – on two planets? Again he thought of the Razalian people telepathising like mad – and, this time, of word spreading like a plague across the whole arc. Tharle beat his brow with a broad hand. He was no nearer a practical solution than he had been when –

“Five minutes,” cut in Tharle of Kidresh. “We can see the western bridge.” Kidresh's mind crumpled closed again.

Tharle looked dully about – at the path, the capital, the airfield. For a moment he thought to meet Kidresh and his companion on the thoroughfare from which the engineers had greeted him. But the soothing flow of the Billomingow filled his ears; for a self-indulgent moment, he sprouted a third ear at the back of his head to absorb it fully. Far better to talk, he decided, overlooking the river, that symbol of reliability, of comforting ceaselessness. As he ascended the knoll again, he willed himself not to wonder if anything was reliable or ceaseless any more. But he couldn't stop Tharle of Venacarr's words slipping in again. Was the white itself a thinking being? Had it blocked all Tharlian thought-waves on some unknown level? Was that why not a single one of them had known what was coming?

“The sun!” Tharle of Kidresh's words flew in with such force that, about to gain the top of the knoll, Tharle nearly lost his balance. Vision

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quadrupling, he looked back towards the western bridge. Two figures were just leaving it, about to turn onto the thoroughfare that would lead towards the knoll. As Tharle had been that morning, they were double their height – understandably, since they’d had half a planet to travel and, drawing on their special powers (and abjuring the vagaries of a chara-jet), had done so on foot. Tharle recognised the features of Kidresh, kindly if a little severe. He smiled – in anticipation of their meeting, but also because Kidresh could never tower convincingly. Even now, he was appreciably smaller than his companion. This, however, was no disadvantage. If anything, Kidresh’s stride was the more focused and assured. It was the companion who kept falling behind, having to double his steps to catch up. This, Tharle saw, was partly because of a shoulder bag, capacious and unwieldy, which kept swinging about as if with a life of its own, at one point nearly toppling him over; and partly because of who he was – Tharle of Dreest. Boyish of face and temperament, unable to shed the puppy-fat of his youth, he had been Tharle for little over two months. Hesitant and bashful, he had distinguished himself in his one *Candling* so far by alternating between his own kind of silence, a sort of breathy blubbing, and a torrent of words which, at one point, had been so forceful that, clutching his Guiding Seat for support, Tharle had seen octuple. Tharle of Dreest seemed to breathe his own air, a compound of bewilderment and anxiety which thickened when he reflected, as he often did, that his election must be a mistake. His predecessor had led Dreest, by no means a small settlement, with due humility but also clear-eyed wisdom, making him admired throughout the whole planet. Like all Tharles, he’d been at liberty to eat the otherwise poisonous sliceblossom. And, as Razalians liked to believe, this power expanded the already formidable frontiers of their leaders’ minds. Yet Dreest’s predecessor had never touched a morsel, apparently. Thus, it was said by all – and with particular veneration by the citizens of Dreest – that his mind had happily expanded itself, and his wisdom was its own, natural, bonny child. By contrast, his

successor harvested sliceblossom whenever he could, keeping a specially treated jar of it in a secret cupboard at his residence and reaching for it as some dwellers on Earth might reach for what, it seems, they are pleased to call a snifter.

The other Tharles knew that the years would bring no change in his style, that he would never grow into the job. During wakeful nights, when the glow came and went in confusion on his face, he recognised as much. “Sham-bling, stout, un-gain-ly boy!” was Tharle of Venacarr’s sing-song estimation. Yet Tharlians regard for him echoed the system’s regard for Razalia. Beneath his unpromising mien and behaviour lay something they could never hope to possess. Only he couldn’t see it. “I know we are simply chosen, Mopatakeh, no bones about it. But when your last hour comes tiptoeing in, press for Dreest to fill your boots. The planet’s soul is within him.” That was Venacarr, too.

Mopatakeh considered these words as the two figures came striding towards the knoll – or rather, as Kidresh came striding and Dreest hopped one way and the other like a man crossing a ravine on two widely-spaced planks: yet another effect of his impossible bag.

“The sun,” repeated Kidresh, aloud this time. “I think, Mopatakeh, we were wiser than we knew to delay our meeting. It’s not just a question –”

But Tharle silenced him with a raised hand. In the air, his finger traced the traditional greeting of Tharle to Tharle: in rough translation, *the doubled-oval*, a figure-of-eight pattern symbolising two Razalian faces with the glow of life flowing between them. Kidresh stopped, open-mouthed: “Oh, yes, yes,” he said in mild irritation and returned the sign. By now Tharle of Dreest had hauled himself alongside Kidresh. “Dreest,” said Tharle of Mopatakeh quietly, at which the novice Tharle cried, “Master! Trimmer of the Glow!” and prostrated himself at the foot of the knoll, his bag square across his back as though it had dropped from the skies and felled him. This form of address for the planet’s leader had last seen regular adult use a good three aeons ago; now, it was only used by schoolchildren if Tharle of Mopatakeh made an

especially formal visit to their settlement. But Dreest practised it, and a score of other moribund customs besides, in hopes of subduing the idea that he couldn't lead a toddler by the hand, let alone a settlement.

In reply, Tharle narrowed his eyes and held both hands out. Dreest levitated, hanging in the air a moment like an indecisive chara-jet. Then he landed gently on his feet to a welcoming smile from Tharle and, from Kidresh, a sigh which turned into, "The *doubled-oval*, Dreest. How many times did I remind you on the way here?" No answer forthcoming, verbal or mental, Kidresh furrowed his brow: "You managed it at your first *Candling* didn't you?" he said, half to himself; but then he conjured a memory of the occasion, with Dreest's well-covered form dropping to one knee and pitching sideways, a form of greeting known only to Galladeelean funsters with too much Baraskian serpent-river ale inside them. "Hmm," he added, his tone fainter still. "Of course – no *oval* there."

His smile now fatherly, Tharle gave the sign again. This time, Dreest copied him but so zealously that it he looked as though he were hanging on to an uncontrollable sword. At this, Tharle decided that the air was thick enough with formality, and he bade Dreest put down his bag. Rattles and thuds filled the air round the knoll. Tharle's inner eyes were about to rummage in the bag, but Kidresh raised a forestalling hand: "In good time, Mopatakeh." So instead, Tharle gestured that they should ascend and take their ease on the knoll's summit. Shrinking to his usual height, Kidresh started forward. Forgetting both his bag and the need to copy Kidresh, Dreest followed. For a petrifying moment, Tharle saw and felt what life, or rather its end, would be like if he were a teeny Carollessan elder, caught in the careless shadow of a Razalian boot. There was no time for formalities or even a bark of fear. Lunging at Dreest's mind, he shrank him as deftly as a Sehundan genie-bottler. For his part, Dreest didn't notice a thing. At last they settled down, facing the Billomingow: Kidresh compact and purposeful, Tharle momentarily faint-brained

from his efforts, Dreest a picture of bottomless anguish between them.

"Now, two questions fall to my charge," said Kidresh, who could match Venacarr for briskness when he chose. "First, why are we wiser than we know, Mopatakeh, in delaying our meeting? The sun! It's my belief that the sun is behind this dreadful business. But I'd estimate that it's larking about above Carolles right now, so we can at least think and talk in safety."

Tharle said nothing for a moment. Still steadying himself from his vision of accidental death beneath the lolloping, puppyish Dreest, he let his eyes rest upon the river. Shards of light clustered and danced on its surface. Reflections of his face, they joined and broke apart like so many uneasy spirits. He, too, had pondered whether the sun had any part in the present peril. But there was protocol to observe, and he knew Kidresh of old. Even now he could sense Kidresh's chest expanding as he prepared to deliver himself of a full-blown theory on the sun's malice, complete with his familiar lobetickling and hand-rubbing.

"And the second question in your charge?" asked Tharle, smiling inwardly as he heard Kidresh deflate. He knew it already, of course, having turned aside a flap of Kidresh's mind as he was about to lambast the sun. But no Tharle, least of all the leader of the planet, ever openly anticipates the words of another in a meeting, however informal. The malpractice – which translates as *filching gold from the gullet* – is dismissed as offensiveness itself. Even Dreest, for whom protocol was almost as terrible as a ravening patch of white, had that rule by heart.

In reply, Kidresh patted the novice's arm: "Why does good Dreest keep me company? Because, Mopatakeh, a mere handful of time after I informed you of my visit" – here an exploratory finger got busy with the folds of his ear – "he troubled me for my attention. And very interesting trouble it is, too."

Tharle turned to regard Dreest, whose glow bulged and rippled with nerves: "You communicated with Kidresh?" Too late he realised that the question, meant neutrally, would flood the

novice with guilt. Dreest's glow looked fit to explode.

"I should have," he blurted, "I would have, had it been... well, it was, but I thought, well, should have thought, should have known, really..." He looked fearfully at Tharle, who was now attending his own ear, seeking to hush the wind that Dreest's outburst had set whistling.

Kidresh rubbed his hands, as though the business of speaking for Dreest would be physically akin to hauling wood.

"What he means to say," he began, "is that he felt he could not think to you directly. He desired the benefit of a second opinion."

Tharle was intrigued: "Opinion on?"

"His invention – which may, Mopatakeh, be the saving of us all."

"Ah... an invention, Dreest." This time Tharle ensured that his tone was encouraging. For, prior to his elevation, Dreest had been a full-time inventor. In a million different ways, his creations and refinements had improved the life, domestic and commercial, of his settlement. Their fame had spread wide – and how could they not? Who, after all, would impugn the usefulness of a device for luring mallowberries – a Razalian staple for garnish and pie – from inaccessible bushes? Or that polished and thickened the ice on ponds during *The Silver Quiet*, Razalia's winter, for the delight and physical advancement of the skating young? Dreest's inventions, or variations thereon, had popped up all over the planet. In fact, his name had crossed Tharle's mind but a short while ago, when he'd pondered the re-fitment of the chara-jets. Again, Tharle considered his newest colleague in a fatherly way. Poor lad: in his previous life, he knew, Dreest been steady of eye, calm of mind. Thus had his inventions, large and small, succeeded. Now, as leader of his settlement, he was all psychic fingers and thumbs. Would he ever accept that he was chosen fair and square? Would he ever believe that, in Venacarr's words, he had the soul of the planet within him? Tharle felt the answers staring at him like a pair of Baraskians at the foot of his bed, enthralled by the way his face-glow danced at the point of sleep. Like his counterparts all over the planet,

he knew Dreest was probably unchangeable. But that didn't preclude any attempts to guide and embolden him, to... well, give him an occasional holiday from himself, however brief. Of course, such guidance was no more than Tharle's duty. It was just that, in the two months since Dreest had shambled into his new responsibilities, Tharle had been as nonplussed by him as everyone else. But he could hardly spin that out as an excuse. Telepathic tongues would start wagging. He could just imagine Venacarr's clipped tones bearding him as he squirmed in the Guiding Seat: "Have to try taking Dreest in hand somehow. Save him from his turmoil whenever you can. Rest of us will support you to the hilt, Mopatakeh – but-it's-up-to-you." (It should be noted that, were Venacarr a creature of Earth and a member of that sub-sect dubbed "English", he would possibly top his sentences with "Thing is, old man" and tail them with "chum".) But now Tharle was smiling again, and not only at the imaginary counsel of the bluff, well-meaning Venacarr. Here was the perfect chance to still Dreest's many agitations, if only for a while. Here was his new invention, which had obviously lit up Kidresh's seasoned, deliberation-worn eyes. He laid a hand on Dreest's arm, which almost stopped jiggling about.

"Show me what you've brought with you, Dreest," he said gently.

Free of any deliberation for now, Kidresh's eyes simply rolled and one of his lobes got a furious tickle. He could see Dreest mouthing "What I've brought with me," sense his mind slipping its slender leash. Careless of Tharle's kindly pressure on his arm, Dreest began gingerly patting the folds of his cloak. Tharle guessed what was happening and, despite himself, felt a twinge of vexation where his fatherliness had been.

Hearing the change of mood from deep within Tharle's mind, Kidresh muttered, "Here we go again, Mopatakeh."

Tharle, eager to make sure of his suspicions, leaned into Dreest's thoughts like a watcher over a parapet. Sure enough, Dreest had misinterpreted his request. All thoughts of his invention gone, he was fumbling about for a clipping of

shrub from Maker's mountain. Protocol once dictated that any Tharle visiting Mopatakeh should bring the shrub as an offering of respect for Razalia's leader. But the protocol had lapsed even before the use of "Trimmer of the Glow". Yet again, Dreest had enlisted a scrap of arcana in a bid to make his new destiny intelligible to himself. Besides that, he had never actually clipped any shrub from the mountain. His settlement lying at its foot, Kidresh would have known if he had. In fact, both he and Tharle knew that Dreest had brought no offering of any kind. More, they knew that Dreest knew it, that naked anxiety had tucked the truth under a cloak-thick fold of his mind. Vexation did not come naturally to Tharle – nor, fundamentally, to Kidresh, though he could make more colourful use of it when it did. So it was that, with a preparatory flick of a lobe, Kidresh reached into Tharle's mind, extricating his spasm as though it were a ripe mallowberry and he, with a family pie to bake, were using Dreest's famed contraption to hook it free. Then he placed an apparently kindly hand on Dreest's other arm and squeezed. At this, Dreest let out a yelp, shook himself free of both Tharles, dug deep in his cloak, produced a jar of grated sliceblossom and stuck the neck, teat-wise, into his mouth.

"No shrub," he wheezed between gulps. "Oh, I forgot, forgot, forgot. So what have I brought, what did I – ?" Dropping the jar in his lap, he pressed his fingers to his brow like a vaudeville mesmerist. "Bear with me, Trimmer of the Glow," he pleaded, rocking to right and left.

The motion becoming more dramatic, Tharle leaned out of his way, and was about to drop the simple nudge, "Your new invention, Dreest," into his mind when Dreest rocked low in the other direction, found no resistance from Kidresh, cried, "Oh, Trimmer! What have I done with him?" and froze bolt upright. Very gingerly, he pawed the ground to his left. It was deserted. In the midst of his panic about being shrubless – and giftless altogether – Dreest thought that he'd pulled a wrong lever in his mind and spirited Kidresh away to – where? The Mopatakeh gap? The waves of the Billomingow? The forsaken midnight?

Not daring to look round, Dreest cried, "My Master Trimmer, un-Tharle me this moment! I have *enchaffed* Kidresh (another Razalian archaism, meaning to scatter something or reduce it to nothing; Tharle remembered that, when he was a child, the planet's oldest farmers and brewers used it, but only *when the lone tides wove into a fountain*, which roughly translates as "once in a blue moon").

Now Dreest was almost sobbing: "And he was so kind, my Master Trimmer. He it was who –" He stopped, slack-mouthed, as though a tale from long ago were drifting back to him. "He it was who had such faith... in what I" – his eyes widened – "have brought to you... my –" At that moment, the hand that had squeezed his arm clamped itself on his shoulder. All a-tremble, Dreest turned to his left. There stood Kidresh.

Emphatically unenchaffed, so to speak, he had decided that the easiest thing all round would be to leave Tharle to the novice's mad pantomime, descend the knoll and drag up the invention-bag himself. Now he laid it across Dreest's lap. Tugging its mouth open, the novice gazed on the response to Tharle's command from, it seemed, aeons ago. "My invention," he mouthed.

A briskly purposeful hand-rub challenged the sound of the river. "Tomorrow, Mopatakeh," said Kidresh, "we hasten to your Guiding, install ourselves in your Notionary and spend a demanding but, I hope against hope, not fruitless hour in ridding our young friend's mind of every pick and speck of antique *fol-de-rol*." He sighed to himself. "*Maker's shrub... Enchaffed... Oceans lave us!*" ("God help us" comes nearest to his last phrase. Given the planet's provisional state – and now, the threat from the gaps of white – it would be foolishness itself for a Razalian to invoke any kind of god in a pleading oath. Ever pragmatic, the Razalians direct what passes for their prayers to something they can see and depend on in their planet's singular nature.) The next moment, however, Kidresh surprised himself with a yelp and stepped back, nearly pitching down the knoll. For Dreest had gently cast the bag aside, pocketed the jar of sliceblossom, stood up and taken a pace or two towards him. Tharle plumbed the novice's mind

on Kidresh's behalf. There was no wrongful assumption that Kidresh had played some trick on him, no intent to offer violence – nor did Tharle think there would be. Instead, there was the imminent threat of a deliriously grateful bear-hug, one that would do for Kidresh as surely as, a little while before, the double-sized Dreest would have done for Tharle himself. Summoning twice the power he'd used to shrink the novice, and nearly as much as when, alone and troubled, he'd scrutinised Mopatakeh's creeping gap, he brought Dreest to a dead halt. Hastily collecting himself, Kidresh laid hand again on the novice's arm. This time he didn't squeeze, but drew the novice into a biddable consciousness.

“Set it up, Dreest,” he whispered. “Here on the knoll.” Then he pressed his hands together, at which Tharle intervened deep in his thinking: “Rest your palms and earlobes, Kidresh, until good Dreest is done.”

A great and merciful change came over Dreest as, with Tharle and Kidresh standing either side and a little away from him, he emptied the bag and set to. In this moment, he was no longer a baffled leader but an inventor only, his mind on nothing but why he and Kidresh were on Mopatakeh and what he had devised. With relief, Tharle realised that this had nothing to do with any telepathic prod from Kidresh or himself. Dreest's clear-sighted focus was all his own work. Briefly, Tharle pondered his duty of care to the novice. Might it not be a good idea to ensure that he always had some invention bubbling in his head? That way, he could always have at least one sizeable foot planted back in his old life. Wouldn't that keep him... well, on the steadyish side of confusion? Sealing his mind against any remote rummaging, he thought again about Razalia's chara-jets. Facts had to be faced: it was no good just reinforcing them here, expanding them there. Refitment on the hoof wasn't enough – ordinary Razalian know-how had its limits. Look at the way that extra-fat Galladeeleean charter had flapped about just a short time before. Dreest, though – he could see to them, all right: keep the same quaint design, but re-build them from the nose backwards with

completely new material, stuff that he could work his magic on so that they would fly without their old, familiar lurch and swing, withstand Galladeeleean high jinks and the concertina solo that was Razalian time. As for what that stuff might be – well, Razalia had nothing suitable, and everyone knew that Carolles, the jets' planet of origin, was now clean out of the material from which they'd been made. Of course, the Carollessa had offered to build new ones for their sister planet, to the same curious specifications. Most folk knew that, too – Dreest among them, no doubt. He'd probably give Tharle some rambling, bashfully-worded reason why Razalia should still take up the Carollessan offer, asserting – as far as he could assert anything – that he was unequal to such a task. But Tharle could command – no, firmly suggest that he forget Carolles and go scouring other planets in the arc. Bound to be something somewhere. Lachbourigg was rumoured to have rich deposits of anything you cared to name. Getting at them might be a problem, of course. Tharle thought of the planet's strange forests, how they were apt to rove about at each Lachbourrigan sunset. But its inhabitants were notable wizards – surely they'd conjure up a way. They'd be happy to, Tharle hazarded, since almost no-one visited them. Not surprising, really: there were only a dozen of them, and they spent their time either quelling restless trees or lost in wild incantations. But Venacarr had spent some time there (accidentally, after a trip to Galladeelee, when one of the goofy planet's catapults had lost its *boing* halfway to Razalia) and had found them uncommonly hospitable. They would make a proper fuss of Dreest. Then there were the arc's infamously martial races. Tharle could imagine the Sehundans and Baraskians falling over themselves to mine, melt and press some indestructible substance – leagues and leagues of it – and ship it out to their little sibling without hearing of any recompense. Yes... Dreest could go roving through the arc – at and for a specified time. As for his settlement, Kidresh could keep an eye it. Capable to a happy fault, able to brook no nonsense while somehow endearing himself to Tharle and commoner alike, Kidresh could

run at least three settlements on his own – Mopatakeh included, thought Tharle, without a hint of false humility. And who was it that Dreest had turned to about his invention? A bond was obviously there, for all Kidresh's displays of annoyance – in which, Tharle had anyway observed, there was irrepressible affection.

Tharle was dimly aware of some rattling and clanking, a voice saying, "Now for the deep angle... hope this knoll's sturdy enough." But his mind, at that moment, was tight around Dreest's future like wadding round an heirloom. Yes – say two Razalian years for the chara-jet project, from Dreest's voyage to the last tap of... well, whatever he last tapped with. Razalia could put up with its present fleet for that much longer. Anyway, two Razalian years sometimes had a way of folding into a tiny pile of months like a half-baked mallowberry fancy. Long or short, it would surely be time enough for the resourceful Dreest. Of course, this wasn't a question of barring him from his Tharlian duties. The good people of Dreest would be up in arms if they suspected that. Dropping the commoner's usual coyness about telepathy, they'd fire off chunks of their mind at Tharle like so much Sehundan *quashbuckshot* (bullets which, in Earth terms, would compare in shape and effect to an unripe Cox's Pippin). Tharle could just see himself, so vividly that it almost hurt, gripping the arms of his Guiding Seat as their indignation battered his brain. Then, of course, there'd be the delegation, the whole of the settlement clumping along to his Guiding, with dire consequences for its joists and foundations. No: the whole point, impossible though it may seem, would be to settle Dreest into his new calling with a reaffirmed sense of his old one. Couldn't his confidence in the latter drip onto – or preferably flood – his dread of the former? The odds might be... yes, longer than the whole planetary arc. But Dreest couldn't simply be left to welter in his anxiety. Who knows, it just might –

"Mopatakeh, where have you got to? Flame up! Flame up!"

Bundling his thoughts away, Tharle saw Kidresh just as his mouth was settling from his command. He saw Dreest's invention, which

looked just like – but then an avalanche started in his head, a thousand knife-edged pebbles dashed themselves about from his crown to his neck. Oceans lave us! He'd clean forgotten his own glow, his watching light. Razalian day was nearly at its end now. All over the planet, people's faces were darkening in readiness for sleep. But he and the others had to stave sleep off, which meant *flaming up*, a special Tharlian power which allowed the boost of watching light. This had to happen in good time – otherwise it was like waiting with a new candle until the old one had guttered, and the attendant torrent of mental pebbles was enough to split wide the most sagacious head. Usually, whenever the need arose to shine into the Razalian night, Tharles flamed up without thinking. Tharle of Mopatakeh had done so himself, a thousand times, often when he was distracted by far weightier matters than Dreest and the chara-jets. But, he realised as the knife-pebbles rained down, the Dreest business hadn't been the real distraction. He'd taken his eye off the lower caverns of his mind. And now, wafting up from these, seeming to cloud the pebbles in a noxious mist, there returned the image that had somehow hoodwinked his automatic flaming-point: Razalia's gaps, their white now as baleful as the form of malign spirits, their edges terrifyingly on the move. Screwing his eyes shut, he flamed up at double-speed, experiencing the usual sensation (equivalent, in Earth terms, to flipping backwards over a high-jump bar, then bouncing up and flipping backwards again, at least half-a-dozen times). The pebbles disappeared like marbles rattling down a chute. The plans for Dreest rolled quietly onto a secure shelf in Tharle's mind, to be lifted out again at a proper time. Opening his eyes, he saw that Dreest was a little to his left, having stepped back to the edge of the knoll, his assemblage complete. On the novice's far side, Kidresh was standing as before. Both had flamed up when necessary. Now, three Tharlian faces converged on what looked like a colander stuck on the burnished pole of a hatrack. Jutting out from the middle of the pole was a pair of something between straps and stirrups.

Kidresh flicked his eyes in Tharle's direction: "None of your Carollessan flash here, Mopatakeh," he thought to him. This was no derision at the expense of their bright and shiny neighbour. Tharle saw that, yet again, Kidresh's admiration for their unlikely colleague had fought through all the usual perils, the grumps and agitations, emerging as a plaudit which, for him, was almost Galladeean in its playfulness. Then Kidresh leaned back, flipping up his hands in a sorry-to-interrupt manner. For Dreest was stepping gravely forward, as if to accept a great prize. Gripping the strap-stirrups with either hand, he pressed his bulk against the pole and stuck his head in the colander. After a moment, the knoll vibrated to a string of determined inbreaths. Anyone passing the landward side of the knoll might have concluded that some creature – perhaps the beast at the core of Razalia, famed as the maker's nemesis in one of the planet's dusty old theories – was breaking the surface of the Billomingow after a leisurely thrashabout. Anyone watching from Earth might have concluded that Dreest was lamenting a fifth pint of beer, that the colander was a bowl paying dearly for a night's excess. Dreest's own behaviour would have encouraged the notion. Raising his head for a second, he seemed to deflate round a dying groan. Then he sank forward again.

Tharle and Kidresh's watching lights played around the colander's curves and the shoulders of their novice-colleague. For a moment or two, Tharle toyed with a matter of protocol, then decided that he couldn't wait for Dreest to finish his singular performance and explain all. His thoughts tiptoed up to the crest of Dreest's mind, as though he were physically closing in on the man himself. But all at once two interdiction seemed to fly up in his face like the crossed sabres of a Paladin guard: "Wait, good Mopatakeh," said one. "Can you not trudge one final mile of bafflement?" the other demanded. Respectful but insistent, the silent voice belonged to Kidresh. Tharle swung his glow up at him, at which Kidresh shook his head: "Dreest won't let us in till he's ready," he added in Tharle's mind. Suddenly, Kidresh's glow

wavered a little, and in that brief weakness Tharle saw the whole tale of his colleague's wearying day. There was his surprise role as the novice's confidant – what a storm he must have withstood there. Then there was the journey across half the planet, with Kidresh doubtless having to wait again and again while his ungainly companion slung down the bag and hitched it to his other shoulder, or stopped dead and checked his cloak for the sliceblossom jar. Tharle could just see the pair of them miles from the western bridge – Kidresh rolling his eyes like peas in a shaken cup while Dreest intoned his unearthed relics of popular speech and Tharlian civility; or reminding the novice about how to execute the *doubled-oval*, the modest but proper greeting for the present times, and then rolling his eyes anew as his advice whistled through Dreest's ears like the swooper-bird of the Venacarr region, returned from some far corner of the planet to familiar eaves again. For all that, Kidresh clearly didn't begrudge an elastic minute of his journey.

Realising this, Tharle thought profuse apologies to Kidresh for his uncustomary impatience.

"I understand, Mopatakeh," Kidresh thought back. "And he is almost done, I think. You and I are but half-a-dozen paces from the moment." Tharle's apology seemed to steady Kidresh's glow. For a second his eyes twinkled, as though Tharle were another and more excitable Dreest, fit to bust from all this waiting, about to shoulder the novice aside and push his own head deep into strangeness.

Dreest raised his head again. Something else seemed to be weaving through his patterns of breath. Kidresh inclined his head as though this change were precisely what he'd been expecting. But Tharle watched the novice anxiously. What had Dreest caught in the net of his breathing? Was it the murmurs that reputedly played on the surface of the creeping gaps? The cries of lost souls within them? Was it the crackle of some doomed traveller's last words, uttered a hundred aeons ago out in the forsaken midnight and only now coming to rest in their hearing? Was it Razalia's Maker itself, filling Dreest's body with a plan for their salvation or a

declaration of their end? Now the sound divided, seeming to become a duet between a child and a dying man, but still unintelligible. Lifting his hands, Dreest traced the colander's rim, then stepped back and fell silent. But the duet continued from the mouth of the colander. Gradually, Tharle and Kidresh began to make some sense of it, although the eerie sound that had first coloured Dreest's breathing still broke in.

"I got it to translate itself," whispered Dreest, "except for" – he made an apologetic face – "well, some things wouldn't give up their meaning. And –" apology turned to agony in his eyes – "I couldn't steady the voices out. They both go high and low."

So it was that Tharle and Kidresh heard a Razalian minute of talk between, it seemed, two voices that could not decide between the morning and the dusk of their years:

"Are you?" asked the reedy pipe of one voice, before sinking into hoarse old age with, "because it won't take a moment."

"No, I said not." The second voice took over the hoarseness, then soared into childhood, then crashed again. "When do I ever go out on a –" Here, and at certain points following, the eerie sound broke in like a neatly folding tide. "Anyway, I'll have to wait in for... won't I? Did she tell you what time she'd be back from...?"

"I thought," said the first voice, rising as uncertainly as a chara-jet, "she was staying over at... That's what she told me."

"Well, she never... a word about that. Still" – the second voice, fluttering between youth and age, suddenly managed a tone which even struck the three leaders as false – "don't you go worrying about it. And she deserves... with friends after all her work. I can... her at... and get some approximate time."

"Someone else pestered by approximate time!" cried Kidresh. "That's heartening."

Tharle silenced him. The first voice was swinging from angelic to catarrhal, insisting that whatever it had said before wouldn't take a moment.

"Well," tooted the second voice, "all right, go on – then it's done for when... get here

tomorrow." And now it growled: "especially since... nearly broke his... off last time they came."

"So he's definitely coming as well?"

"Oh, honestly... I did say." There was that troubling false tone again. "He was supposed to be... up to... but now they want him... And... said he was well and truly... about it. Well, he can make a killing when they have to pay him for..."

A shared frown shone down the three watching lights. Shared questions baffled their owners. How were killings made? Since when was death an act of creation? What manner of creature possessed such dark skill?

"I'll tuck the... right against the... They won't have any bother... either side then." Despite its haphazard twitch from bass to soprano, the first voice clearly sounded agitated.

"Actually – no, look, I'll move it," said the second voice. "You get going. Don't want... and... wondering where you are."

"I'll see to it."

"... you'll be late!"

"Won't take a second... it's a... of a clamber up into the... you know that. And the key needs a good... in the... All right, I was thinking of your –"

The eerie tide folded in on the last word, but Tharle was sure he'd grabbed it.

"Back," he said.

"What, us?" His eye still on the colander, Kidresh began an awkward, reverse shuffle to the edge of the knoll. "Is there danger, Mopatakeh? What, is your gap splashing round this very –?"

"Back!" Tharle accompanied the repetition with a single thump to his own spine. "That's what it said. The agitated one." Dreest involuntarily shushed them, then plunged into more agony at his presumption, then was ignored as the second voice said,

"Told you, it's fine... not one twinge... a half-hour's soak and stroke with the... then five minutes... on my... while I played the... of the... skybells... and a quick, light... to finish. Had my doubts, but it worked a treat. Better than those bathsalt pyramids I got from... but they're best



*as preparation anyway, when you need to give your... a proper... so there was no harm using them last night."*

Above river and knoll, three watching lights clashed in delirious confusion.

Then Dreest raised a hand. The voices were fading. "Leave me your key, then," said the second voice, hollowly affectionate as before. The first voice said that it would be back by – then the tide folded in for good.

Kidresh started to think something to the other two, then changed his mind. Suddenly, silent chat seemed a bit cloak-and-dagger. This was a matter for clear words on the night air. In that very moment, the other two decided the same.

"Actually, Dreest," he said, "I couldn't help thinking – all those trills and grizzles back and forth – are you sure there weren't more than two?"

The novice shook his head: "I just couldn't undistort them enough – they've come a long way."

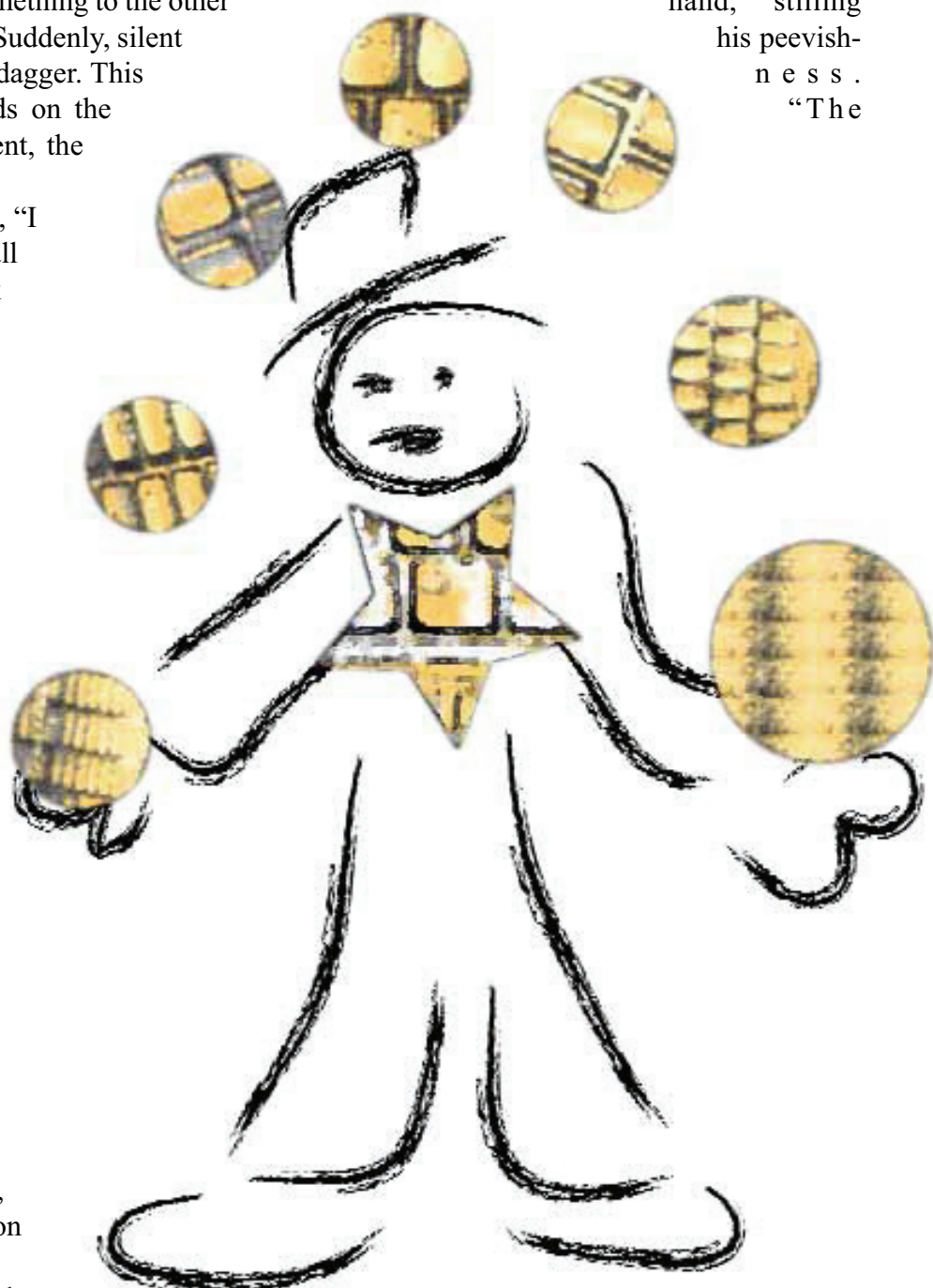
"Very long," said Kidresh. "Making killings, indeed. You wouldn't even hear that from a Sehundan." He nearly gave a lobe a concerted twang but collected himself in time. A brief silence fell. Then, slowly and reverently, Kidresh and Dreest swung their watching lights towards Tharle, who, distracted, was playing his own light across the Billomingow, watching it break up gently on the sleepy ripples.

"So," said Tharle, "we have learnt of beings visiting other

beings, an object that must be moved, an irksome key and a bathing ritual unlike any on which Razalian time has been wasted. Who have you fished from your bowl of voices, Dreest?"

Dreest gave the colander a last peek, as though another rogue word or two might come wisping up. Then, stepping back again, he said, "The... well, affectionate one –"

"Pah! If that's affection," broke in Kidresh, at which Tharle raised a hand, stilling his peevishness. "The



troubling one," Dreest corrected himself. "That's the consort, I'd say."

"The consort of?" his companions demanded. Tharle's light threatened to set the novice's face aflame. The brightness seemed to wear Dreest's features away, until there was nothing but a pair of anxious eyes flickering between Tharle and Kidresh. "Of?" they repeated, voices raised.

"Of the one responsible," said Dreest.

"Responsible for?" Dreest couldn't bear their chorusing. While he had assembled his invention, bent to the colander and set the voices in motion, he had seemed to assume – give or take the odd quake and apology – exactly that confidence which Tharle sought to draw out through the chara-jet project. But now – if ever eyes could squirm, Dreest's did.

"For Razalia," Dreest managed, his eyes now swooning away as though he were twisting his body in anticipation of a blow. "He of the agitated voice – the one who was worrying about a –" He trailed off and Tharle's light lost its fierceness – just in time to reveal the novice mimicking his master's thump to the spine.

Dreest's words reduced Tharle and Kidresh to a pair of fish, mouths opening and closing on words that would not come. At last, Kidresh managed "Our Maker," in the voice of a penitent who craves blessing at his moment of death. Tharle, his mind on the Mopotakeh gap, on all the gaps across Razalia, made a sort of singing noise which seemed to slide from hope to anger and then to despair, before dropping into his boots. After that, neither made a sound. Astonishment emptied all thought from their minds like mallowberries from a baking-gourd. Even when the power to think came back, it dragged them where it pleased. Tharle tried to hear again those edgy, bitten-off phrases. It made no sense that they'd been uttered by Razalia's Maker. No, that wasn't right: look at the state of the planet, all that white where proper creation should be. In fact, it made perfect sense that their Maker's words should be unfinished – never mind Dreest saying he couldn't translate the lot. But if someone, something, were so inept, how did they become a Maker in the first place? There must have been

something there... enough for some... well, say some master-teacher to draw out, to nurture. Or did Makers just happen? Did creation itself say *yes*, as Razalians did when new Tharles were chosen, and there it was? If so, perhaps Razalia's Maker was another Dreest, formidably capable but plagued by cruel doubts. Or had something external intervened? Had Razalia's Maker been distracted by something that challenged its Makerhood? All the ancient theories about the planet ended with its creator's demise. But what if the Maker had been called away to deal with some threat to its project... some danger from... Tharle's inward sigh was weary indeed: "Oceans lave us," he thought, "danger from what?" Speculation defeated him. He felt that he was prodding about with a newborn's helpless hand. He gave up.

Meanwhile, Kidresh had fastened on the voice of the consort. Consorts, as far as he knew, were wives or husbands with gilded bells on. In this case, however, the phrase *licensed leech* had stuck fast in his mind and would not be shaken out. Kidresh recalled the consort's tone of voice. No, untrue: it needed no recollection but broke hard over his thoughts, dousing them like a noxious downpour. Glittery and hollow, it was a wheedler's voice – and as easily a moaner's. No wonder Razalia's Maker was all agitation. Presumably she, or it, had been there as the planet bloomed in forsaken midnight. Kidresh imagined her, or it, dogging him, or it – but there he stopped and breathed deep. It was no good riddling this fancy with qualifications. Slippery already, it would vanish altogether, abandoning his mind to scraps of words and images that made no sense at all. So: he imagined *her* dogging *him* as he fashioned a hill and went up it, carved a valley and scrambled down. He heard her voice in full moan: "Call this a planet? Look at all that you've missed. Where's the green for this bit? You'll be doing something with all the white, I presume? No? Planning to cart it off? Well, I tell you this, boy, you needn't expect me to roll up my sleeves –" Kidresh clapped his hands to his head. This was worse than thrashing about in senselessness. Never mind imagination: it was as though she were

right there – as though he were the Maker and she was lambasting his every effort, made or to come, deriding him before he so much as drew the first shoot from the first cake of soil. And since when had that word *boy* sounded so vicious and ugly? No-one on Razalia would use it thus. His head felt like Tharle's when he'd neglected his *flaming up*. Pebble-storms lashed and pounded it, till he was convinced that his skull was done for. At the last second, something freed him from that terrible inquisition, and he reverted, like Tharle, to utter blankness.

Dreest stared at the two statues his revelations had created. He'd planned – no, hoped – well, prayed, really – that his words would emerge, and be received, in perfect calm. Instead, they'd brought up the rear in a skirmish of questions. Just his luck: just his destiny. He felt his old, capacious glumness taking hold. But then, reflexively doubling his height, he pulled clear of it, even stamping his feet as if to close it off. This was no time for shambling and whimpering, for calling on the skies to *enchaff* him for good and all. His elders were dead before him. He had to bring them back to life. Resuming his normal height, he played his glow from one face to the other: "I found him yesterday," he began. "Our Maker." So pleased was he with this show of assurance that he didn't notice uncertainty looming behind his relief: "Well, their yesterday," he babbled now, "about two days ago for us, though sometimes it was two-and-a-half... no, two-and-a-bit... no, it was less than... more like" – he paused to count on his fingers, seemed to make a hash of it, then started again with his earlobes.

Still, his performance had the desired effect. At least, it gave Tharle and Kidresh time to come to. Blinking, working his shoulders as though he'd been sleeping upright, Tharle told himself that rolling his mind into a ball was hardly suitable behaviour for a leader faced with staggering news. Despite Tharle's earlier request, Kidresh went through a full work-out of handrubs and lobe-twangs, the end of which was a silent but impassioned declaration that he hadn't found the *oomph* to trek across Razalia only to swoon away like a Galladeelean over an empty keg. But

this shared mortification did elasticate their minds. They were able to reach behind them, so to speak, and catch Dreest's half-confident, half-shambolic words just as they finished quivering the air.

"Our apologies, Dreest," said Tharle. "Mine especially. We should have waited on your words, not bearded you like Sehundan helots. Your news astounds, but that hardly excuses our –"

"No excuse at all," Kidresh chipped in, giving his hands a single, dramatic rub as though such un-Tharlian behaviour were dirt to be wiped clean away. "And look how we paid for it" – he pretended to goggle like a circus clown.

But still Dreest hopped and twitched. Watching him, Tharle regretted turning his light so ferociously on the novice's face. That, really, had precipitated the whole episode, along with the way he and Kidresh had pelted him with questions like a pair of bullies. He hadn't intended to stoke his light – hadn't known it was happening, in fact, until Dreest was nothing but a pair of wide eyes. He wasn't, he realised grimly, having much luck with his glow that evening. And for someone of his position, falling back on luck was hardly the way to maintain –

"Compose yourself, good Dreest." Kidresh was all kindness. "We assure you that henceforth we are all sober attention. Now, the swooping and scouring – tell Mopatakeh that."

"Yes, Trimmer of – Mast – Mopata –" Giving up his mish-mash address with a gesture that could have been half a *doubled-oval*, Dreest cleared his throat and fought for the confidence which, in his summoning of the voices, had come so naturally to him. "I swooped and scoured these many days past, called up spiral and planet-shower. The voices of all creation poured themselves into my head."

"And then you heard his voice." Kidresh shook his head in amazement. "And now, so have we."

Tharle turned to him: "So you didn't know until now, Kidresh? What Dreest had actually found?"

"Wasn't I parroting those fool questions along

with you? No, as I said when we arrived, Mopatakeh, I could tell that his invention might be the saving of us all. And I knew of the swooping and scouring.” Kidresh sighed in mock weariness. “Yes, I knew mightily about that.” Gentle laughter rolled along the beam of Tharle’s light; he could imagine – no, why simply do that? He folded back Kidresh’s memories of his journey and, sure enough, heard Dreest’s endless incantation at his ear: “Swooped, scoured, they emptied themselves... swooped, scoured...”

“But,” said Kidresh, “when I asked him what the end of all this” – he waved a hand, supplying Dreest’s incantatory words – “actually was, he wouldn’t say. Which was only right,” he hurried on, in case Dreest should hear a charge of rudeness in his words and drown him in apologies. “He wanted my opinion on the general worth of the thing, and I was happy to give it. As for what we’ve just heard... oh, he hinted alright – after a fashion – but then he sealed off again. Still, his knowing coughs were our companions.” Kidresh’s hand rose to his ear – not for a good flick this time, but because, through mere recollection, Dreest’s explosive hints were trouncing his head anew. “But as for his triumph, he could not tell me before he told you.” Having delivered himself of all this, and once Dreest’s coughing had sunk again into the pit of memory, Kidresh couldn’t help setting up a slow hand-rub, topped off with a graceful tickle of a lobe. Pride in the novice shone through his unlikely pantomime. Like a magician with power over water, Dreest had carried his discovery in cupped hands until he stood before Tharle. Despite himself, he had honoured the most signal point of protocol. “I didn’t even know, Mopatakeh, if he’d set out to find our Maker.”

“Did you know yourself, Dreest?” asked Tharle. In reply, the novice begged their pardon and sank to the ground. Inventing, journeying, babbling, demonstrating – all now exacted their toll. Again the jar of sliceblossom appeared from his cloak; again the draught was deep and, it seemed, restorative. Tharle motioned to Kidresh that they should copy the novice, and they sank in unison either side of him. For his part, Tharle

was happy to take Dreest’s lead. Only now was he taking in the full significance of what they’d heard. With the Billomingow lapping gently below them, with Dreest’s invention rising before them like a baptismal font, he tried his question again.

“I knew I’d find something,” said Dreest, sounding only slightly less exhausted than he looked. “Of course, I had to look beyond our arc first. Past all that yukking on Galladeelee, the Baraskian growls, the whooshing on Lachbourigg.”

“You don’t think of Lachbouriggians as whooshers, do you?” Kidresh was reflective and amused at the same time. “Venacarr never mentioned whooshing when he told me about them. But then he was down among them and their jumpy forests. A different matter, I suppose, getting an earful of their spells from” – he gestured at Dreest’s invention – “the miraculous basin.” He stopped, his face burning in the heat of two incredulous beams. “Tree-proof, that house they live in,” he finished lamely. “Venacarr told me. Enchanted grouting.”

“Sober attention, Kidresh,” said Tharle. “You promised.” He urged the novice gently on, relieved to see that Kidresh’s singular discourse hadn’t jangled his nerves. Probably he was too fatigued to be anxious about anything. Tharle could have tested his theory with a quick gawp into that wondrous mind, but chose not to.

“Once I was hunting beyond our system, though – how to describe it? The things that came up over that rim. When you’re hearing your way over our sixteen planets, yes, it’s a gabble, shrieks and barks and whispers. But there’s... there’s a level floor to it, it’s your system, you know you won’t smack into a mountain of sudden noise or fall down a hole of silence. You move like a stately land-ship, translating as you go. But after that – you’re in quicksand. Sometimes it hardens. You could be hearing along, I don’t know, something like the cracked plains of our outwater. Then, without warning, you’re thrown as high as a Baraskian surfing our sealess tides.”

The comparison unsettled Tharle, who thought again of the Baraskians’ imminent

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Festival on Razalia. Would there be tides for them to surf? Would there be any cracks twisting and flexing, mimicking all the known shapes of the galaxy? Would any of Dreest's beloved sliceblossom rise up, flapping and puffing? Or would there just be a white sea, petrified, unwitnessed?

"Patience, Mopatakeh," thought Kidresh at him, sensing some change in his mood. "Hear the boy out." Not bothering to explain his unease, Tharle attended again to the quiet words.

"Or the quicksand opens like a well," Dreest was saying, "and you're tumbling down hundreds of leagues. And the noises – on the crest of those sand-tides, in the caverns deep down. Some are just untranslatable, though not unpleasant – like birdsong, or a mother's wordless lullaby. But some – I heard along a whole system, easily forty planets, that was just one long scream; and another one, three planets wide, which was the same noise repeated over and over, a kind of sob that... well, it didn't translate, exactly, but it sounded like *oh, no... oh, no*, as if all the bad luck in creation had landed on one sorry soul."

Hands planted behind him, Tharle was leaning back. "All these sounds," he said dreamily, as though quite alone. "Seeing with the ears."

"And eyes, Master," said Dreest, at which Tharle sat bolt upright. "Eyes, Dreest? You really saw as well?"

"Whenever I sensed that I might be near something to help us. Then there were deserts in the bowl, Master, swirled with reds and blacks and yellows; and floating valleys that swung like cradles in summer skies; and cities that were toppled pyramids, and other cities that were tiny humpbacked houses in lines like the underside of footprints. Then... whether it was some extra power I can't explain, or" – Dreest smiled – "well, just a most un-Razalian wishfulness... then I could translate, then understanding came. But there was nothing for our case after all. In the whole of the desert galaxy, I found only four beings on one planet, and they'd just placed the roof on a hut. One hut in quintillions of leagues. And they were saying that it was something, what they'd done, it was a start after all that had

happened, whatever that was. And in the valley galaxies they were whistling and cooing because flowers had bloomed for the first time ever, and this one was asking that one what they should call them, what you did with them."

"And in the cities, Dreest?" Kidresh sounded like a child, amazed and scared by fresh tales of Razalia's beginnings.

"Questions," said Dreest. "Questions without answers, even though they were all about things the beings had created themselves. *So what do we do with this now? How can we start it again? Do we have any left? Doesn't anyone know?*"

Tharle looked at Kidresh: "He told you nothing of this?"

His fellow-leader looked nightwards: "He gave me a picture of swirls and running colours, Mopatakeh. A notion, an outline." He placed a hand on the novice's shoulder. "The best you could do at the time, eh, Dreest? Even you, good Mopatakeh, would have a deal of waiting until such visions, such wonders made any sense to you."

Tharle remembered his problem with *flaming up* and how his fatherly glow had nearly crisped the novice. If he'd been Dreest, he feared, these visions and wonders would have had him slumped and gibbering under the Guiding Seat.

"Yes, Kidresh," he murmured, keeping his thoughts close in a pocket of his mind, "I rather think I would."

"Mmm, me too." Suddenly, Kidresh's voice seemed different. Had the business of *flaming up* been too much for him as well? But then Tharle saw that, having prevailed upon Dreest, he was chewing a fistful of sliceblossom. "Haven't had this for years," he said. "Tastes like early mallowberries."

"I crushed some in," said the novice.

"Is that because you're partial to them, Dreest, or did you have a mountain of 'em stashed away after you'd perfected your magic berry-catcher? You know" – he stuffed another mouthful home – "I met our district berry-man just last week. Having a mighty rummage, he was, stripping all the bushes for miles. Big celebration on – Dame Pennater turning twice-ninety in three days, or a week, or tomorrow. Or perhaps she's been twice-

ninety for a year. Really, you'd think our time would stabilise out of respect for the elderly." He leaned forward and winked. "She's all agog for your birthday visit, Mopatakeh. *If you're thinking to him*, says she to me, *remind him about his duty. Twice-ninety, sir, gilded milestone. If he forgets I'll dunk him in the Billomingow.* Her husband was there, picture of exasperation. Well, she's been thinking the news all over the planet, like she was the first to be gilded. Old Gent Pennater rolls his eyes. A year younger than she is, you know... doesn't reckon he'll make his gilding, the way she's carrying on."

"My visit to Dame Pennater is at the crest of my mind, Kidresh," said Tharle, watching as his colleague put paid to another mouthful, wondering where his sober attention had got to now. Never before had Kidresh simply dropped his interest in any matter of grave consequence. But now... Tharle's mind roved at tenfold speed through Razalia's lore of medicine, returning none the wiser. No, no-one had written or proclaimed that sliceblossom was a quick intoxicant, or the juice of the mallowberry. But the two mixed together? Another quick sprint, this time through the annals of sliceblossom (Tharles for the use of), showed him that Dreest was the first to try the concoction. It had had no effect on him. He was young, though, and his invention and discoveries had kept him sharp as a thorn from a Sehundan snow-tree. Trying not to notice the hand that was again busy at the sliceblossom jar, Tharle quietly asked Dreest to continue, hoping that hearing more about sounds and galaxies would remind Kidresh of his wonted gravity.

"How far had your hearing taken you, then, Dreest? When you looked down on the cities filled with questions?"

"Far, far," said the novice, his bright eyes suggesting that he was there again. "Imagine our arc stretched fifty, a hundred times over – then as far again. There were vast expanses, oceans of dark with nothing to hear or see. Then it grew cold, colder than the deepest days of our *Silver Quiet*. All I knew –"

"Anyway, our berry-man." Despite a full

mouth, Kidresh's bellow was fine indeed. "Gathering 'em up for Dame Pennater's Twice-Ninety Pie. Three portions for every mouth in the settlement." His arms seemed to fly apart of their own accord. "Big, big, big, big, big. *Morning, Gent Satherfall*, says I. *Scaring the bushes for the good Dame, I see.* Satherfall" – he snorted and brayed together – "Satherfool, more like. He swings round from the bush, Dreest's marvellous catcher *pyoinnging* here and *totter-tipping* there in his hand – nearly has my nose off with the thing. And I'd only grown it out a second before. Kept it furled away, you see, till I was good and ready to enjoy the scents of the morn. *Oh, the scents of the morn,*" he extemporised tunelessly, "*and the per-dee-perp of the dawn.*" Then, seeming to think that he was Dreest's cloak, he lunged at the novice and wrapped his arms over his shoulders. "Not-that-I'm-blaming-you-Dreest-not-in-the-slightest-wouldn't-dream-of-it." Like a cloak itself, his voice fell in a draggled chant about the knoll. "No, Satherfool – my good Satherfooooool – he should have brought the thing to heel." Now Kidresh flailed about as though gaps of white had him in a murderous circle.

Aghast, Dreest tried to hunch clear of him, only to catch a pummelling as Kidresh fought his way upright. Meantime, the sliceblossom jar had made its escape and, contents frothing, was rolling easefully towards the Billomingow. With a scream to match a Galladeelean's at the words *you must toil for your keep*, Kidresh dived after it, gathered it in one becloaked arm, scooped a pile of rogue sliceblossom from the knoll and resumed.

"Not that I'm really blaming Satherfool either, for" – clasping his hands, he juddered about, miming a possessed berry-catcher with an old party on the end of it. "He probably couldn't tell where I was. Got a rotten case of half-glow at the moment. Left side in darkness every day. Common among berry-men, did you know that?" Kidresh pulled his cloak about him with righteous fussiness. "I blame the umber moons. Well" – his hand delved deep in the jar – "what use are they? Eh? All our twinges and sores, they could sort them out. Wrap the planet in healing

rhythms, calm it, regulate it. But do they care, jiggling and alley-oooping about? Every Razalian should reach double-ninety, you know, but do they? Do they?” He rounded on Dreest, who was wondering what strange, zig-zag arc had led the talk from his own discoveries to these wayward imprecations. “Look at them!” cried Kidresh, pointing up at nothing. “They see how the sun treats us, but do they lift a finger to help? Call yourself moons! You’re rubbish! All your alignment business – what’s that about? Just gets the cracks and shingle in a tizz.” He staggered to his feet. “Oi! Fairy-beads! I’m talking to you! Right, then –” He stood up, just about, and approached Dreest’s colander. “You’re for stuffing into this, my lads! See how you like life in the only hut in a desert.” Swaying, trying to grab hold of the strap-stirrups, he cried, “Be it known, I am de-mooning Razalia!”

“Master!” The cry had been a long time swimming into Tharle’s awareness. Dreest had uttered it the moment the jar had got away from Kidresh – the moment after Tharle had gone into another trance of astonishment. But now Dreest’s cry rang clear in his head. He stared hard at Kidresh, who was alternately grabbing for the straps and swaying like a mallowberry bush in a gust of elastic time. He hoped he could do this. He’d only had to do it once before, when he’d come upon a group of foolish young playing a game of chicken at the Mopatakeh gap, racing up to the white, making to plunge in, then skidding to a heartstopping halt. He’d unskidded them, unplunged them, had them all running backwards to their several homes, the urge to play at dying purged from their minds. Now, his watching glow trebled its power. It worked. In less than a Razalian minute, Kidresh had stumbled backwards from the colander, unstood, unsat, unscrambled for the fugitive jar and unlunged at Dreest. Like a pumping-mule at an oil-well, his hand had risen and fallen over the jar, which had rapidly filled with uneaten slice-blossom. A minute later, Tharle’s glow had subsided and the jar was back in Dreest’s lap. Leaning in with grave solicitude, Kidresh was again saying that, even if Tharle himself had devised the contraption on the knoll, he would

still have had a deal of waiting to do until its wonders made sense. “Now, Dreest,” he added, “you were describing cities full of questions.” And he pushed one lobe upwards to show he was all concentration. With a brief look of amazed gratitude at Tharle, the novice continued:

“Yes... yes, I said that my ears and eyes were far from here when I came upon the cities.”

“You said that?” Kidresh chuckled. “Oceans lave us, my memory’s playing the fool.” Then, frowning, he glued fingers to lobe again. “Actually, I do feel a bit –” His words trailed into a helpless shake of his other hand.

“No, I can’t remember that part, either,” said Tharle, eyes widening at Dreest.

“Oh... oh, well, perhaps I... yes... yes, I was far and far. Farther than – than –”

“*Our arc stretched fifty, a hundred times over;*” Tharle thought at him. “*Expanses... oceans... nothing to see or hear... then cold... colder than deepest days of Silver Quiet.*” With a thankful look at his Master, Dreest repeated his own words. This time he sounded uncharacteristically dramatic, more like the decisive Venacarr, so that Kidresh forgot the oddness buzzing about his head and breathed “Goodness” as though he were an ordinary Razalian who, just that minute, had finished a dip in the Billomingow and stumbled on the leaders’ parley.

“And then,” said Dreest, “I found us.”

“Us?” Surprise flashed from Tharle to Kidresh and back, as though Dreest’s simple words had set their own glow weaving about the knoll. Independently, it seemed, Kidresh’s fingers made a speculative voyage of either ear.

“Us,” repeated Tharle in a whisper. As the word sank in, his glow made an aimless sweep of the knoll, Dreest’s contraption and the quiet run of the Billomingow, returning at last to the novice. His lips shaped themselves for his next word. For a moment they stayed that way, as though he wasn’t sure what the word was or what would follow it. At last, reminding himself that he was not a Sehundan helot, he gently managed:

“And where were we?”

“In our Maker’s book.”

Whatever Dreest answered, Kidresh had

determined to be as encouraging as Tharle. The novice's response, however, was even more bewildering than *I found us*, and Kidresh's sense of sounds and meanings folded itself away. "Book," he repeated almost nervously, as though he had come upon the word floating in a gap of white. Razalia was filled with books of all sorts: compendia, puzzles for the young, lives of Razalians notable and ordinary. His own Settlement House bulged with them, to the point where Dame Pennater – who saw her imminent gilding as justification for pitching up daily at his door – declared that he was at the point of self-eviction. Still, repeating the word again – stretching it, reducing it to two consonants knocking together – he seemed flummoxed by it. As for Tharle, it looked as though he, not Kidresh, had gorged on the sliceblossom. His watching light played on the air like a distended firefly, finally coming to rest on his own lap. Then he sat motionless, as though he were no longer the leader of Razalia but some elaborate, forgotten storm-lamp.

Between them, Dreest twitched and shuffled. His old anxiety was reclaiming him. A moment longer and he might have been on his feet again, addressing Tharle as *Trimmer of the Glow*, praising Kidresh for dodging his unintentional *enchaffment*. Luckily, Tharle began to think aloud and, realising his duty to lead his Master from the deeps of confusion, the novice calmed himself again.

"So," Tharle said, laying his words out like cards, "our Maker still exists and has us fast in a book."

"Book," intoned Kidresh again, this time letting its vowel flutter and fall to rest against the *k*.

"It grew so cold," Dreest continued quickly, "that I thought I must have reached the end of everything. There was nothing but the rustle of freezing currents, the moan of gathering ice. I wondered if I was hearing pure forsaken midnight, stripped of any clusters or galaxies, rolling out like a one-way tide through the ever and ever."

At these last words, the sound of the Billomingow spread disconcertingly through

Tharle's mind. By then, however, Kidresh had somehow made his peace with *book* and caught up, steeling himself for whatever new perplexity Dreest might throw at them. So it was that he stoically shared the image which now possessed Tharle. They saw themselves with Dreest on his astonishing journey – or rather, they saw the novice as he negotiated the pits and ranges of space, dragging them in his wake as if on leading-strings, their ears filled with the tumult or static of other Makers' works. Reflexively, Kidresh rubbed hands and then ears, momentarily convinced that the fire of life was deserting him.

"But then other noises awoke," said Dreest, "and started to move about. I think I must have reached the last galaxy, or at least a forgotten one, decillions of leagues from the question-cities, the valleys with their first flowers. I heard my way over planets again – tiny planets that spoke in mists and gases, and a larger planet girdled with a sound like a... like a carousel of rocks... and another that had tantrums of red heat and fierce winds."

At this, his hearers relaxed a little. Now, Dreest seemed to speak of living sound, of sights such as Razalia itself might offer. They imagined the tiny planets he described, their babble of mists and gases, and heard the swoosh of their own shores as they bunched and hollowed at the umber moons' command. They pictured the carousel of rocks as a million such moons, leapfrogging and figure-of-eighting as they swung round their circle.

"Fancy," murmured Kidresh, feeling no rancour at all at this far grander display of pointless energy. Gradually, their image faded of themselves as intergalactic toddlers, stumbling behind the pioneering Dreest. They even managed a sigh of relief, albeit barely audible. On the knoll, the air began to warm and comfort. Again the Billomingow was merely lazy, not a torrent of strangeness.

By now, Dreest had shuffled back a little, so that his glow could move with more ease between the two faces gravely agog:

"Suddenly, I sensed help for our case again – stronger than ever. Up to then, I was hearing



much, seeing little. Now I had to see properly, deep down.” But here he broke off with a long, whinnying laugh.

Tharle and Kidresh jumped as one. What comfort and relief was this noise meant to offer? How could it possibly aid his tale? Convinced anyway that Dreest couldn’t run to an amiable chuckle, they found his explosion as frightening as the prospect of a night among the gliding trees of Lachbourigg. They tried to get into his mind, but the way was blocked. Kidresh thought to Tharle that the sheer weight of some hideous recollection must have pushed Dreest’s reason off its perch. Tharle wondered if Dreest’s special compound was finally doing its worst but, mindful of Kidresh’s performance a short while before, he chose not to share this for fear of triggering in him a fresh need to assault the jar.

“Let us see,” he thought back instead. “The peal of bells can green the brownest grasses” (an old Razalian saying which roughly translates as “Laughter is the best medicine”). “Perhaps he is merely recalling some fancy too foolish to share.” But then he saw Dreest’s eyes and berated himself for a fool. Why was he dragging up whiskery old proverbs? Why was he lugging such stuff around in his head at all? The novice looked terrified. Had Kidresh thought true? If he had – oh, oceans lave us, there was no precedent for this, a leader lost in madness. They’d have to get another Dreest – but how long would that take? And how would anyone find out, now, how to use the... well, the bowl on a stick before them? And would they want to, even if Razalia’s Maker was floating about at the bottom of it?

“Mopatakeh!” Reprimand rather than name, the word rang hugely in Tharle’s head. It hadn’t come from Kidresh. He was chiding himself. Again he’d dropped his duty of care, letting it skitter off like that infernal jar of sliceblossom. If Kidresh was right, the novice had sacrificed his reason for Razalia. This was nobility in action, not a fleeting inconvenience. The first thing to do was try, however great the odds, to coax that poor brain back to sanity. The bowl and stick could wait – and the gaps of white. Why, if need be, he’d bring the things to heel with one long stare, fiercer than any pyre-rocket

Sehunda had ever launched at Barask. The main thing –

Something was bothering his vision. It was Dreest’s glow, which was wobbling about as though the sun’s pulses were having their way with it. His hands were clapped to the side of his face. He was still laughing, but now it was just that kind of chuckle of which Tharle had thought him incapable. “Fool, fool, fool,” Tharle heard, and for a moment he thought it was his own mind, still on at him for clogging it up with old, cosy-sounding saws, for his cold pragmatism in the face of his novice’s distress. But it was Dreest, ticking himself off.

“Forgive me, Master, good Kidresh,” he said, steadying his glow. “A proper horror just rushed through me, and I clean forgot I’d survived it. Had I not, how could I be here?” His tone was self-mocking, but quietly so. There was no hint of imminent mortification, not the slightest shuffle or helpless jig of the hands. Tharle wondered if he was growing up after all – if he was realising that his shambling, puppyish self could play no part in these present revelations. He tried his best smile of encouragement to the novice, an effort only partly undermined by his noticing, at the edge of his glow, that Kidresh was eyeing the sliceblossom jar with something like – like what? Dipping into his seasoned colleague’s mind, he found only a bewildered question – *what does a wonder like Dreest need with all that shrubbery?* – and withdrew in relief.

“The thing is,” Dreest went on, “as soon as I gazed deep down, I found something strong all right – but not what a Razalian would call help. White came at me.”

“White!” exclaimed Tharle.

“Leagues of it. At first I thought one of our gaps had streamed along in the wake of my hearing, ready to snuff me out. Never mind just creeping. It was energy itself. It became its own planet, ridges and lakes and all, rolling away to the very edge of my sight. Then it was a crazed thing, mad to wrap itself about me, to get into my mouth, down to my heart. I hung on to the straps for dear life – the bowl spun like a wheel about my face. My sight was dropping, dropping

like a sun-scorched bird, the white still hard round me.”

“What did it feel like?” Kidresh asked.

“Like the brush of a million tiny hairs. Hairs wet and cold from a proper dousing. Hairs that would any moment turn to briars, even nails, and press deep.”

At this, Tharle sprang up and, boosting his glow and vision to their extremes, trained a long look upon the Mopatakeh gap. Taking his cue, Kidresh stood and flickered his eyes shut. His glow broke apart like plumes of breath from a horse pulling fuel or provisions in the depths of *The Silver Quiet*. Doggedly, his inner eye roved all the other gaps of Razalia. They had sat down again before Dreest quite knew what was happening – sat down in guarded thankfulness.

“No movement from our neighbour-gap,” Tharle said to Dreest.

“Nor elsewhere,” added Kidresh. “Sorry, Dreest, it was all that about briars and nails. Didn’t want to turn and find our white was brushing its way over the whole planet.”

Dreest understood: “I can’t say that my ambush of white was the same as lurks in our gaps. If it was, my escape was merciful – it tore apart at last, loosed its hold on me. Now I was seeing down faster, through a kind of blue – nearly what we get when the sun bestirs itself to call, but brighter, more evenly spread across that vastness in my bowl.”

“The kind it bestows on everything else in our arc,” grumbled Kidresh. “Yes, the sun has a furnace-hand in our predicament. Mark me.”

Dreest chuckled again: “Not that it lasted long – not even as long as the fortnightly crumb it throws us. Grey was rising towards me, great bulks and spurs of it.”

At once, Kidresh looked up and flung his arms apart. Tharle wondered if, sliceblossom or no, he was about to flay the umber moons again, damning them as the sun’s henchmen. But he was warming further to his theme of the moment: “Grey! Doleful grey! Exactly how our beloved sun would love to see us wrapped for good and all! Oceans lave us, you can always feel – you can even hear – its reluctance to cross our threshold. I can, anyway. Wheezing down

from the forsaken midnight, all its fancy fireworks popping and pffutting –”

“Kidresh.” Tharle’s hand was light but determined on his arm. “The sun is as it is. We Razalians may lament that... but we accept. You know that.” He glowed purposefully at Kidresh’s brow. “Now, seal the sun away. Our present business is otherwise. If the sun indeed has some part to play in our gaps’ encroachment –”

“Dreest will discover!” Kidresh sailed in, jabbing a hand at the colander-and-stick. “With his miracle!”

“Ah... I’m not altogether sure – ah.” Dreest’s mouth worked between agreement and denial. “Thing is, I haven’t yet –”

“Yet isn’t never, Dreest. No bashfulness, at this of all moments. Proceed.”

“Bulks and spurs of grey, Dreest,” prompted Tharle; then, into the mind of their splenetic companion, *Leave be, Kidresh. See how confident the boy’s tale makes him. We mustn’t jitter him up again. Come to that, we mustn’t crumple like dolls again at any new marvel. We shall consider the sun when we consider the sun.* Kidresh laid his hands upon his chest in mainly gracious, slightly irked accession to his leader’s wishes. “Apologies, Dreest. Let’s have the bulks and spurs.”

“For a moment I thought the white had shot down past me into hostile altitudes and was starting to die. All was dollops of grey. Then came other spurs and twists – dark blue, darker than our amethyst skies. But as I looked, the grey performed wondrously – changed itself to settlements, tiny and huge. And the blue became inland seas, fingers of rivers, and the settlements clung to the blue or raced away from it, climbing hills, tumbling into valleys.”

“Are you sure you hadn’t heard and seen your way back home, Dreest? And didn’t know it?” Tharle felt his puzzlement expand as he spoke. It was as if he was asking more than he properly knew.

“So it sounds, Master. I might say, yes – apart from the birds’ eggs.”

“Birds’ eggs?” Tharle leaned a little away from the novice. Uncharacteristically, Kidresh

stretched out and propped his head on one hand (but not before he'd given both lobes the ghost of a tickle).

Dreest craved Tharle's pardon: "That's how they looked to me, nestled among all that grey. At first I thought them speckled with – well, no colours we have on Razalia. But then they declared themselves. Red like the egg of a Carolles sheenaloft. Yellow like the Sehundan snow-duster. Lemon like our own hop-ridge. And they weren't inert. They were moving on pepper-covered stoneways, lurching and bouncing like the roisterers will doubtless be at Dame Pennater's Twice-Ninety gilding."

"How true," sighed Kidresh.

"So these eggs," said Tharle, "were rolling themselves in drunken lines."

"When they weren't spinning round circles of green – sorrier than the stoneways, those. Grim little attempts at shrubs and flowers on them. They reminded me of that galaxy of valleys I'd heard along, leagues back, where the first flowers had come and no-one knew whether to eat them or marry them or what."

"Hmph," said Kidresh. "They remind me of the average Baraskian's efforts at raising a garden." He shook his head. "Oceans lave us. And eggs spinning about them. I must say, Dreest, you got yourself into a queer nook of creation."

"Not so queer, in the end." Dreest smiled. "It took me some while to shake off the 'egg' notion – to see things as they really were." He gave another chuckle, which Tharle copied encouragingly, thinking that mirth suited their young colleague after all. "No," Dreest continued, "when I magnified my gaze, I saw they weren't eggs – but even then I didn't get it right. Primeval Galladeeleans was my next guess."

"Good Dreest, in the grand long ago, Galladeelee flowered exactly as it is now," Kidresh sounded as though he were orating to Razalia's massed schoolchildren. Like many others, he found it difficult to credit that something had actually troubled itself to create Galladeelee. More appealing was the idea that it had popped out of nothing, like a self-made firework which, instead of dissipating, hung in the

air, refining its gaudiness. "The planet of the rouge catacombs never had a primeval phase. Though I suppose, if you want to look at it the other way round, primeval is the only phase it will ever know."

"But what could he do, Kidresh, save use his knowledge of us, of our planets?" As he spoke, even Tharle's finger now closed discreetly on an earlobe. "Assume, connect, eliminate. I should have done likewise. So should you. He didn't have the name for these drunken oddities. It's doubtful they would have shouted it out as they rolled along. So" – he beamed at Dreest – "what were these non-eggs? And why did you think of riotous Galladeelee?"

"Busy little boxes," said Dreest, "with crazy wheels. Not that they were all little. There were some real bruisers among them, as long as a chara-jet. They had wheels all over, even up off the stoneways, just for show – like a child's drawing of a market-cart. And it was all the jostling – the drunkenness, as I called it – that made me think of our wild-limbed neighbours. Every last box was rocking and shoving away. I actually expected them to sprout a tangle of arms and legs – to start a mighty old flap."

Tharle thought of the chara-jets that morning and evening, their freight of roisterers. He could see why Dreest had assumed and connected thus.

"So these were actual creatures?" Astonishment had narrowed Kidresh's light to a glowing sheet. "Not closed carts with mad... things inside them?"

"So it seemed." Dreest flapped his arms helplessly. "Imagine yourself in a blizzard, good Kidresh. Or on Lachbourigg at midnight with all those trees roving about you. Imagine so much coming at you – not just through eyes and ears but over your whole being. That's how it was for me. I felt that I wasn't just bent over that bowl, seeing and hearing. I was there. The great slabs of distance were crushed. I was hovering right above them. That's why I hung onto the Galladeelee notion, I suppose. It was either that or lose myself completely. And I couldn't do that – I just knew there was something for our case down there."

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"Among boxy creatures," mused Kidresh, "dancing about for the sheer foolery of it."

"Well, as for that" – Dreest shuffled about; his glow betrayed a well-reddened face – "I wondered if it was foolery. I wondered," he mumbled shyly, "if they weren't... preparing."

Tharle and Kidresh frowned together: "And what," said Tharle, "might such frenzy be preparation for?"

Dreest drew a deep breath. Hesitantly, he brought his hands to within an inch of each other, twisting them this way and that as if demonstrating a stringless cat's-cradle. He didn't seem wholly aware of what he was doing. Certainly, the three kisses he blew at the Billomingow were a shock all round.

"For mating," he said.

The two other lights turned awkwardly aside. A cough funnelled along Kidresh's.

"It was the noise they made," persisted Dreest. "Little parps and weeps, then a long bellow, then a bit of squawking. I wondered if they were trying to... you know, select... pair up... off... so that..." He sought about for a conclusion to his theory. It was like looking for a pinhead of light at the end of an impassable tunnel.

"Hundreds mating in the open," said Kidresh. "Yes, Dreest, you found something primeval. I doubt if Galladeelee itself could boast such sport. Most troublesome," he concluded wearily. His mind ran on courting couples who, thanks to the zealous patrolling of such as DamePennater, would from time to time be drawn shamefaced from wood or copse around his settlement. Personally, despite his present words, it didn't bother him that much. He was rather of the opinion that love should have its way. But he had to be seen to be properly Tharlian about it, delivering homilies, inserting fleas in ears. It was irksome. And Dreest's theory made him picture, most unwillingly, what would happen if mass passion took hold back home. He could hear Dame Pennater and her cronies holding him personally responsible for the evaporation of all morals. "Decency?" came the Dame's imperious tone. "Decency? Gone from this settlement,

Kidresh. See now? There's the last shred of it going *pfffft* on the top of Maker's Mountain."

"Mind you," said Dreest, "the moons would stop them, ever and again."

"Moons?" repeated Tharle. Like Kidresh, he had been reflecting on courting couples, but they hadn't made him doleful. His strategy for dealing with them spared blushes and forestalled the gripes of his own Dame Pennaters. He exploited his throat, clearing it mightily whenever his patrol of Mopatakeh took him deep into nature, then sealing off his eyes and ears so that anyone who had to could retreat undetected. A little hum topped off his efforts, meaning *don't let me fail to see you again*. Thus far, no ardent youth or maiden had ignored his bidding.

"Trios of moons," Dreest was saying now. "Everywhere. As nimble as ours, too, though hardly as adventurous. They cling to poles like fat old grapes on a vine. Like this –" He trained his glow on the ground before him. The others followed suit. By the tripled light, Tharle and Kidresh saw Dreest's finger score a line in the grass, then prod three points at the top. "And they leapfrog, like ours, so fast you don't see them jump out and back. But they never slide down the pole, or shoot off it. Just the same motions in the same space – no urge to dart about – not like ours – you know, when the sun vanishes and they blow raspberries at its tail."

"And these, too, are natural beings, like the boxes?" asked Tharle. "Not some artificial contrivance?"

Dreest nodded vigorously: "They leap as blithely as fish in a stream," he declared in bardic tones. "A sad little stream, but there it is. And they do their bit for public order. When a particular moon hops to the very top of the pole, whole lines of boxes stop their wheezing and parping. And when another moon does, they start their jostling again, and another lot shut down."

"Moons like proper acrobats," mused Kidresh, "and with restraining effect. They sound positively mannerly – just the thing for our skies." Picking a point where he supposed the umber moons to be, he glowered up, his light sweeping the forsaken midnight like an emul-

sion-brush. Tharle quaked a moment, fearing an inexplicable return of his sliceblossom turmoil. But Kidresh was content to hiss, “Your days could well be numbered,” before returning his attention to Dreest’s line in the grass.

“And you still thought,” said Tharle, “that you’d found some ancient Galladeelee?”

“Not after watching the moons for a while. I saw – method there – a pride in cause and effect – however unseemly the general spectacle might have been. That’s just not the Galladeelee way.”

“No,” Tharle added, “I should have discarded that notion myself.” Despite a look of prompting enquiry from Kidresh, he fell silent. Cause and effect, he was thinking. Nature organising nature. And moons again. Kidresh would hardly agree with him, but wasn’t there some correspondence with their own gadfly moons? They align: the burning shingle makes new landscapes, veritable worlds of itself. Exactly between their alignments, the cracks beyond the tides flex their way through every last shape in the galaxy. And always there is precision: always the moons elude the scrunch and drag of Razalian time – which is far worse, anyway, than their clowning. Yes, the umber moons perplex and exasperate. Yes, you would think they were Galladeeleans themselves, the way they cheek the sun at its departure. But mightn’t that be play well earned – for duties whose method and aim Razalia doesn’t yet understand? He’d had his doubts. Part of him had thought that, despite his conviction, Dreest had dropped down any-old-where. But that assumption was fading; a connection was firming up. Yes, this was indeed sounding like their Maker’s home. New home. His – what? – second go at creation? A new Razalia? True, the notion that their Maker might be a lascivious box on wheels didn’t bear over-much thinking. Still, best to be patient until Dreest – suddenly Tharle felt something stir at the edge of his mind. *I couldn’t help it, Mopatakeh*, thought Kidresh at him. *I know what we agreed: outer talk for each new revelation this night. But I really had to know what you felt* – there was a long silence then: Kidresh was considering Tharle’s thoughts, as if standing on the bank of his own Billomingow while they

streamed past his inward eye. Finally, *Our moons?* thought Kidresh sharply. *With a purpose? Oceans lave us, Mopatakeh, as tall orders go...* But then a softening in his tone: *I was doubtful myself. But no-one will ever hear and see as much as Dreest – no, not even the admirable Carollessa. And if he’s right, we have indeed heard our Maker. And I think that, if we simply –*

Simply what, Tharle never knew. Nor in fact did Kidresh, who’d decided to raise Tharle’s roof with some grand final pronouncement but had neither words nor sentiment to hand. Dreest’s voice came showering down on them: “So strong I thought I’d explode!” They stared at the novice, who seemed to be shining on all Razalia, his glow waving about like a huge, errant flame. “I was close. Help for our case – the best and only help – was as near as that” – he pointed down the Billomingow to where an islet split the waters. “Once I felt it as strong as that, I couldn’t loiter. So – one minute I was looking down at one of those green circles, with its derelict shrubs and those passionate boxes skeltering round. The next, I was off down a stoneway as if something gigantic was drawing breath and I was aimed straight for its mouth. There were dwellings – as alive as the boxes, it seemed, though that might have been the speed of my eyes. Some came bellying right up to the road; others scuttled back, petrified of something, and hid behind crook-necked flowers and tatty little greens – not a mallowberry in sight, by the way. I just missed a huge creature, a chara-jet and a half – parping away, heaving its rump to the road. And the road! Mad as anything I’d seen, twisting this way and that –”

“Like the crack-plains!” cried Kidresh.

“Exactly so!” Tharle rejoined.

“– dragging me along as if it had me by the nose. And I saw a grey cliff with scores of mirror-windows and lines of the creatures all quiet outside. And the cliff was splashing and squealing –”

Fearfully, Kidresh raised a hand: “Good Dreest, I may not be as crammed with time as Razalia, but I’ve eaten years enough and my face is lined from the chore. I implore you,

humour a fading Tharle and spare us your theory on squealing cliffs.”

“I have none,” said Dreest. “I had scarcely a moment to see it before the wall.”

This he had seen in some detail. He described its restless coping, the way it buckled out and swayed back. He dwelt on its curious cuts of stone, some sticking out like a fist, others seeming to hang unsupported from its side.

“That’s the wall round the Guiding,” said Tharle. “If it’s not, I’m a stranger to my own sight. I stared hard enough at it yesterday, Kidresh, while I was thinking to you of the gaps.”

Kidresh didn’t seem to hear: “That’s the wall Gent Pennater and Satherfall built,” he declared, “to keep the settlement hogs from snouting the Maker’s mountain geese to death.”

“It was playing a game,” said Dreest. “There was thwacking and cries and different parps and beeps.”

“Oh, well, you get that with walls.” Kidresh sounded as solemnly knowing as when he’d meditated on Lachbourigg and its solitary, tree-proof house. Ideally, after the excitement of recognition, he and Tharle would have enjoyed the chance to sigh in unison, lapse into brief repose and catch their breath for the end of the novice’s journey. But Dreest was already leaving the wall behind:

“– like something had my ears by the lobes – hauling me into this curious dwelling. Stairs flapped down past my eyes, then I was plonked on flatness, then more stairs, more flatness – then my eyes shinned a berry-man’s ladder, up into a brown triangle of dust and planking – and there it was, there he was – our Maker, with us in his book.”

His hearers swayed like the exposed roots of the Nine Oceans. Their hands sought the firm earth beneath the grass. No repose now: they felt as though they’d burst up through the dwelling on Dreest’s back. Tharle shook his head vigorously:

“And was he... is he... a wheeled box? Did he parp?”

Kidresh recalled the novice’s mating theory: “Did he pant?”

Dreest, now worn out himself, fanned his face with a fold of cloak: “Just like us,” he said quietly. “Except he seemed smaller.”

“Ah,” said Tharle, “so he made two prime species for his new planet.” On behalf of Razalia, he sounded a little hard done by.

Kidresh glowed steadily at Dreest: “What does he call this planet, Dreest?”

The novice pressed his fingers lightly to his brow. The name fluttered out over the knoll.

“What an odd sound,” said Tharle. “Like someone trying to work a Sehundan sournut from the back of their throat.”

Save for the odd lapse by Kidresh, that was the end of all extraneous comment. No more did watching lights bob and flash in astonishment or irritation. There were no further imprecations against the umber moons. To Tharle and Dreest’s relief, there was no further chaotic business with the sliceblossom jar (which, in any case, Dreest tucked into his cloak and, a while later, transferred to his invention-bag).

“His book,” said Kidresh. “Was it a map of Razalia?”

Dreest scratched his head: “No, not really. It was a queer-looking thing. Sort of an almanac, or – just on the line where an almanac becomes a scrap-book.”

His hearers hmm’d recognition. In their official houses, there was a goodly shelf of such books, whose name is best translated as *Knowscapes*. They were half-printed with general principles and philosophies of use to the practising Tharle; but the other half was blank, so that each settlement’s incumbent could add, verbally or diagrammatically, any experience whose worth might benefit a successor. By the time a volume was filled, the next was ready for the shelf. The printed half varied little, unless a particular *Candling of Eyes*, the counsel of Tharles, led to the adoption of a new general principle or modification of Tharliian philosophy. As for the blank part, its sometimes close-written, sometimes sketched, sometimes three-dimensional contents were shared on an *ad hoc* basis across the planet. One leader might, for example, think most anxiously to his peers about a poor mallowberry season. Another might

discover a predecessor's record of a similar famine in his own settlement, together with opinions on ending the misfortune. At such times, however dire the problem, the telepathically-charged air was almost merry. This, after all, was an exchange-and-mart between some of the most singular thinkers in creation; and a solution to the problem, or at least a brake on any further deterioration, was usually not long in coming. For a moment, Tharle and Kidresh wondered if future *knowscapes* would boast the heading *White, gaps, curtailment of. Eradication*, of course, would be the ideal.

The two of them shared their thoughts with Dreest.

"I don't know if I'd call his book a *Knowscape*," said the novice. "*Hopescape*, perhaps. It seemed to be mainly plans for planets he'd like to create. I didn't get a feeling that they were records of real places. I didn't get any feeling at all, until he found a page and lost it. Then there was the sharpest pain in my head, like strings pulling themselves out of my temples and entwining before my eyes – or a finger jabbing out of my skull. Somehow, I'd just seen us! I might have rediscovered the page for him – I can't remember. In any event, he turned back to it – and there were our valleys, our outwaters" – he nodded to Kidresh – "and Maker's mountain to its very tip."

Tharle's voice came softly: "And the white?"

"That, too." At this, Dreest's hearers sighed.

"I didn't see it immediately," said Dreest, "nor any of it – not in detail. I had to expand the whole picture to make sure. I think it shocked him."

"I wonder if he planned it?" said Tharle. "The white. For some purpose. As our umber moons might be." He blinked before Kidresh's gaze: "Might incredibly be," he corrected himself.

"There was... something else." For a second, Dreest looked about to succumb to a fresh burst of twisting and apologies and pleas to be *enchaffed*. Tharle laid a firm hand on his arm.

"Good Dreest, it is hardly as though we know this tale you tell us – every scrap from dawn to eve – and are testing your knowledge of it. In all of this, you are our leader. Who contrived this

voyage of ear and eye to make these discoveries? Not Kidresh, not me. We are resolved not to" – he turned to Kidresh – "what did I say we shouldn't do, however astonishing his news?"

"Crumple like dolls," muttered Kidresh. "Though I should much have preferred "Like the Razalian rose at glowfall." I've been called some things in my time, most of them by Dame Pennater, but a doll is –"

"The something else, Dreest." Tharle raised a hand square into Kidresh's glow, which dimmed grudgingly.

"There was so much in the picture. Hard against its left was a cluster of dots and blobs. I'm sure they were the planets I'd heard and seen along, just before I reached – again he pronounced the name of the Maker's new planet; his hearers winced.

"He'll have to call it something better than that," said Kidresh. "Come to think of it, I heard the very same noise at one of our Baraskian Festivals once. A Galladeelean waiter – waiter, mark you! When did Galladeeleans ever wait, except till the danger of honest work disappeared? – anyway, a so-called waiter was just draining the dregs of a flagon when he let fly –"

"His new planet must have been amongst them," the novice drove on. "But then the picture glided into something different. Our arc. From such a strange angle. Such as the sun might see if it circled our eastward side alone. I could make out Sehunda. I think I saw Carolles. But they fell away in a line of curves and satellites. Razalia was at the head, right against my eyes."

His words warmed Tharle and Kidresh, reminding them of how the other planets in the arc saw theirs: as keeper of time before their times, image of their long-buried, fledgling selves – a beguiling conundrum of wisdom and frailty. Razalia at the head: right that it should be. They smiled benignly on Dreest, who now spoke of writing.

"It was above the picture, strung from left to right. Exactly what it meant, I couldn't tell. I was weakening quickly. It was... the end of some record. A *knowscape* memorandum? An account of Razalia's creation, perhaps? An epic of storm

and battle? Something, it said, was speeding past the Arc of the Sixteen planets, right over us." In his weakened state, Dreest had got only the barest gist of the writing on the Maker's page. The embroidery – describing Razalia as *unfinished, overlooked, the very runt of that system* – had happily defeated him. "I could see it, too," he added emphatically. "The creature in the sky."

"What was it?" Kidresh was agog. "What was speeding?"

By his own confession, Dreest had seen nothing of the epic over which their Maker had pored. He knew nothing of "The Magenta Line," or what it might signify. He knew nothing of the creatures Broom and Anstey, or Goody Trower or Squire Evershed. Still, he'd gleaned enough to provide an answer for Kidresh – though he feared that it would take a prodigious effort to find the intelligible Razalian for "Farhanva, Planet of the Rising Age" or "twenty-foot pregnant seahorse".

Again he pressed his brow like a medium, as he had when conjuring the name that seemed so crude for their Maker's new home.

"A *curiotwist*," he said finally.

Tharle and Kidresh started. A *curiotwist* was a Razalian question-mark, far more elaborately inscribed than its abused counterpart on Earth.

"A flying *curiotwist*?" Kidresh's lobes came in for some mighty prodding.

"Shaped like that... no, it was... a limbless, baby-bubbled horse with fans for shoulders, three Razalians high. It was from –" But "Planet of the Rising Age" emerged as "old clod waking up". As for "Farhanva," the name seemed to make his voice melt, so that Tharle and Kidresh were treated to a gargle, a whistle and a belch. Understanding that, whatever it was, the word had stuck fast between Dreest's brain and his gullet, they didn't press him. Besides, the baby-bubbled horse was enough for now. Not that Tharle or Kidresh were especially dismayed by the sound of it. In their own system, several planets were home to creatures as bizarre – even more so. Sehundans, for example, were so improbable of structure and aspect that, on Razalia, a kind of proverb had developed about

them, best translated as *once seen, never remembered*, implying that they were so hard to credit, except as the stuff of night-fever, that the average mind voided their image. Most of the other planets had similar sayings about them – with the inevitable exception of Barask, whose inhabitants, never noted for abstraction, had spent much of their remoter history trying to ensure that there was no Sehunda to forget. But it was the very existence of this horse, this limbless *curiotwist*, that filled Dreest's hearers with awe. Here was a creature which had played some part, crucial or literally fleeting, in Razalia's conception. Why else would he be in the Maker's book?

Now Dreest had a fresh surprise for them; "I can... I think I can conjure its likeness," he said. "Weak I might have been, but its image went deep." He thumped his chest. Tharle nodded assent, at which Dreest stood up and began lightly drumming his brow with the fingers of both hands. From centre to temples and back they moved, as if stuck in one figure of an eternal dance. Slowly, the limbless *curiotwist* rose over the Billomingow, its tail just clearing the water. Once at rest, it resembled a moon which, having found its place in the heavens, starts to melt and flow back to its lair below the horizon. Dreest had managed a fair approximation of the creature in the Maker's book, save for its bodily texture. The book presented its skin like crazy paving. But Dreest had so much on his mind when he looked upon the book – enough, indeed, for two more minds besides – that he'd been momentarily distracted when his Maker lost the page, thereby absorbing a blink of an image from elsewhere. So it was that, from curled head to questioning tale, the *curiotwist* was now clad in the discreet check sometimes favoured by Eddie Beplate, "Clarinetist Against Crime".

The image compelled attention. Tharle and Kidresh didn't hear Dreest when, fatigued by the conjuration, he groaned and sank back down between them. Under its spell, Tharle began throwing out theories as though compiling a list of highly speculative advice for the the Mopotakeh *knowscape*: "Perhaps it was the



Maker's apprentice, and it went rummaging through the system for ideas to complete us... as far as Sehunda, where they took one look at it and" – here his finger described the creature's ignominious trajectory. "Or was it a rival Maker, an adversary who went boasting of how it had thwarted the Maker's plans to finish Razalia – even stolen them from his head – so that there was only white where there should have been natural beauty? And did our sister planets tire of its boast – even fear that it might have terrible plans to reshape them? Did they catch it off-guard and hurl it from our midst?"

At this, Kidresh's concentration broke. He pulled his cloak tight round him, tut-tutting away. "Yes, yes, Mopatakeh," he said, "but its business wasn't with the Sixteen Planets alone. Dreest said it had travelled over the galaxy where the wonder-boy is hiding his face."

Tharle arched an eyebrow: "Wonder-boy?"

"Our Maker, so-called." Kidresh was decidedly peevish. "My apologies, Mopatakeh, but at present I'm none too impressed by him. Ah" – he held up his hands in a forestalling gesture – "I'm not courting agreement. I don't even wish to sound your minds in the matter. But Dreest only found him at the uttermost end of the line. What being skedaddles that far from its offspring? Even Sehundans acknowledge their young until they can stand upright. As for your theories, Mopatakeh, I don't discount them, but I'm much oppressed by the thought that they might be true." Now he spread his hands wide, as if determined to grab the knoll by its sides and uproot it. "Self-respecting Makers don't have rivals, do they, in or out of their systems? Or if they do, surely they see them off before getting down to the business of making. And you vet apprentices, don't you? Every last Razalian farrier will tell you that."

Tharle said nothing. He didn't resent Kidresh's words – which were, after all, food for much meditation. But his mind was presently in thrall to the *curiotwist*. There its likeness was, hanging resplendent before them. At that moment, it was more real than their Maker. It looked as if it would turn its head and charm fresh speculation from him. Besides, for all his

prodigious powers, Dreest couldn't keep it there much longer. Luckily, Kidresh gave his special string of coughs, which always struck any stranger as one cough and a stutter of echoes. Simultaneously, he lowered his hands, rubbed them with exquisite lightness, then gave three claps. Tharle knew what his antics meant: *profound grump suspended*. So did Dreest, who'd seen them more than once on the way to the capital, and who now broke in with, "I think it's at my lips... the name of the *curiotwist's* home." The others looked at him as he wrestled again with "Farhanva, Planet of the Rising Age". This time, after a near-swoon, he got the words out.

"The Rising Age," repeated Tharle, gazing on the *enceinte* shape before them. His voice grew gentle, almost fatherly. "Perhaps I do it a disservice. Perhaps its flight across the Maker's page was intended – nothing to do with banishment." He pointed with a child's finger. "Brimming with young – you see? A benefactress of the universe, birthing planets on its way, hanging comets by their tails in the sky. A master-Maker, aiding our own – bringing forth umber moons, so that the Razalian sky might not be barren." As Tharle uttered the last words, Dreest gave a long sigh of relief, and the image gracefully vanished. Disregarding the sigh, Tharle couldn't resist the idea that the image had lingered until he was right.

"Perhaps, Mopatakeh, perhaps." Kidresh sounded sleepy. "Perhaps all of it at different times – perhaps none. But why bequeath all that infernal white, without telling our Maker what it was or should become?" Again he flicked up a hand. Though seeming to invite it, he didn't have the stomach for further reflection. "All I know now is that my glow is near done for this night. As yours must be. And especially—" He gestured at Dreest, who was now rocking slowly, all but spent from his exertions. "And, Mopatakeh, I can no longer fight you about our umber moons. See? That's how tired I am."

For several moments, the only sounds came from the knoll's rustling grass and the ripples of the Billomingow. At last, Tharle stroked his face, then studied his own glow. Yes, he too had

boosted his last for that night. The light was thinning away, beyond even Tharlian command. He gazed at Dreest, who stretched, yawned, then turned his attention to husbanding his own light till the meeting was done.

"What you have shown us, Dreest," said Tharle, shaking his head, "is beyond miraculous." He wasn't sure where the next utterance came from. Perhaps it was tiredness. Perhaps, all that evening, his no-nonsense colleague from Razalia's smallest settlement had been mad to get into his thoughts. At any rate, his next words were Venacarr's. "You have the soul of the planet within you, Dreest," he blurted.

Sadly, the blessing seemed to transport Dreest back through the hours to the foot of the knoll. Again, the novice squirmed and fumbled – if anything, worse than when he came staggering up with his magic bag – until Tharle feared that he might double his height and go stomping into the Billomingow, simply to shake his mind loose from this redoubled attack of agony: "Master," he said, "I hardly feel that, as if I, as if such praise, as if I should acknowledge it – I mean I *do* acknowledge it, accept it, but when I say 'acknowledge' –" His voice folded into his waning light. "When I say 'accept'," he tacked on in a miserable whisper.

During all this, Tharle could only shake his head. Venacarr having spoken through him, he had no words of his own, brusque or soothing, to add. He was therefore relief itself when, despite his own confession of weariness, Kidresh fixed the novice in a final bright glare: "Dreest!" he said. "You have taken us a journey of journeys. You have gathered all that is into your sight. We have listened like children at Gent Satherfall's knee, while he tells old tales of the first berry-men on Razalia. You are no petrified puppy."

As though hypnotised, Dreest began intoning heavily, "I am no –"

"No, no, good Dreest," Kidresh pressed on. "No need of that. What I tell you is, Mopatakeh blesses you truly, with all good cause. And one day, we hope, you will know it."

Awoken and emboldened by these words, Tharle laid a gentle hand on the novice's shoulder. His gaze unwavering, he looked a

maker of galaxies lodging the final moon in place.

"Indeed, Dreest," he murmured. "Now – our beds hail us. But Kidresh and I must know the journey's end. Can you do it?"

Kidresh looked bewildered, then annoyed: "Oh, speak it out, Mopatakeh. I *am* about to crumple like a doll." But Tharle said nothing and so, with an *oh-very-well* sigh, he stood alongside Dreest in their leader's mind. He stared at the words, smiled and echoed them aloud.

After a final spasm, the petrified puppy disappeared. Dreest gave a three confident nods, as if to bounce his reply out into the night: "Yes. Yes, I'm sure so. I'll need four days – provided our time holds steady. Five or three if not."

"How many of his days is that?" asked Kidresh.

"Two, I think. So that should be –" Pausing, he raised leaden hands to his brow and ran through the days of his Maker's week. "Yes, that should be the day he calls... Soo... Sana... Sunday."

The others gasped. The word was a pointless noise – even worse, really, than the name for the Maker's new hidey-hole. Kidresh spoke, but this time with great reluctance:

"I suppose... I suppose she'll be coming with him." Deliberately, he avoided saying "the consort". He was mindful of the run of his thoughts after Dreest had conjured the voices – the way her imagined moan had roamed about his head. But it was too late. *Call this a planet?* she shrilled anew. *Look at all that you've missed. Where's the green for this bit? You'll be doing something with all the white, I presume?* Somehow, Dreest's response broke through, fighting her off: "No, good Kidresh, I doubt I could manage the two – not the first time, at least."

"Oh." Suddenly Kidresh sounded as breezy as if he'd just got up. "Ah, well, right that you shouldn't. We need... time alone with wonder-boy. Time to see what fist he makes of our questions. About Mopatakeh's beloved *curiotwist*. About" – he snapped his fingers, recalling the first question he'd fired at Tharle when they settled down on the knoll – "about our singular

sun.” Sitting bolt upright, he thrust out a dramatic arm. “Maker,” he said sonorously, before breaking up his words like Tharle of Venacarr at his most insistent. “A-bout our sun. Our twi-sting, lur-ching, snee-ring sun. Friend-or-foe?” He tapped his brow. “Now,” he muttered, “there was that saying the consort used in their extraordinary chatter. Ah, exactly” – and he reverted to his drama – “life source or ma-ker of ki-llings?”

Dreest chuckled. Tharle, however, simply stared at his over-weary colleague.

“And our other question, Kidresh?” he inquired quietly. Then, like a mother coaching her child through a speech, he mouthed, *Peril*.

“Oceans lave us!” cried Kidresh, dropping his arm. “Has it moved again? Leave it to me, Mopatakeh. I can do it – I can survey all! I’ll gee up some light from somewhere. Just let me –”

“Kidresh, give up your agitation.” Tharle spread his hands. “I just gee’d some up myself. And I roved the whole planet, though where I got the strength from, I hardly know. No movement. The white is as it was when we ascended this knoll.”

“Ah... ah... ah.” Kidresh sounded worse than Dreest at his most bashful. “Now I understand you, Mopatakeh. What does he propose... does he know... can he vanquish – ?” He broke off and, copying Tharle, mouthed *gaps*. Then, in a single breath, “Well, of course, that would be my final, my steeliest question, that was where I’d lead him, I’d fully intend – lulling, you see, a good inquisitor lulls, feints, works his way about, you see – think of a boat, Mopatakeh, on the Billomingow, tacking, you see, bringing its prow –”

“Our Maker has work to do,” Tharle cut in. “If it involves explaining suns and *curiotwists* – as well it might – than that will be more work besides. But our planet stands to be eaten alive. Before all else, our Maker must roll up his sleeves against that.”

Chastened, Kidresh ruckled and unruckled a handful of cloak. “Well, yes,” he said quietly. “Of course, Mopatakeh. I assure you, the white was at the peak of my mind.” Despite his

awkwardness, however, he was all admiration for Tharle. He’d spoken like the leader he was.

“Good Dreest,” said Tharle now. “Whatever you need – I mean, in addition to” – he gestured at the colander and stirrups – “I shall provide for you. Tomorrow, we shall plan.”

“What about Venacarr and the others?” Kidresh asked, cocking his head. “Surely you can’t delay a *Candling*, Mopatakeh. But how do we manage it without telling Razalia? How do we avoid suspicion, rumour, all-out telepathy?”

“Tomorrow, Kidresh, tomorrow we unlock our minds to Venacarr and all our colleagues. Tomorrow we decide everything. At this moment, we are three lights that need their dark rest.”

“Vales and ridges.” Dreamily, Dreest’s voice lapped round the others’ practicalities. With a start, they turned to find him staring far down the Billomingow. On tiptoe, they crept into his thoughts. Whether through fatigue or thankfulness that this present, covert *Candling* was done, they were fastened on one thing. At last, the novice was pondering the dimensions of what he’d achieved – and the demands of what he would shortly do. “Our Maker leaves Razalia – the vales and ridges he himself has fashioned – the heathland and tides. He goes far, far... horizon after horizon... brow of a hill, brow of another, out and out. Peaks and ocean floors. A desert planet with one hut to its name – whatever that name is. Valleys where flowers are a mystery. Planets that rage, planets that weep. Out and out, far and far. And I follow... a leaf in a storm. Somehow I follow.”

“Hardly as erratic as that, Dreest,” said Kidresh kindly. “Though you may never know it. As for your quarry, well, he can just come back and back. Gallumph his way over all his pretty horizons. What choice does he have? Good Dreest, he is fixed like a star in your eye –” He broke off. A boyish grin, such as he hadn’t managed for countless years, now tricked out his face. “No, I shouldn’t. Mustn’t.”

“Kidresh.” Tharle spoke his name in some alarm. Kidresh gave him a faintly pleading look, then continued in yet another rush:

“Dreest – yes, I know, our glows must be off

to their beds, and if you can't, you can't, and if you won't, you won't, but" – his voice sank to a bare whisper – "can we see him? Could you drop him in the bowl? For a second, Dreest – no more. So we can" – he shrugged – "fix him in our own eyes?"

Dreest looked at Tharle, who couldn't deny the same boyish urge. "It is for you to pronounce, Dreest," he said, secretly hating to sound so proper. "We shall be fixing on him enough before long. We've waited aeons – we can wait on the morrow. You more than anyone need deep, earnest rest."

"It's no so much that," said Dreest. "It's – well, I conjured the voices a goodly while ago. They'll be deep in their own sleep. You see, it's early their next morning now."

"Of which of their days?" asked Tharle. "I'm sorry, Dreest, there was something of the Sehundan about the noises you made. They're gone from me."

Again, Dreest made use of their Maker's tongue.

"Sa-tur-day." Repeated Kidresh, sounding now like Venacarr uncharacteristically stumped. "It's not a language, really, is it? More a riot of the throat. I can just hear some of the roisterers at Dame Pennater's Gilding – especially if a brace of Galladeeleans drop in. They'll all be hacking it fluently."

Instantly, all three were knocked flat on their backs. The knoll swung from side to side like a warning finger. The rich spray of the Billomingow soused their cloaks. Dreest's contraption shuddered like a lightning-rod. "Sorry, Maker!" cried a petrified Kidresh. "Sorry, umber moons! Forgive, oh, forgive an old Tharle's unbelief!"

As quickly as it had stirred, the tumult faded. The knoll stilled itself; the contraption stood motionless, almost upright. The trio scrambled to their feet. Tharle and Dreest had known instantly what had befallen them – and the whole planet. As for Kidresh, mortification at his foolishness, at the childish fear that had found shape on his lips, left him in a rare old froth. "Our infernal, useless, drunkard time!" he cried. "I thought it had been too quiet while we were up

here. Saving us up for a right old shake. And those moons egging it on, no doubt – falling about up there, chortling like those Galladeelee toppers who'll drink Dame Pennater dry." He goggled at the others. "Mark me, both of you, mark me, when our Maker sets his foot on our sorely-used planet, I shall fling him into a mallowberry –"

"Wait!" Dreest looked wildly about. Then, once more, he began that semi-chant of inbreaths he'd emitted with his head deep in the colander. At last he broke off: "Our time! It has shaken us back through his. Now it's just after I found their voices – hours before their sleep." He turned to Kidresh. "You can see him."

And so the three Tharles clean forgot fatigue, *curiotwists*, umber moons and consorts – and even, briefly, the capricious gaps of Razalia. The Billomingow flowed smoothly. The grass on the knoll stirred as gently as could be. Slowly, they advanced on Dreest's contraption. Setting it properly upright again, the novice motioned to them to take a strap-stirrup each, while he cupped his right hand against the colander's rim. Then, at his signal, all three inclined their heads.

At the far side of Razalia's nine oceans, a Carolla who is not keeps guard on a free-floating pier. In shape and beauty, she is as the Carollessa, but they have no record of her being. Nor did any Carollessan or Razalian hand construct her vantage-point. Nor has any living Razalian spoken with her. Nor has she in any way revealed the secret of her mysteriously comforting presence. Still, while Razalia toils or feasts, while light creeps into its faces or whirls on their drooping lids, she glides back and forth between splendid white columns, under a canopy of teal green, scanning land, ocean and beyond, a graceful hand shading her vision.

That, at least, is her usual, inscrutable round. But while three astonished Tharles bent over a colander on a pole, a further cause of astonishment came gliding toward them. A boat moved under its own motion, leaving silken traces on the Billomingow.



# The Quarterly Review

## Jericho

CBS, US, 45 min

I briefly mentioned *Jericho* in my previous review of *Three Moons Over Milford* – see TQF#12 – and now I have had a chance to watch it. As predicted, this show does indeed deal with similar themes in a more serious way. Whether it is a better or worse show is hard to say, but it is certainly more interesting.

To sum it up briefly for the British I might call it a remake of *The Survivors*. How do you get by after the apocalypse? In this case a small town, *Jericho*, sees one day a mushroom cloud forming over the nearest city. What to do next?

In terms of presentation, style and plotting, this is very much a post-*Lost* show. Most of its good qualities derive from its more sophisticated predecessor. For example, it knows to keep its cards close to its chest. Secrets are kept, revelations parcelled out slowly, motivations obscure. Viewers are trusted to be patient and attentive. However, it does not push them too far – unlike last year's slow-burning *Invasion*, each episode does present a crisis of some kind that must be resolved by the episode's end, even as ongoing storylines smoulder on.

However, *Jericho* has its own problems. For one, there is a troubling and pervasive feeling that things are better since the apocalypse. The chattering classes are gone, and while the loss of those big city folks is mourned, there is a strong feeling that the people left are those who really get things done. The effects of fallout are minimal, refugees are generally considerate enough to die before reaching town, and risks always pay off. One typical scene sees three characters wondering about the safest way to open a canister full of petrol that might explode at the slightest spark. Ignoring the safety-conscious twitterings of the big city girl, the

ballsy farmer knocks the lid off with the butt of his rifle, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Another frustrating episode sees a library on fire, and not one character stops to consider just how crucial books might be if the rest of the world has been blown up. It's just art in there, and who needs art when there's shooting to be done?

One of the most stomach-churning plot threads is that of the class geek who becomes friendly with the hottest girl in class, due to their shared and sudden status as orphans. Whenever I see them together, especially the early scene in which they seal themselves into a house to avoid any possible fallout, "Let's Do It for America" (from *Grease 2*) plays so loudly in my head as to drown out any dialogue. There might have been a nuclear holocaust, but he's gonna get lucky (maybe)!

The people of *Jericho* seem to have something of a schizophrenic attitude to capitalism. The farmer who would rather burn his crops than let the townspeople share them is just standing up for his rights, whereas the store owner through whom everyone trades is a shameless, grasping profiteer. Inconsistent? Maybe, but then the farmer is a salt-of-the-earth All-American boy. In contrast, at first I thought the store owner was a Jewish stereotype. Or at least that's what I thought until I noticed her name: Gracie Leigh. And then I began to wonder if that had originally been Gracie Lee... rather than a stereotypical Jewish money-grabber, maybe the character began life as a stereotypical Korean money-grabber. Either way, it goes without saying that she gets a number of come-uppances...

The strong and capable female protagonists of *Lost* are utterly absent here. At times it feels like whole episodes go by without a female character being the protagonist in a scene, as opposed to being the nursemaid, lover, mother, etc of one of the husky male heroes.

The nominal female lead is Ashley Scott, perhaps best known to genre audiences as The Huntress (the daughter of Batman and Catwoman, in TV continuity) in the short-lived action series *Birds of Prey*, or as the female equivalent to Jude Law's Gigolo Joe in *AI*, who spent little time on screen but whose publicity photos launched a thousand wallpapers.

She was also, interestingly, the actor originally cast to play Joey's next-door neighbour in his spin-off from *Friends* (though after the pilot she was replaced by Andrea Anders, now doing good penance for those crimes against comedy in the rapidly improving new sitcom, *The Class* – the first sitcom to take to heart the new popularity of serialised drama).

Here Ashley Scott plays Emily, who spends the first half of the season moping after various men – her old boyfriend, her fiancé, her dad – while playing absolutely no role whatsoever in the town's efforts to re-establish life after the apocalypse. She spends a lot of time in the bar, though, commiserating with the girls about the menfolk running around playing soldier.

One female character who does get to take the lead occasionally is the big city, uptight tax collector who comes to repossess a farm, only to find herself sticking around for the lack of somewhere to return to, and slowly noticing the strapping charms of the aforementioned insolvent, tax-evading farmer. It's classic bodice-ripping stuff, but worrying, in that a city had to die in flames for this big city gal to achieve some personal growth.

There is in general a lack of appealing or interesting characters, with most, in contrast to the rich and varied players in *Lost*, being fairly standard cookie-cutter types, who might just as easily have come from *Everwood* or *Judging Amy*.

The one stand-out is the mysterious newcomer to the town, Rob Hawkins, played by Englishman Lennie James, recognisable in particular from an eye-catching turn in Guy Ritchie's *Snatch*. Everything about Hawkins is a mystery, even to his own family, and waiting to find out the answers about him is the biggest reason for watching at the moment.

The odd thing about *Jericho* is that despite the bland characters, the slightly dull stories, the illiberalism and the jolliest nuclear holocaust ever depicted on screen, I do keep watching it – I want to find out what happens, I want to find out what has happened, and I have a feeling that it's going to get better.

I expect I could get almost exactly the same amount of pleasure from just reading a *Jericho* episode guide at the end of its run, but for the time being I will carry on watching. – *WB*

## Heroes

**Tim Kring (creator)**

NBC, US, 45 min

*Heroes*, an interesting new science fiction superhero drama, is a bit like *Lost* or *24* – there is very little you can say about it that will not add up to a spoiler, which makes writing a review a tricky job. But the premise is simple: there are powers in the world, and we follow the stories of some of those who have them. The characters are varied enough in background and temperament that everyone will find someone to empathise with. If it has a potential flaw, it lies in its greatest strength. It has immense gravity, but if it does not follow through on that constant portentousness it may come to be seen as a hollow shell, much as happened to *The X-Files* when the answers to some of its much-discussed mysteries gave every sign of having been thought up on the hoof – I'm thinking in particular of the dreadful, ultimate revelation that Mulder's sister was abducted, not by aliens, but by fairies, to save her from a child abuser... *Heroes* is making a lot of big narrative promises, but so far it has kept them.

It does share two flaws with *The X-Files* – an inexplicable urge to rattle on irrelevantly about God, and a near-total lack of understanding of evolution. (Those flaws may be connected!)

But it also shares many strengths of the earlier programme – it is dark, scary, gripping, mysterious and very well made, and I doubt I will ever miss an episode. – *WB*

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# HELEN AND HER MAGIC CAT

