

## TRUNK AND DISORDERLY

by Charles Stross

**Charles Stross has been in rehab since 2004, recovering from the bad attack of singularitis that led to the Accelerando outbreak. His doctors report that he is much improved since the excision of his dot-com gland, and may eventually be capable of writing normal SF again, under suitably controlled circumstances, although he is unlikely ever to return to his previous proto-Ballardian normality. The following story was discovered cunningly encoded in a scarf he was crocheting at the clinic; we believe it may cast some light on his illness.**

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### 1. In Which Laura Departs and Fiona Makes a Request

“I want you to know, darling, that I’m leaving you for another sex robot—and she’s twice the man you’ll ever be,” Laura explained as she flounced over to the front door, wafting an alluring aroma of mineral oil behind her.

Our arguments always began like that: this one was following the script perfectly. I followed her into the hall, unsure precisely what cue I’d missed this time. “Laura—”

She stopped abruptly, a faint whine coming from her ornately sculpted left knee. “I’m leaving,” she told me, deliberately pitching her voice in a modish mechanical monotone. “You can’t stop me. You’re not paying my maintenance. I’m a free woman, and I don’t have to put up with your moods!”

The hell of it is, she was right. I’d been neglecting her lately, being overly preoccupied with my next autocrementation attempt. “I’m terribly sorry,” I said. “But can we talk about this later? You don’t have to walk out right this instant—”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” She jerked into motion again, reaching for the door handle. “You’ve been ignoring me for months, darling: I’m sick of trying to get through to you! You said last time that you’d try not to be so distant, but look how that turned out.” She sighed and froze the pose for a moment, the personification of glittering mechanistic melodrama. “You didn’t mean it. I’m sick of waiting for you, Ralph! If you really loved me you’d face up to the fact that you’re an obsessive-compulsive, and get your

wetware fixed so that you could pay me the attention I deserve. Until then, I'm out of here!"

The door opened. She spun on one chromed stiletto heel, and swept out of my life in a swish of antique Givenchy and ozone.

"Dash it all, not again!" I leaned my forehead against the wall. "Why now, of all times?" Picking a fight then leaving me right before a drop was one of her least endearing habits. This was the fifth time. She usually came back right afterward, when she was loose and lubed from witnessing me scrawl my butchness across the sky, but it never failed to make me feel like an absolute boulder at the time; it's a low blow to strike a cove right before he tries to drill a hole in the desert at mach twenty-five, what? But you can't take femmes for granted, whether they be squish or clankie, and her accusation wasn't, I am bound to admit, entirely baseless.

I wandered into the parlor and stood between the gently rusting ancestral space suits, overcome by an unpleasant sense of aimless tension. I couldn't decide whether I should go back to the simulator and practice my thermal curves again—balancing on a swaying meter-wide slab of ablative foam in the variable dynamic forces of atmospheric re-entry, a searing blow-torch flare of hot plasma surging past, bare centimeters beyond my helmet—or get steaming drunk. And I hate dilemmas; there's something terribly non-U about having to actually *think* about things.

You can never get in too much practice before a freestyle competition, and I had seen enough clowns drill a scorched hole in the desert that I was under no illusions about my own invincibility, especially as this race was being held under mortal jeopardy rules. On the other hand, Laura's walk-out had left me feeling unhinged and unbalanced, and I'm never able to concentrate effectively in that state. Maybe a long, hot bath and a bottle of sake would get me over it so I could practice later; but tonight was the pre-drop competitors' dinner. The club prefers members to get their crashing and burning done before the race—something to do with minimizing our third-party insurance premium, I gather—so it's fried snacks all round, then a serving of rare sirloin, and barely a drop of the old firewater all night. So I was perched on the horns of an acute dilemma—to tipple or topple as it were—when the room phone cleared its throat obtrusively.

"Ralph? Ralphie? Are you all right?"

I didn't need the screen to tell me it was Fiona, my half-sister. Typical of her to call at a time like this. "Yes," I said wearily.

“You don’t sound it!” she said brightly. Fi thinks that negative emotions are an indicator of felonious intent.

“Laura just walked out on me again and I’ve got a drop coming up tomorrow,” I moaned.

“Oh Ralphie, stop angsting! She’ll be back in a week when she’s run the script. You worry too much about her, she can look after herself. I was calling to ask, are you going to be around next week? I’ve been invited to a party Geraldine Ho is throwing for the downhill cross-country skiing season on Olympus Mons, but my house-sitter phoned in pregnant unexpectedly and my herpetologist is having another sex change so I was just hoping you’d be able to look after Jeremy for me while I’m gone, just for a couple of days or maybe a week or two—”

Jeremy was Fiona’s pet dwarf mammoth, an orange-brown knee-high bundle of hairy malevolence. Last time I’d looked after Jeremy he puked in my bed—under the duvet—while Laura and I were hosting a formal orgy for the Tsarevitch of Ceres, who was traveling incognito to the inner system because of some boring edict by the Orthodox Patriarch condemning the fleshpits of Venus. Then there’s the time Jeremy got at the port, then went on the rampage and ate Cousin Branwyn’s favorite skirt when we took him to Landsdown Palace for a weekend with Fuffy Morgan, even though we’d locked him in one of the old guard towers with a supply of whatever it is that dwarf mammoths are supposed to eat. You really can’t take him anywhere—he’s a revolting beast. Not to mention an alcoholic one.

“Must I?” I asked.

“Don’t whine!” Fi said brightly. “Nobody will ever take you seriously if you whine, Ralphie. Anyway, you owe me a favor. Several favors, actually. If I hadn’t covered up for you that time when Boris Oblomov and you got drunk and took Uncle Featherstonehaugh’s yacht out for a spin around the moon without checking the anti-matter reserve in the starboard gravity polarizer....”

“Yes, Fi,” I said wearily, when she finally let me get a word in edge-ways: “I surrender. I’ll take Jeremy. But I don’t promise I’ll be able to look after him if I die on the drop. You realize it’s under mortal jeopardy rules? And I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to protect him from Laura if she shows up again running that bestiality mod your idiot pal Larry thought it would be a good idea to install on her when she was high on pink noise that time—”

“That’s enough about Larry,” Fi said in a voice dripping liquid helium. “You know I’m not walking out with him any more. You’ll look after Jeremy for two weeks and that’s enough for me. He’s been a little sulky lately but I’m sure you’d know all about *that*. I’ll make certain he’s backed up first, then I’ll drop him off on my way to São Paolo skyport, right?”

“What ho,” I said dispiritedly, and put the phone down. Then I snapped my fingers for a chair, sat down, and held my head in my hands for a while. My sister was making a backup of her mammoth’s twisted little psyche to ensure Jeremy stayed available for future torments: nevertheless she wouldn’t forgive me if I killed the brute. Femmes! U or non-U, they’re equally demanding. The chair whimpered unhappily as it massaged my tensed-up spine and shoulders, but there was no escaping the fact that I was stressed-out. Tomorrow was clearly going to be one of those days, and I hadn’t even scheduled the traditional post-drop drink with the boys yet....

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## 2. The New Butler Calls

I was lying on the bottom of the swimming pool in the conservatory at the back of Chateau Pookie, breathing alcohol-infused air through a hose and feeling sorry for myself, when the new butler found me. At least, I think that’s what I was doing. I was pretty far-gone, conflicted between the need to practice my hypersonic p-wagging before the drop and the urge to drink Laura’s absence out of my system. All I remember is a vague rippling blue curtain of sunlight on scrolled ironwork—the ceiling—and then a huge stark shadow looming over me, talking in the voice of polite authority.

“Good afternoon, Sir. According to the diary, Sir is supposed to be receiving his sister’s mammoth in the front parlor in approximately twenty minutes. Would Sir care to be sober for the occasion? And what suit should Sir like to wear?”

This was about four more sirs than I could take lying down. “Nnngk gurgle,” I said, sitting up unsteadily. The breather tube wasn’t designed for speech. Choking, I spat it out. “M’gosh and please excuse me, but who the hell are you?”

“Alison Feng.” She bowed stiffly, from the waist. “The agency sent me, to replace your last, ah, man.” She was dressed in the stark black and white of a butler, and she did indeed have the voice—some very expensive training, not to mention discreet laryngeal engineering, went into producing

that accent of polite condescension, the steering graces that could direct even the richest and most irritable employer in directions less conducive to their social embarrassment. But—

“You’re my new butler?” I managed to choke out.

“I believe so.” One chiseled eyebrow signaled her skepticism.

“Oh, oh jolly good, then, that squishie.” A thought, marinating in my sozzled subconscious, floated to the surface. “You, um, know why my last butler quit?”

“No, sir.” Her expression didn’t change. “In my experience it is best to approach one’s prospective employers with an open mind.”

“It was my sister’s mammoth’s fault,” I managed to say before a fit of coughing overcame me. “Listen, just take the bloody thing and see it’s locked in the number three guest dungeon, the one that’s fitted out for clankie doms. It can try’n destroy anything it bally likes in there, it won’t get very far an’ we can fix it later. *Hic*. Glue the door shut, or weld it or something—one of her boyfriends trained the thing to pick locks with its trunk. Got a sober-up?”

“Of course, sir.” She snapped her fingers, and blow me if there wasn’t one of those devilish red capsules balanced between her white-gloved digits.

“Ugh.” I took it and dry-swallowed, then hiccupped. “Fiona’s animal tamer’ll probably drop the monster off in the porch but I’d better get up’n’case sis shows.” I hiccupped again, acid indigestion clenching my stomach. “Urgh. Wossa invitation list for tonight?”

“Everything is perfectly under control,” my new butler said, a trifle patronizingly. “Now if Sir would care to step inside the dryer while I lay out his suit—”

I surrendered to the inevitable. After all, once you’ve accepted delivery of a dwarf mammoth on behalf of your sister nothing worse can happen to you all day, can it?

Unfortunately, I was wrong. Fiona’s chauffeuse did indeed deposit Jeremy, but on a schedule of her own choosing. She must have already been on the way as Fi was nattering on the blower. While Miss Feng was introducing herself, she was sneakily decanting the putrid proboscidean

into the ornamental porch via her limousine's airlock. She accomplished this with stealth and panache, and made a successful retreat, but not before she completed my sister's act of domestic sabotage by removing the frilly pink restraining rope that was all that kept Jeremy from venting his spleen on everything within reach. Which he commenced to do all over great-uncle Arnold's snooker table, which I was only looking after while he was out-system on business. It was the triumphant squeaking that clued me in that we had problems—normally Jeremy manages to achieve a preternaturally silent approach while he sneaks up on one with mischief in what passes for his mind—as I headed toward the stairs to my dressing room.

“Help me,” I said, gesturing at the porch, from which a duet for Hell's piccolo and bull in a china shop was emanating.

The butler immediately rose in my estimation by producing a bolas. “Would this serve?” she asked.

“Yes. Only he's a bit short for a mammoth—”

Too late. Miss Feng's throw was targeted perfectly, and it would have succeeded if Jeremy had been built to the scale of a typical pachyderm. Alas, the whirling balls flew across the room and tangled in the chandelier while Jeremy, trumpeting and honking angrily, raised his tusks and charged at my kneecaps. “Oh dear,” said the new butler.

I blinked and began to move. I was too slow, the sober-up still fighting the residual effects of the alcohol in my blood. Jeremy veered toward me, tusks raised menacingly to threaten the old family jewels. I began to turn, and was just raising my arms to fend off the monster (who appeared dead-set on editing the family tree to the benefit of Fiona's line) when Miss Feng leaned sideways and in one elegant gesture ripped the ancient lace curtains right off the rail and swiped them across my assailant's tusks.

The next minute remains, mercifully, a confused blur. Somehow my butler and I mammoth-handled the kicking and struggling—not to mention squealing and secreting—Jeremy up the rear staircase and into the second best guest suite's dungeon. Miss Feng braced herself against the door while I rushed dizzily to the parlor and returned with a tube of InstaSteel Bulkhead Bond, with which we reinforced the stout oak partition. Finally my stomach rebelled, quite outraged by the combination of sober-up and adrenaline, at which point Miss Feng diffidently suggested I proceed to the master bathroom and freshen up while she dealt with the porch, the pachyderm, and my suit in descending order of priorities.

By the time I'd cleaned up, Miss Feng had laid a freshly manufactured suit for me on the dresser. "I took the liberty of arranging for a limousine to your club, sir," she said, almost apologetically. "It is approaching eighteen o'clock: one wouldn't want to be late."

"Eighteen—" I blinked. "Oh dear, that's dashed awkward."

"Indeed." She watched me cautiously. "Ah, about the agency—"

I waved my hand dismissively. "If you can handle Jeremy I see no reason why you couldn't also handle great-uncle Arnold when he gets back from Proxima Tau Herpes or wherever he's gone. Not to mention the Dread Aunts, bless 'em. Assuming, that is, you want the job—"

Miss Feng inclined her head. "Certainly one is prepared to assume the role for the duration of the probationary period." *Sotto voce* she added, almost too quietly for me to catch: "although continuing thereafter presupposed that one or both of us survives the experience...."

"Well, I'm glad that's sorted." I sniffed. "I'd better trot! If you could see the snooker table goes for repair and look to the curtains, I'll be off, what-what?"

"Indeed sir." She nodded as if about to say something else, thought better of it, and then held the door open for me. "Good night, sir."

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### 3. The Dangerous Drop Club

I spent the evening at the Dangerous Drop Club, tackling a rather different variety of dangerous drop from the one I'd be confronting on the morrow. I knew perfectly well at the time that this was stupid (not to mention rash to the point of inviting the attention of the Dread Aunts, those intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic), but I confess I was so rattled by the combination of Laura's departure, my new butler's arrival, and the presence of the horrible beast in room two that for the life of me I simply couldn't bring myself to engage in any activity more constructive than killing my own brain cells.

Boris Kaminski was present of course, boasting in a low-key manner about how he was going to win the race and buying everyone who mattered—the other competitors, in other words—as many drinks as they

would accept. That was his prerogative, for, as the ancients would put it, there's no prize for second place; he wasn't the only one attempting to seduce his comrades into suicide through self-indulgence. "We fly tomorrow, chaps, and some of us might not be coming back! Crack open the vaults and sample the finest vintages. Otherwise you may never know...." "Boris always gets a bit like that before a drop, morbidly maudlin in a gloating kind of way. Besides, it's a good excuse for draining the cellars, and Boris's credit is good for it—"Kaminski" is not his real name but the name he uses when he wants to be a fabulously rich playboy with none of the headaches and anxieties that go with his rank. This evening he was attired in an outrageous outfit modeled on something Tsar Putin the First might have worn when presiding over an acid rave in the barbaric dark ages before the re-enlightenment. He'd probably found it in the back of his big brother's wardrobe.

"We know you only want to get us drunk so you can take unfair advantage of us," joshed Tolly Forsyth, raising his glass of Chateau !Kung, "but I say let's drink a toast to you! Feet cold and bottoms down."

"Glug glug," buzzed Toadsworth, raising a glass with his telescoping sink-plunger thingie. Glasses were ceremoniously drained. (At least, that's what I think he said—his English is rather sadly deficient, and one of the rules of the club is: no neural prostheses past the door. Which makes it a bit dashed hard when you're dealing with fellows who can't tell a fuck from a frappé I can tell you, like some high-bandwidth clankie heirs, but that's what you get for missing out on a proper classical education, undead languages and all, say I.) Goblets were ceremonially drained in a libation to the forthcoming toast race.

"It's perfectly all right to get *me* drunk," said Marmaduke Bott, his monocle flashing with the ruby fire of antique stock-market ticker displays: "I'm sure I won't win, anyway! I'm sitting this one out in the bleachers."

"Drink is good," agreed Edgestar Wolfblack, injecting some kind of hideously fulminating fluorocarbon lubricant into one of his six knees. Most of us in the club are squishies, but Toadsworth and Edgestar are both clankies. However, while the Toadster's knobby conical exterior conceals what's left of his old squisher body, tucked decently away inside his eye-turret, Edgestar has gone the whole hog and uploaded himself into a ceramic exoskeleton with eight or nine highly specialized limbs. He looks like the bastard offspring of a multi-tool and a mangabot. "Carbon is the new—" his massively armored eyebrows furrowed—"black?" He's a nice enough chappie and he went to the right school, but he was definitely at the back of the queue the day they were handing the cortical upgrades out.



“Another wee dram for me,” I requested, holding out my snifter for a passing bee-bot to vomit the nectar into. “I got a new butler today,” I confided. “Nearly blew it, though. Sis dumped her pet mammoth on me again and the butler had to clean up before I’d even had time to fool her into swearing the oath of allegiance.”

“How totally horrible,” Abdul said in a tone that prompted me to glance at him sharply. He smirked. “And how is dear Fiona doing this week? It’s ages since she last came to visit.”

“She said something about the Olympic skiing season, I think. And then she’s got a few ships to launch. Nothing very important aside from that, just the après ski salon circuit.” I yawned, trying desperately to look unimpressed. Abdul is perhaps the only member of the club who genuinely out-ranks Boris. Boris is constrained to use a nom de guerre because of his position as heir to the throne of all the Russias—at least, all the Russias that lie between Mars and Jupiter—but Abdul doesn’t even bother trying to disguise himself. He’s the younger brother of his Excellency the Most Spectacularly Important Emir of Mars, and when you’ve got that much clout you get to do whatever you want. Especially if it involves trying to modify the landscape at mach twenty rather than assassinating your elder siblings, the traditional sport of kings. Abdul is quite possibly certifiably insane, having graduated to orbital freestyle re-entry surfing by way of technical diving on Europa and naturist glacier climbing on Pluto—and he doesn’t even have my unfortunate neuroendocrine disorder as an excuse—but he’s a fundamentally sound chappie at heart.

“Hah. Well, we’ll just have to invite her along to the party afterward, won’t we?” He chuckled.

“Par-ty?” Toadsworth beeped up.

“Of course. It’ll be my hundredth drop, and I’m having a party.” Abdul smirked some more—he had a very knowing smirk—and sipped his eighty-year Inverteuchtie. “Everyone who survives is invited! Bottoms up, chaps?”

“Bottoms up,” I echoed, raising my glass. “Tally ho!”

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#### 4. The Sport of Kings

The day of the drop dawned bright and cold—at least it was bright and cold when I went out on the balcony beside the carport to suit up for my ride.

Somewhat to my surprise, Miss Feng was already up and waiting for me with a hot flask of coffee, a prophylactic sober-up, and a good-luck cigar. “Is this competition entirely safe, Sir?” she enquired as I chugged my espresso.

“Oh, absolutely not,” I reassured her: “but I’ll feel much better afterward! Nothing like realizing you’re millimeters away from flaming meteoritic death to get the old blood pumping, what?”

“One couldn’t say.” Miss Feng looked doubtful as she accepted the empty flask. “One’s normal response to incendiary situations that get the blood pumping is a wound dressing and an ambulance. Or to keep the employer from walking into the death trap in the first place. Ahem. I assume Sir *intends* to survive the experience?”

“That’s the idea.” I grinned like an idiot, feeling the familiar pulse of excitement. It takes a lot to drive off the black dog of depression, but dodging the bullet tends to send it to the kennels for a while. “By the way, if Laura calls could you tell her I’m dying heroically to defend her virtue or something? I’ll see her after—oh, that reminds me! Abdul al-Matsumoto has invited us—all the survivors, I mean—to a weekend party at his place on Mars. So if you could see that the gig is ready to leave after my drop as soon as I’ve dressed for dinner, and I don’t suppose you could make sure there’s a supply of food for the little monster, could you? If we leave him locked in the garret dungeon he can’t get into trouble, not beyond eating the curtains—”

Miss Feng cleared her throat and looked at me reproachfully. “Sir *did* promise his sister to look after the beast in person, didn’t he?”

I stared at her, somewhat taken aback. “Dash it all, are you implying...?”

Miss Feng handed me my pre-emptive victory cigar. She continued, in a thoughtful tone of voice: “Has Sir considered that it might be in his best interests—should he value the good opinion of his sister—to bring Jeremy along? After all, Lady Fiona’s on Mars, too, even if she’s preoccupied with the après ski circuit. If by some mischance she were to visit the Emir’s palace and find Sir sans Jeremy it might be more than trivially embarrassing.”

“Dash it, you’re right. I suppose I’ll have to pack the bloody pachyderm, won’t I? What a bore. Will he fit in the trunk?”

Miss Feng sighed, very quietly. “I believe that may be a remote theoretical possibility. I shall endeavor to find out while Sir is enjoying himself not dying.”

“Try beer,” I called as I picked up my surfboard and climbed aboard the orbital delivery jitney. “Jeremy loves beer!” Miss Feng bowed as the door closed. *I hope she doesn’t give him too much*, I thought. Then the gravity squirreler chattered to itself angrily, decided it was on the wrong planet, and tried to rectify the situation in its own inimitable way. I lay back and waited for orbit. I wasn’t entirely certain of the wisdom of my proposed course of action—there are few predicaments as grim as facing a mammoth with a hangover across the breakfast table—but Miss Feng seemed like a competent sort, and I supposed I’d just have to trust her judgment. So I took a deep breath, waited another sixty seconds (until the alarm chimed), then opened the door and stepped off the running board over three hundred kilometers of hostile vacuum.

The drop went smoothly—as I suppose you guessed, or I wouldn’t be here to bend your ear with the story, what? The adrenaline rush of standing astride a ten centimeter thick surfboard as it bumps and vibrates furiously in the hypersonic air-flow, trying to throw you off into the blast-furnace tornado winds of re-entry, is absolutely indescribable. So is the sight of the circular horizon flattening and growing, coming up to batter at your feet with angry fists of plasma. Ah, what rhapsody! What delight! I haven’t got a poetic bone in my body, but when you tap into Toadsworth outside of the club-house’s suppressor field that’s the kind of narcotic drivel he’ll feed you. I think he’s a jolly good poet, for an obsessive-compulsive clankie with a staircase phobia and knobby protrusions; but, at any rate, a more accurate description of competitive orbital re-entry diving I haven’t heard from anyone recently.

A drop doesn’t take long. The dangerous stage lasts maybe twenty minutes from start to finish, and only the last five minutes is hot. Then you slow to sub-sonic velocity and let go of your smoldering surfboard, and pray to your ancestors that your parachute is folded smartly, because it would be mortifying to have to be rescued by the referee’s skiff. Especially if they don’t get to you until after you complete your informal enquiry into lithobraking, eh?

There was a high overcast as I came hurtling in across Utah, and I

think I might have accidentally zipped instead of zagging a little too firmly as I tried to see past a wall of cloud ahead and below me, because when my fireball finally dissipated I found myself skidding across the sky about fifty kilometers off course. This would be embarrassing enough on its own, but then my helmet helpfully highlighted three other competitors—Abdul among them!—who were much closer to the target zone. I will confess I muttered an unsportingly rude word at that juncture, but the game's the thing and it isn't over 'til it's over.

In the end I touched down a mere thirty-three thousand meters off-base, and a couple of minutes later the referees ruled I was third on target. Perry O'Peary—who had been leading me—managed to make himself the toast of the match before he reached the tropopause by way of a dodgy ring seal on his left knee. Dashed bad play, that, but at least he died with his boots on—even if they were glowing red-hot and welded to his ankles.

I caught a lift the rest of the way to the drop base from one of the referee skiffs. As I tromped across the dusty desert floor in my smoldering armor, feeling fully alive for the first time in weeks, I found the party already in full swing. Abdul's entourage, all wearing traditional kimonos and burnouses, had brought along a modified camel that widdled champagne in copious quantities. He held up a huge platinum pitcher: "Drinks are on me!" he yodeled as Tolly Forsyth and some rum cove of a Grand Vizier—Toshiro Ibn Cut-Throat, I think—hoisted him atop their shoulders and danced a victory mazurka.

"Jolly good show, old son!" I called, ditching my helmet and gloves gratefully and pouring a beaker of bubbly over my steaming head. "Bottoms up!"

"B'm's up indeed!" Abdul sprayed camel flux everywhere in salute. He was well into the spirit of things, I could tell; indeed, the spirit of things was well into *him*.

Ibn Cut-Throat's kid brother sidled up behind me. "If Ralphie-sama would care to accompany me to His Majesty's Brother's pleasure barge, we will be departing for Mars as soon as the rest of the guests arrive," he intimated.

"Rest of the guests? Capital, capital!" I glanced round in search of my clankie doxy, but there was no sign of Laura. Which was dashed strange, for she'd normally be all over me by this point in the proceedings: my nearly being turned off in front of an audience usually turned her on like a

knife-switch. “Who else is coming?”

“Lots of people.” Ibn Cut-Throat Junior looked furtive: “it’s a very big party, as befits the prince’s birthday. Did you know it was his birthday...? It’s a theme party, of course, in honor of the adoptive ancestors of his ancient line, the house of Saud.”

Abdul al-Matsumoto is as much an authentic prince of Araby as I am a scion of the MacGregor, but that’s the price we all pay for being descended from the *nouveau riche* who survived the Great Downsizing hundreds of years ago. Our ancestors bought the newly vacated titles of nobility, and consequently we descendants are forced to learn the bally traditions that go with them. I spent years enduring lessons in dwarf-tossing and caber-dancing, not to mention damaging my hearing learning to play the electric bagpipes, but Abdul has it worse: he’s required by law to go around everywhere with a tea-towel on his head and to refrain from drinking fermented grape juice unless it’s been cycled through the kidneys of a re-engineered dromedary. This aristocracy lark has its down side, you mark my words.

“A theme party,” I mused, removing my face from my cup: “that sounds like fun. But I was planning on taking my gig. Is that okey-dokey, as they say? Is there room in the imperial marina?”

“Of course,” said the vizier, leering slightly as a shapely femme wearing a belly-dancer’s costume sashayed past. I noticed with distaste his hairless face and the pair of wizened testicles on a leather cord around his neck: some people think too much testosterone makes a cove stupid, but there’s such a thing as going too far, what? “Just remember, it’s a fancy-dress party. The theme is the thousand nights and one night, in honor of and for the selection of His Excellency’s newest concuboid. His Excellency says you should feel free to bring a guest or two if you like. If you need an outfit—”

“I’m sure my household wardrobe will be able to see to my needs,” I said, perhaps a trifle too sharply. “See you there!”

Ibn Cut-Throat bowed and scraped furiously as he backed away from me. *Something odd’s going on here*, I realized, but before I could put my finger on it there was a whoosh and I saw the familiar sight of my gig—well, actually it’s Uncle Featherstonehaugh’s, but as he’s not due back for six years I don’t think that matters too much—descending to a perfect three-point landing.

I walked over to it slowly, lost in thought, only to meet Miss Feng marching down the ramp. “I didn’t know you could fly,” I said.

“My usual employer requires a full pilot’s qualification, Sir. Military unrestricted license with interstellar wings and combat certification.” She cleared her throat: “Among other skills.” She took in my appearance, from scorched ablative boots to champagne hairstyle: “I’ve taken the liberty of laying out Sir’s smoking jacket in the master stateroom. Can I suggest a quick shower might refresh the parts that Sir’s friends’ high spirits have already reached?”

“You may suggest anything you like, Miss Feng, I have complete confidence in your professional discretion. I should warn you I have a guest tagging along, but he won’t be any trouble. If you show him to the lounge while I change, we shall be able to depart promptly. I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything from Laura?”

She shook her head minutely. “Not so much as a peep, Sir.” She stepped aside. “So, I’m to set course for Mars as soon as the guest is aboard? Very good, Sir. I shall be on the bridge if you need me.”

It appeared that Miss Feng was not only an accomplished butler, but a dashed fine pilot as well. Would miracles never cease?

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## 5. Miss Feng Serves the Wrong Beer

Uncle Featherstonehaugh’s boat is furnished in white oak panels with brass trim, ochre crushed velvet curtains, and gently hissing gas lamps. A curving sofa extends around the circumference of the lounge, and for those tiresome long voyages to the outer system there are cozy staterooms accessible through hidden sliding panels in the walls. It is a model of understated classical luxury in which a cove and his fellows can get discreetly bladdered while watching the glorious relativistic fireworks in the crystal screen that forms the ceiling. However, for the journey to Abdul’s pleasure dome on Mars it suffered from three major drawbacks. For one thing, in a fit of misplaced bonhomie I’d offered Edgestar Wolfblack a lift, and old Edgy wasn’t the best company for a post-drop pre-prandial, on account of his preferred tipples being corrosive or hypergolic, or both. Secondly, Laura was still making her absence felt. And finally, as the icing on the cake, so to speak, Miss Feng had locked Jeremy in the luggage compartment. He was kicking up a racket as only a sober dwarf mammoth with a hangover can, and I could barely hear myself think over the din.

“Dash it all, how much beer did you give him?” I asked my butler.

“Two liters, Sir,” Miss Feng replied. “Of the rather elderly Bragote from the back of your uncle’s laboratory. I judged it the least likely to be missed.”

“Oh dear God!” I cried.

“Bragh-ought?” echoed Edgy, as a plaintive squeal and a loud thud echoed from the under floor bay. By the sound of things Jeremy was trying to dash his brains out on the undercarriage. (Unfortunately a dwarf mammoth’s skull is thick enough to repel meteors and small anti-matter weapons.)

“Was that a mistake?” Miss Feng enquired, unexpectedly tentatively.

I sighed. “You’re new to the household, so I suppose you weren’t to know this, but anything Uncle Featherstonehaugh brewed is best treated as an experiment in creative chemical warfare. He was particular keen on the Bragote: it’s a mediaeval recipe and it requires a few years to mature to the consistency of fine treacle, but once you dilute the alcohol it’s an excellent purgative. Or so I’m told,” I added hastily, not wanting to confess to any teenage indiscretions.

“Oh dear.” Her brow wrinkled. “One suspected it was a little past its prime. There is another firkin in the hold, just in case it becomes necessary to sedate Jeremy again.”

“I don’t think that will work,” I said regretfully. “He’s not *entirely* stupid. Uncle was working on a thesis that the Black Death of 1349 wasn’t actually a plague but a hangover.”

“Blackdeath? Is no posthuman of that nomenclature in my clade,” Edgy complained.

BUMP went the floor beneath my feet, causing my teeth to vibrate. “Only two hours to Mars,” Miss Feng observed. “If Sir will excuse me, I have to see to his costume before arrival.” She retreated into one of the staterooms, leaving me alone with old Edgy and the pachydermal punctuation.

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## 6. Pleasure Domes of Mars: A Primer

I arrived on Mars somewhat rattled, but physically none the worse for wear. Miss Feng had rustled up a burnoose, djellaba, and antique polyester two-piece for me from somewhere, so that I looked most dashing, absolutely in character as a highly authentic Leisure Suit Larry of Arabia. I tried to inveigle her into costume, but she demurred: “I am your butler, Sir, not a party-goer in my own capacity. It wouldn’t be right,” she said, tucking an emergency vial of after-shave in my breast pocket. It’s hard to argue with such certainty, although I have a feeling that she only said it because she didn’t approve of the filmy harem pants and silver chainmail brassiere I’d brought along in hopes of being able to tempt Laura into them. Edgestar we dressed in a rug and trained to spit on demand: he could be my camel, just as long as nobody expected him to pass champagne through his reactor’s secondary coolant circuit. Jeremy emerged from storage pallid and shaking, so Miss Feng and I improvised a leash and decided to introduce him as the White Elephant. Not that a real White Elephant would have menaced the world with such a malign, red-rimmed glare—or have smelled so unpleasantly fusty—but you can’t have everything.

A word about Abdul’s digs. Abdul al-Matsumoto, younger brother of the Emir of Mars, lives in a madly gothic palace on the upper slopes of Elysium Mons, thirteen kilometers above the dusty plain. Elysium Mons is so big you’d hardly know you were on a mountain, so at some time in the preceding five centuries one of Abdul’s more annoying ancestors vandalized the volcano by carving out an areophysical folly, a half-scale model of Mount Everest protruding from the rim of the caldera. Thus, despite the terraforming that has turned the crumbly old war god into a bit of a retirement farm these days, Abdul’s pleasure dome really is a dome, of the old-fashioned *do not break glass, do not let air out (unless you want to die)* variety.

Ground Control talked Miss Feng down into the marina below the sparkly glass facets of the dome, then sent a crawler tunnel to lock on to the door before old Edgy could leap out onto the surface and test his vacuum seals.

The door opened with a clunk. “Let’s go, what?” I asked Jeremy. Jeremy sat down, swiveled one jaundiced eye toward me, and emitted a plaintive honk. “Be like that, then,” I muttered, bending to pick him up. Dwarf mammoths are heavy, even in Martian gravity, but I managed to tuck him under my arm and, thus encumbered, led the way down the tube toward Abdul’s reception.



If you are ever invited to a party by a supreme planetary overlord's spoiled playboy of a younger brother, you can expect to get tiresomely lost unless you remember to download a map of the premises into your monocle first. Abdul's humble abode boasts 2428 rooms, of which 796 are bedrooms, 915 are bathrooms, 62 are offices, and 147 are dungeons. (There is even a choice of four different Planetary Overlord Command Bunkers, each with their own color-coordinated suite of Doomsday Weapon Control Consoles, for those occasions on which one is required to entertain multiple planetary overlords simultaneously.)

If the palace was maintained the old-fashioned way—by squishy servants—it would be completely unmanageable: but it was designed in the immediate aftermath of the Martian hyper-scabies outbreak of 2407 that finished off those bits of the Solar System that hadn't already been clobbered by the Great Downsizing. Consequently it's full of shiny clicky things that scuttle about when you're not watching and get underfoot as they polish the marble flags and repair the amazingly intricate lapis lazuli mosaics and re-fill the oil lamps with extra-virgin olive oil. It still needs a sizable human staff to run it, but not the army you'd expect for a pile several sizes larger than the Vatican Hilton.

I bounced out of the boarding tube into the entrance hall and right into the outstretched arms of Abdul, flanked by two stern, silent types with swords, and a supporting cast of houris, hashishin, and hangers-on. "Ralphie-san!" he cried, kissing me on both cheeks and turning to show me off to the crowd: "I want you all to meet my honored guest, Ralph MacDonald Suzuki of MacDonald, Fifth Earl of That Clan, a genuine Japanese Highland Laird from old Scotland! Ralphie is a fellow skydiver and all-around good egg. Ralph, this is—harrumph!—Vladimir Illich of Ulianov, Chief Commissar of the Soviet Onion." Ulianov grinned: under the false pate I could see it was our old drinking chum Boris the Tsarevitch. "And this—why, Edgy! I didn't recognize you in that! Is it a llama? How very realistic!"

"No, is meant to be a monkey," explained Wolfblack, twirling so that his false camel-skin disguise flapped about. I opened my mouth to tell him that the barrel Miss Feng had strapped to his back to provide support for the hump had slipped, but he turned to Abdul: "You like?"

"Jolly good, that outfit!"

"Pip pip," said Toadsworth, whirring alongside with a glass of the old neurotoxins gripped in one telescoping manipulator. I think it might have been a high-bandwidth infoburst rather than a toast, but due to my

unfortunate hereditary allergy to implants I'm very bad at spotting that kind of thing. "Which way to the bar, old fellow?"

"That way," suggested Ibn Cut-Throat, springing from a hidden trapdoor behind a Ming vase. He pointed through an archway at one side of the hall. "Be seeing you!" His eyeballs gleamed with villainous pro-mise.

A black-robed figure in a full veil was staring at me from behind two implausibly weaponized clankie hashishin at the back of the party. I got an odd feeling about them, but before I could say anything Toadsworth snagged my free hand in his gripper and began to tug me toward the old tipple-station. "Come-on! Inebriate!" He buzzed: "all enemies of sobriety must be inebriated! Pip pip!" Jeremy let out a squealing trumpet blast close to my ear and began to kick. Not having a third hand with which to steady him, I let go and he shot off ahead of us, stubby ears flapping madly in the low Martian gravity.

"Oh dear," said Miss Feng.

"Why don't you just run along and see to my chambers?" I asked, irritated by the thought that the bloody elephant might poop in the punchbowl (or worse, dip his whistle in it) before I got there. "Leave the beast to me, I'll sort him out later."

"Inebriate! Inebriate!" cried Toadsworth, hurtling forward, the lights on his cortical turret flashing frantically. "To the par-ty!"

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## 7. In Which Ralph Explains the Nature of his Relationship with Laura

Now dash it all, it behooves a young fellow to remain discreet and close-lipped about matters of an embarrassingly personal nature. But it's also true to say that this story won't make a lot of sense without certain intimate understandings—a nod's as good as a wink to a deaf robot and all that—and in any event, ever since the minutiae of my personal affairs became part of the public gossip circuit following the unfortunate affair involving the clankie dominatrix, the cat burglar, and the alien hive-mind, it would be somewhat hypocritical of me to stand upon my privacy. So where a more modest cove might hesitate, allow me to step in it and, at risk of offending your sensibilities, explain something about my complex relationship with Laura.

I sometimes fancy that life must have been so much simpler back in

the days of classical Anglo-American civilization, when there were only two openly acknowledged genders and people didn't worry about whether their intimate affairs were commutative, transitive, or reflexive. No clankie/squishie, no U or Non-U, nothing but the antique butch/femme juxtaposition, and that was pretty much determined by the shape of the external genitalia you were born with. Perverts dashed well knew what they were, and life was simple. Modern life is enough to drive a cove to drugs in my opinion, but as a Butch U Squishie of impeccable ancestry I have the social option of maintaining a mistress, not to mention the money, and that's where Laura comes in.

Laura is very clankie and very frilly femme with it, but with a squishy core and sufficiently non-U to make a casual relationship just barely acceptable to polite society on the usual sub-rosa Morganatic basis. We met on a shooting weekend at one of the Pahlavi girl's ranches on Luna, doing our bit for evolution by helping thin the herd of rampaging feral bots during their annual migration across the Sea of Tranquillity. I'm not sure what she was doing there, but I think it was something to do with working her way around the Solar System on a cut-price non-U grand tour: laboring as a courtesy masseuse in Japan and a topiarist on Ceres while saving up the price of her next interplanetary jaunt. Her maternity factory or mother or whoever was sending her a small allowance to help pay her way, I think, but she was having to work as well to make ends meet, a frightfully non-U thing for a cute little clankie princess to have to do. Our eyes met over the open breech of her silver-chased Purdey over-and-under EMP cannon, and as soon as I saw her delicately wired eyelashes and the refractive sheen on her breasts, simultaneously naked and deliciously inaccessible in the vacuum, I knew I had to have her. "Why, I do declare I'm out of capacitors!" she fluttered at me, and I bent over backward to offer her my heart, and the keys to the guest room.

There is something more than a little bit perverse about a squish who chases clankie skirt: even, one might suppose, something of the invert about them; but I can cope with sly looks in public, and our butch/femme U/non-U tuple is sufficiently orthodox to merely Outrage the Aunts, rather than crossing the line and causing Offence. If she showed more squish while being less non-U, I suppose it would be too risqué to carry on in public—but I digress. I trust you can sympathize with my confusion? What else is a healthy boy to do when his lusts turn in a not-quite-respectable direction?

Of course, I was younger and rather more foolish when I first clapped eyes on the dame, and we've had our ups and downs since then. She was, to be fair, unaware of my unfortunate neurohormonal problems: and I wasn't

entirely clear on the costs, both mechanical and emotional, of maintaining a clankie doxie in the style to which she would want to become accustomed. Nor did I expect her to be so enthusiastic a proponent of personality patches, or so prone to histrionic fits and thermionic outrages. I expect I had some surprises for her, too. But we mostly seemed to bump along all right—until that last pre-drop walk-out, and her failure to turn up at the drop zone.

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## 8. Jeremy Runs Amok; A Dreadful Discovery before Dinner

Among the various manners of recovering from the neurasthenic tension that accompanies a drop, I must admit that the one old Abdul had laid on for us took first prize for decadent (that means good) taste. It's hard to remain stressed out while reclining on a bed of silks in a pleasure palace on Mars, with nubile young squishies to drop pre-fermented grapes through your open lips, your very own mouth-boy to keep the hookah smoldering, and a clankie band plangently plucking its various organs in the far corner of the room.

Dancers whirled and wiggled and undulated across the stage at the front of the hall, while a rather fetching young squishie lad in a gold lamé loincloth and peacock feather turban waited at my left shoulder to keep my cocktail glass from underflowing. Candied fruits and jellied European cryoplankton of a most delightful consistency were of course provided. "What-ho, this is the life, isn't it?" I observed in the general direction of Toadsworth. My bot buddy was parked adjacent to my bower, his knobby mobility unit sucking luxuriously conditioned juice from a discreet outlet while the still squishy bits of his internal anatomy slurped a remarkably subtle smoked Korean soy ale from a Klein stein by way of a curly straw.

"Beep beep," he responded. Then, expansively and slowly, "you seem a little melancholy about something, old chap. In fact, if you had hyperspectral imagers like me, you might notice you were a little drawn. Like this: pip." He said it so emphatically that even my buggy-but-priceless family heirloom amanuensis recognized it for an infoburst and misfiled it somewhere. "Indiscretions aside, if there's anything a cove can do to help you—enemies you want inebriated, planets you want conquered—feel free to ask the Toadster, what?"

"You're a jolly fine fellow and I may just do that," I said. "But I'm afraid it's probably nothing you can help with. I'm in a bit of a blue funk—did you know Laura left me? She's done it before several times, of course, but she

always comes back after the drop. Not this time, though, I haven't seen gear nor sprocket of her since the day before yesterday and I'm getting a bit worried."

"I shall make inquiries right away, old chap. The clankie grapevine knows everything. If I may make so bold, she probably just felt the need to get away for a while and lube her flaps: she'll be back soon enough." Toadsworth swiveled his ocular turret, monospectral emitters flashing brightly. "Bottoms up!"

I made no comment on the evident fact that if the Toadster ever did get himself arse over gripper he'd be in big trouble righting himself, but merely raised my glass in salute. Then I frowned. It was empty! "Boy? Where's my drink?" I glanced round. A furry brown sausage with two prominently flared nostrils was questing about the edge of the bower where my cocktail boy had been sitting a moment before.

"Grab him!" I swore at the lad, but I fear it wasn't his fault: Jeremy had already done him a mischief, and he was doubled over in a ball under the nearest curtain, meeping pathetically. Jeremy sucked the remains of my Saturnian ring ice-water margaritas up his nose with a ghastly slurping noise, and winked at me: then he sneezed explosively. An acrid eruption slapped my face. "Vile creature!" I raged, "What do you think you're doing?"

I'm told that I am usually quite good with small children and other animals, but I have a blind spot when it comes to Jeremy. He narrowed his eyes, splayed his ears wide, and emitted a triumphant—not to say alcohol-saturated—trumpet-blast at me. *Got you*, he seemed to be saying. *Why should you two-legs have all the fun?* I made a grab for his ears but he was too fast for me, nipping right under my seat and out the other side, spiking my unmentionables on the way as I flailed around in search of something to throw at him.

"Right! That does it!" People to either side were turning to stare at me, wondering what was going on. "I'm going to get you—" I managed to lever myself upright just in time to see Jeremy scramble out through one of the pointy-looking archways at the back of the hall, then found myself eyeball to hairy eyeball with Ibn Cut-Throat's administrative assistant.

"Please not to create so much of a noise, Ralphie-san," said the junior under-vizier: "His Excellency has an announcement to make."

And it was true. Human flunkies were discreetly passing among the

audience, attracting the guests' attention and quieting down the background of chit-chat. The band had settled down and was gently serenading us with its plucked vocal chords. I glanced after Jeremy one last time: "I'll deal with *you* later," I muttered. Even by Jeremy's usual standards, this behavior was quite intolerable; if I didn't know better, I'd swear there was something up with the blighter. Then I looked back at the stage at the front of the room.

The curtain sublimed in a showy flash of velvet smoke, revealing a high throne cradled in a bower of hydroponically rooted date palms. His Excellency Abdul al-Matsumoto, younger sibling of the Emir of Mars, rose from his seat upon the throne: naked eunuch bodyguards, their skins oiled and gleaming, raised their katanas in salute to either side. "My friends," old Abdul droned in a remarkably un-Abdul like monotone: "It makes me more happy than I can tell you to welcome you all to my humble retreat tonight."

Abdul wore robes of blinding white cotton, and a broad gold chain—first prize for atmosphere diving from the club, I do believe. Behind him, a row of veiled figures in shapeless black robes nudged each other. *His wives?* I wondered, *or his husbands?* "Tonight is the first of my thousand nights and one night," he continued, looking more than slightly glassy-eyed. "In honor of my sort-of ancestor, the Sultan Schahriar, and in view of my now being, quote, too old to play the field, my elder brother, peace be unto him, has decreed a competition for my hand in marriage. For this night and the next thousand, lucky concubines of every appropriate gender combination will vie for the opportunity to become my sole and most important sultana."

"That's right, it's not just a date!" added Ibn Cut-Throat, from the side-lines.

"I shall take the winner's hand in marriage, along with the rest of their body. The losers—well, that's too boring and tiresome to go into here, but they won't be writing any kiss-and-tell stories: they should have made backups before entering the competition, that's not my problem. Meanwhile, I ask you to raise a toast with me to the first seven aspiring princesses of Mars, standing here behind me, and their intelligence and courage in taking up Scheherazade's wager." He sounded bored out of his skull, as if his mind was very definitely busy elsewhere.

Everyone raised a toast to the competitors, but I was losing my appetite even before Ibn Cut-Throat stepped to the front of the stage to explain the terms of the competition, which would begin after the banquet. I may come from a long line of Japanese pretenders to the throne of a sheep-stealing bandit, but we'd never consider anything remotely as

blood-thirsty and mediaeval as this. The prospect of spending a night with dashing young Abdul gave a whole new and unwelcome meaning to losing your head for love, as I suppose befitted a pretender to the crown of Ibn Saud—never mind the Sassanid empire—by way of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. “I don’t think this is very funny,” I mumbled to Toads-worth. “I wish Laura were here.”

Toadsworth nudged me with his inebriator. “I don’t think you need to worry about that, old chap. I spy with my little hyperspectral telescopic imager—”

—Ibn Cut-Throat was coming to the climax of his spiel: “gaze upon the faces of the brave beauties!” He crowed. “Ladies, drop your veils!”

I gaped like a fool as the row of black-garbed femmes behind the prince threw back their veils and bared their faces to the audience. For there, in the middle of the row, was a familiar set of silver eyelashes!

“Isn’t that your mistress, old boy?” Toadsworth nudged me with his inebriator attachment. “Jolly rum do, her showing up here, what?”

“But she can’t be!” I protested. “Laura can’t be that stupid! And I always forget to remind her to take her backups, and she never remembers, so—”

“M ‘fraid it’s still her on the stage, old boy,” commiserated the Toadster. “There’s no getting around it. Do you suppose she answered an advertisement or went through a talent agency?”

“She must have been on the rebound! This is all my fault,” I lamented.

“I disagree, old fellow, she’s not squishy enough to bounce. Her head, anyway.”

I glanced up at the stage, despondent. The worst part of it was, this was all my fault. If I’d actually bothered to pull myself out of my pre-drop funk and talked to her, she wouldn’t be standing on stage, glancing nervously at the court executioners standing to either side. Then I saw her turn her head. She was looking at me! She mouthed something, and it didn’t take a genius of lip-reading to realize that she was saying *get me out of here*.

“I’ll rescue you, Laura,” I promised, collapsing in a heap of cushions. Then my mouth-boy stuck a hookah in the old cake-hole and the situation

lost its urgent edge. Laura wasn't number one on the old chop-chop list, it appeared. There'd be time to help her out of this fix after dinner.

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## 9. An After-Dinner Show; Discussions of Horticulture

Dinner took approximately four hours to serve, and consisted of tiresomely symbolic courses prepared by master chefs from the various dominions of the al-Matsumoto empire—all sixty of them. The resulting cultural *mélange* was certainly unique, and the traditional veal tongue sashimi on a bed of pickled jellyfish cous-cous a l'Olympia lent a certain urgency to my inter-course staggers to the vomitorium. But I digress: I barely tasted a single bite, so deeply concerned was I for the whereabouts of my cyberdoxy.

After the last platter of chili-roast bandersnatch in honey sauce was cleared and the dessert wine piped to our tables, the game show began. And what a game show! I sat there shuddering through each round, hoping against hope that Laura wouldn't be called this time. Ibn Cut-Throat was master of ceremonies, with two dusky-skinned eunuchs to keep track of the score cards. "Contestant Number One, Bimzi bin Jalebi, your next question is: what is his Excellency the Prince's principal hobby?"

Bimzi rested one elaborately be-ringed fingertip on her lower lip and frowned fetchingly at the audience. "Surfing?"

"A-ha ha ha!" crowed Ibn Cut-Throat. "Not quite wrong, but I think you'd all agree she had a close shave there." The audience howled, not necessarily with joy: "so we'll try again. Bimzi bin Jalebi, what do you think his Excellency the Prince will see in you?"

Bimzi rested one elegant hand on a smoothly curved hip and jiggled seductively at the audience: "my unmatched belly-dancing skills and—" wink—"pelvic floor musculature?"

"I'm asking the questions around here!" mugged the vizier, leering at the audience. Everybody ooh'd. "Did you hear a question?" Everybody ooh'd even louder.

"Pip pip," said Toadsworth, quietly. He continued: "I detect speech stress analyzers concealed in the pillars, old boy. And something else."

"Let me remind you," oozed the Vizier, "that you are attending the



court of his Excellency the Prince, and that any untruth told before me, in my capacity as grand high judicar before his court, may be revealed and treated as perjury. And—” he paused while a ripple of conversation sped around the room—”now we come to the third and final cut-off question before you spend a night of delight and jeopardy with his Royal Highness. What do you, Bimzi bin Jalebi, see in my Prince? Truthfully now, we have lie detectors and we know how to use them!”

“Um.” Bimzi bin Jalebi smiled, coyly and winningly, at the audience, then decided that honesty combined with speed was the best policy: “a-mountain-of-gold-but-that’s-not-my-only—”

“Enough!” Cut-Throat Senior clapped his hands together and her a-borning speech was arrested by the snicker-snack of eunuch katanas and a bright squirt of arterial blood. “To cut a long story short, his Excellency can’t stand wafflers. Or gold-diggers, for that matter.” He glanced at one particular section of the audience who, standing under guard, were white with shock, and smiled toothily: “And so, now that we’re all running neck and neck, who’d like to go first?”

“I can’t bear this,” I groaned quietly.

“Don’t worry, old fellow, it’ll be all right on the night,” Toadster nudged me.

To prove him wrong, Ibn Cut-Throat hunted through the herd of candidates and—by the same nightmare logic that causes toast to always land buttered-side down except when you’re watching it with a notepad and counter—who should his gaze fall on but Laura.

“You! Yes, *you!* It could be you!” cried the ghastly little fellow: “Step right up, my dear! And what’s your name? Laura bin, ah, Binary? Ah, such a fragrant blossom, so redolent of machine oil and ceramics! I’d spin her cams any day of the week if I still had my undercarriage,” he confided to the crowd as my pale person of pulchritude clutched a filmy veil around her and flinched. “First question! Are you the front end of an ass?”

Laura shook her head. The crowd fell silent. I tensed, balling my hands into fists. *If only there was something I could do!*

“Second question! Are you the back end of an ass?”

Laura shook her head again, silently. I tried to catch her eye, but she didn’t look my way. I quailed, terrified. Laura is at her most dangerous when

she goes quiet.

“Well then! Let me see. If you’re not the front end of an ass, and you’re not the back end of an ass, doesn’t that mean you’re no end of an ass?”

Laura gave him the old fish-eye for an infinitely long ten seconds then drawled, in her best Venusian butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-her-mouth accent: “Why, I do declare, what is this ‘ass’ you speak of, human, and why are you so eager for a piece of it when you don’t have any balls?”

I was on my feet, staggering uncertainly toward the stage, as Ibn Cut-Throat raised his fists above his head: “We have a winner!” he declared, and the crowd went wild. “You, my fragrant rose, have passed the first test and go forward to the second round! My gentles, let it be known that Laura Binary has earned the right to an unforgettable night of ecstasy in the company of his Excellency the Prince!” *Sotto voce* to the audience: “Such a shame she won’t live long enough to forget it afterward.”

I saw red, of course: dash it, what else is a cove to do but stand up for his lady’s honor? But before I could take a step forward, meaty hands descended on each of my shoulders. “Bed time,” rumbled the guard holding my left arm. I glanced at his mate, who favored me with a suggestive leer as he fingered the edge of his blade.

“Flower bed time,” he echoed.

“Ahem.” I glanced at the stage, where Laura was struggling vainly as a cadre of guards as grotesquely overaugmented as old Edgy wrapped her in delicate silver manacles: “If you don’t mind, old fellow, I’ve got a jolly good mind to tell your master he can take your daisies and push them—”

“*Bed time*,” Miss Feng hissed urgently behind my right ear. “We need to talk,” she added.

“Okay, bed time,” I agreed, nodding like a fool.

Guard number two sighed dispiritedly as he sheathed his sword. “Petunias.”

“What?”

“Not daisies. Petunias.”

“Bed time!” Guard number one said brightly. I think he had a one-track mind.

“We were supposed to bury you under the petunias if you resisted,” Guard number two explained. “It’s so hard on the poor things, they don’t get enough sunlight out here and the soil is too acidic—”

“No, no, see, he’s quite right, if we bury him he’s supposed to be pushing up daisies,” said Guard number one, finally getting hold of the conversation. “So! Are you going to bed or are we going to have to tuck you—”

“I’m going, I’m going,” I said. The homicidal horticulturalists let go of me with visible reluctance. “I’m gone,” I whimpered.

“Not yet, Sir,” said Miss Feng, politely but forcefully propelling me away from the ring of clankie guards surrounding the stage. “Let’s talk about it in private, shall we?”

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## 10. Miss Feng makes a series of Observations

The guards escorted me out of the dining pavilion and up two flights of stairs, then along a passageway to a palatial guest suite which had been made available for the members of the Club. Miss Feng followed, outwardly imperturbable, although I heard her swear very quietly when the guards locked and barred the main door.

“Dash it all.” I stumbled and sat down on a pile of cushions. “I’ve got to rescue her before it’s too late!”

Miss Feng looked at me oddly. “Indubitably, Sir. Although we appear to be locked in a guest suite on the second floor of a heavily fortified palace built by a paranoid lunatic, with guards standing outside the door to prevent any unscheduled excursions. Perhaps Sir would consider an after dinner digestif and a post-prandial nap instead?”

But I was too far gone in my funk to notice: “This is my fault! If only I’d talked to her instead, she wouldn’t be here. This isn’t like Abdul, either. I know him, he’s a good egg. There must be some mistake!”

“If Sir will listen to me for a minute—” Miss Feng drew a deep and exasperated breath, her chest swelling beneath her traditional black jacket

in a most fetching manner—"I believe the key to the problem is not rescuing Miss Laura, but *making a successful escape* afterward. Sir will perhaps recall the planetary defense grasers and orbital arbalests dug into the walls of the caldera? While I am an adequate pilot, I would much prefer our departure from the second-most-heavily fortified noble house on Mars to be facilitated by traffic rather than fire control. And—" she raised one eyebrow, infinitesimally—"Sir *did* promise his sister to take care of her mammoth."

"Dash it all to hell and back!" I bounced to my feet unsteadily: "Who cares about Jeremy?"

Miss Feng fixed me with a steely gaze: "*You* will, if your sister thinks you've mislaid him on purpose, Sir."

"Oh." I nodded, crestfallen, and ambled over to the screen of intricately carved soapstone fretwork that separated the central lounge from the inner servants' corridor. Small thingumabots buzzed and clicked outside, scurrying hither and yon about their menial tasks. "I suppose you're right. Well, then. We need to rescue Laura, retrieve Jeremy from whatever drunken escapade he's got himself into, *and* talk our way out of this. Bally nuisance, why can't life be simple?"

"I couldn't possibly comment, Sir. Compared to covering for one of Prince W the thirteenth's little escapades this should be a piece of cake. Incidentally, did you notice anything odd about the Sheikh Abdul tonight?"

"What? Apart from his rum desire to butcher my beloved—"

"I was thinking more along the lines of the spinal parasite crab someone has enterprisingly planted on him since the race, Sir."

"The spinal what? Dear me, are you telling me he's caught something nasty? Do I need to take precautions?"

"Only if Sir wishes to avoid having his brain hijacked by a genetically engineered neural parasite, his prefrontal lobes scooped out and eaten, and his body turned into a helpless meat puppet. Mr al-Matsumoto's burnoose covered it incompletely, and I saw it when he turned round: you might have noticed he's not quite himself right now. I believe it is being controlled by Toshiro ibn-Rashid, the vizier."

"Oops." I paused a moment in silent sympathy. "Bloody poor show,

that.”

“I’ve seen more than one attempted coup d’etat in my time, Sir, and it occurs to me that this is an unhealthy situation to be in. The banquet continues for three more days, and Sir might usefully question the wisdom of staying to the end. After all, his Excellency’s puppet master didn’t throw a party and invite all of the prince’s personal friends along for no good reason, did he?”

“Then I suppose we’ll just have to rescue Laura and make our escape.” I stopped. “Um. But how?”

“I have a plan, Sir. If you’d start by taking this sober-up, then I’ll explain....”

\* \* \* \*

## 11. A Meeting in the Tunnels

Miss Feng’s Plan was certainly everything you could ask for. One might even suspect her of black ops training, but experience has taught me that it is best to never knowingly underestimate the lethality of a sufficiently determined butler. I confess I harbored certain misgivings about the nature of her proposed offensive—but with stakes this high I was prepared to work to any plan.

However, it was after midnight before we could start, when the guards opened the doors to direct a shambolically intoxicated Edgestar and a thoroughly inebriated Toadsworth into our company. “Pip Paaarrrrp,” Toadsworth burped, drifting to a bumpy halt in the middle of the floor: his cortical turret spun round twice with the force of the belch, as his lights strobed down through the spectrum and went dark.

“Am being pithed,” said Edgestar, shambling into a pillar and collapsing onto two legs. “Huuuurk!”

“Let me help you with that,” I said, stepping forward to relieve him of his camel-hair coat—and the full firkin of Bragote that Miss Feng had secreted beneath it. I nearly dropped the cask: nine gallons of ale is quite an armful, especially when it’s bottled up in corrosion-proof steel and biohazard warning stickers.

“Aaah, that’s better,” mumbled Edgestar, another leg retracting with a hiss of hydraulics and a brief stink of chlorine. “M tired. G’night.”

“Quietly,” Miss Feng reminded me, as I lowered the deadly cylinder to the tiles. “Excellent. I’ll take care of this.” She rolled it on its side, directing it toward the door, as she palmed a pre-emptive sober-up. “I’m sure it will be quite the hit at the squishie servants’ party,” she added, with something very like a shudder.

I tip-toed away from the door as she knocked on it, then dived into my room to hide as the bolts rattled. As a servant, Miss Feng stood a better chance of avoiding suspicion than I—but she had other tasks in mind for which Edgestar, Toadsworth, and I were clearly well-suited. And so I swallowed my misgivings, picked up the sober-up spray, and approached Toadsworth.

“Excuse me old chap,” I essayed, “but are you up for a jolly jape?”

“Bzzzt—” The cortical turret turned toward me and I confronted a red-rimmed eye stalk: “In-ebriate? Par-ty?”

“Jolly good show, Toadster. But I think you might enjoy this first, what?” I flicked the sober-up at him. “Don’t want to let the side down, do we?”

There was a muffled explosion, his cortical turret spun round three times, and steam hissed from under his gasket. “You unspeakable bounder!” He buzzed at me. “That was below the belt!” His lights flashed ominously. “I’ve a good mind to—”

“Whoa!” I held up a hand. “I’m terribly sorry, and I’ll happily demonstrate the depth of my gratitude by groveling in any way you can imagine afterward, but we need to rescue Laura from the harem, and then we need to make our escape from the evil vizier and his mind control minions.”

“Really?” The Toadster froze in place for a moment. “Did you say *evil vizier*? With minions? My favorite kind!”

“Top hat, old boy, top hat!” I waved my hands encouragingly. “All we need to do is get old Edgy awake—”

“Some’buddy mention nominative identifier?” With a whine of overstrained hydraulics Edgestar Wolfblack began to unfold from his heap on the floor. One foot skidded out from under him and ended up scuttling around the skirting board, barking furiously until the Toadster was forced to

shoot it to death with his Inebriator. “Hurrrrk. Query vertical axis of orientation?”

“That way,” I said, pointing at the ceiling. Edgy groaned, and began to quiver and fold in on himself, legs and arms retracting and strange panels extending to reveal a neat set of chromed wheels.

“Vroom,” he said uncertainly. “Where to?”

“To the harem! To rescue Laura and the other contestants, while Miss Feng poisons the squishie servants with Uncle Featherstonehaugh’s Bragote,” I explained. “If you’d be so good as to follow me, chaps....”

I pulled on the black abaya Miss Feng had procured for me, then bent down to tap on the robot servitor’s hatch, clutching the identity beacon Miss Feng had acquired from one of the waitrons during dinner. The hatch deigned to recognize the beacon and opened, for which I was duly grateful.

The servants’ tunnel was built to a more than human scale: not all the bots were small bleepy things. I screwed my monocle firmly into place and hurried along the dank, roughly finished tunnel, blessing my foresight in remembering to download the map. I don’t mind admitting that I was sweating with fright, but at least I was in good company, with Edgestar whizzing alongside like a demented skateboard and the Toadster gliding menacingly through the darkened tunnel, his trusty Inebriator raised and ready to squirt.

Miss Feng’s plan was clear. The unlucky ladies would almost certainly be languishing under lock and key in the harem. Moreover, the harem’s main entrance would be guarded by palace eunuchs, or possibly chaperone-bots. However, she speculated, the servants’ passage would still be open—if we could get past the inevitable guard on the back passage. We would find the chaperone-bot, I would pretend to be a fainting misplaced maiden, and Edgy and the Toadster would play the part of Palace security guards who had found me and were taking me back inside. Getting out would be a little harder, but by then Uncle Featherstonehaugh’s tipple should have taken effect....

Something moved in the tunnel ahead of me and I froze, knock-kneed in fear. I don’t lack moral fiber, it just gives me the runs: I swore under my breath and stopped dead in my tracks as Toadsworth ran over my hem. “What is it?” He buzzed, quietly.

“I don’t know. Shh.”

Holding my breath, I listened. There was a faint shuffling noise, a breathy whistling, and then a clicking noise from the dark recesses of a twisty little side-passage. A shadow moved across the floor, and paused. I sniffed, smelling an unholy foulness of stale sweat and something else, something familiar—I then blinked, as two evil, red-rimmed orbs brimming with pure, mindless hate loomed out of the darkness toward me.

“Jeremy!” The delinquent dwarf reared back, waving his tusks drunkenly in my face, and I could see his trunk begin to flare, ready to blow a betraying blast on the old blower. There was only one thing for it—I reached out and grabbed. “Hush, you silly old thing! If they hear you, they’ll kill you, too!”

Grabbing a mammoth by the trunk—even a hung-over miniature mammoth who’s three sheets to the wind and tiddly to the point of winking-is not an act I can recommend to the dedicated follower of the quiet life. However, rather than responding with his usual murderous rage at the universe for having made him sixteen sizes too small, Jeremy blinked at me tipsily and sat down. For a moment I dared to hope that the incident would pass without upset—but then the gathering *toute* came out *suite*, and the foul little beast sneezed a truly elephantine blast of beer-smelling spray in my direction. I let go instinctively: he struggled back to his feet and began to reverse shambolically into the tunnel, with a mistrustful glare directed over my left shoulder. I tried to scuttle after him, only to be brought up short by the Toadster, who was still parked on my skirt. “Dash it all, men, follow that mammoth!”

With a brain-rattling crash, a fiendishly stealthed black chaperone-bot jumped over my suddenly stationary form, slipped on the snot-lubed floor, tumbled head-over-heels into the far wall, and crashed to the ground in a shower of spiked armor and vicious stabby bits. I nearly jumped right out of my skin—indeed, I believe separating me from my integument had been the sole purpose of its acrobatic display.

Before I could gather my disguise and my wits and run, Edgestar revved up to speed and whizzed past me. Vrooming like a very vroomy thing, he jumped on the bally bot in a most unfriendly manner! It was a sight to see, I can assure you. The chaperone-bots of al-Matsumoto look a lot like Edgestar in humanoid form, only less convivial and disinclined to a discreet afternoon tippie when they could be out and about, briskly ripping unfortunates limb from limb. But being bots, they lack the true élan and esprit of a clankie, and even a hung-over tea-trolley posthumanoid is a fearsome thing to behold when it gets its cricket box on. Jeremy



scampered off into the bowels of the palace honking tunelessly; meanwhile, old Edgy bounced up and down on the combat robot's abdomen, squeaking furiously and spinning his wheels. They had cute little cutting disks on their inner rims! The chaperone-bot lay on its back, stiletto-tipped legs curling over and inward to stab repeatedly at the assailant on its abdomen, but Edgy was too fast for it. Presently it stabbed too enthusiastically for its own good—and Edgestar yanked hard, pulling the stinger under the edge of a gaping inspection panel. With a triumphant squeal of brakes he leapt off the chaperone-bot just in time, transforming back into humanoid form in mid-air as sparks began to fly and an acrid smoke poured from its joints.

“Jolly good show, that transformer!” I exclaimed.

“Pip-pip!” said the Toadster, regaining some of his *joie de vivre*.

I consulted my map again. “The back door to the harem is just around the corner! I say old chap, I think you've cleared the last obstacle. Let's shuftie, shall we? If we're to be home by tea it behooves us to get our move on.”

\* \* \* \*

## 12. I Find Laura in Questionable Company

Well, to cut a long story short, there I was in the harem of the Emir of Mars's younger brother, surrounded by adoring femmes, while my two fellows from the Club made themselves scarce. “Darling,” Laura trilled, reclining in my arms, “I do confess, I am so *touched!* Hic.”

“I know, my dear, but we can't stay here.” I quickly outlined what I knew. “Miss Feng thinks the evil Vizier is conspiring to build resentment against the oppressive and harsh autocracy of the al-Matsumoto clan, and intends to use it to foment a revolt.”

“But the al-Matsumotos aren't harsh and autocratic!” complained one of the ladies, a cute blonde bimbettebot in filmy harem pants and tank top: “they're cute!” The room descended into giggles, but I frowned, for this was no laughing matter.

“They'll be harsh and autocratic by the time Ibn Cut-Throat's spinal crab is through with Abdul! Dash it all, do you want to be decapitated? Because that's what's going to happen if the Vizier seizes power! He won't have any use for you—he's the chief eunuch! He's an ex-man, and his

special power is chopping off heads! He probably thinks testosterone is something you catch from sitting too many exams.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can fix *that*,” a dusky six-armed beauty informed me with a flick of her aristocratic nose: “I didn’t study regenerative medicine for nothing.” Her arch look took in Laura: “Why don’t you take yourself and your tin-plate tart and leave us to sort out the matter of succession? She was only going to go down hard in the talent show round, anyway.”

“Pip-pip!” called Toadsworth, sailing from one vaulted side-chamber to another in pursuit of a giggling conical debutante, a silk favor knotted around his monocular. “Party back at my pad, old chap! Bring a knobby pal! Inseminate! Inseminate! Bzzt!” I looked away before the sight of his new plug-in could scar my retinas for life. You can’t take these clankie stallions anywhere in polite company, they can’t so much as wink at a well-lubed socket without wanting to interface with it—

“She’s right, darling, we must be going.” Laura laid her elegant head on my shoulder and sighed. “Oh I do declare, my feet are killing me.” I scooped her up in my arms, trying to see over a faceful of frills.

“I’ve missed you so much,” I told her. “But what are you doing here anyway?”

“Hush.” She kissed me, and for a moment the world went away: “My brave, butch, bullish Ralphie!” She sighed again. “I was going to hold out until after the race! But I had just checked into the Hilton when I received a telephone call saying there was a gentleman waiting to see me in the lobby.”

Jealousy stabbed at me. “Who was it?” I asked, cringing and glancing away as Edgestar rolled past, having transformed himself into a tentacularly enhanced chaise lounge for the amusement of the blonde bimbettebot, who appeared to be riding him around the room using his unmentionables as a joystick.

“I don’t remember,” she said dreamily. “I woke up here, waiting for my prince—you! I do declare—but Toshiro said he was arranging a surprise for you, and there’d be a party, and then it all went a little vague—”

I can tell you, I was freezing inside as I began to realize just how disoriented she was. “Laura, what’s gotten into you?”

“Not you, not lately!” she said sharply, then lapsed back into dreamy

incoherence: “But you came to rescue me, Ralphie, oh! He said you would. I swoon for you! Be my love rocket again!”

I saw a small, silver receptacle on a nearby table, and my heart sank: she’d clearly been at the happy juice. Then I sneaked a peek at the sockets on the back of her neck, under her hairline, and gasped. Someone had planted a hedonism chip and a mandatory override on her! No wonder she was acting out of sorts.

I plucked the ghastly thing out and dropped it on the floor. “Laura, stand up!” I cajoled. “We’ve got to be leaving. There’s a party to be going to, don’t you know? Let’s go.”

“But my—” She wobbled, then toppled against me: “Whoops!” She giggled. “*Hic.*” I might have pulled the chips out of the fryer but my fish was still thoroughly pickled.

I hadn’t expected this, but Miss Feng had insisted I take a reset pill, just in case. I hated to use the thing on her—or rather, Laura hated it, and this invariably led to a fight afterward—but sobriety is a lesser evil than being trapped in a castle by a mad vizier while subjected to mood-altering implants, what? So I pressed the silver cap against the side of her neck and pushed the button.

Laura’s jaws closed with an audible click, and she tensed in my arms for a second. “Ouch,” she said, very quietly. “You bastard, you know I hate that. What’s going on?”

“You’re on Mars and we’re in a bally fix, that’s what’s going on. This Ibn Cut-Throat fellow’s a thoroughly bad egg. He’s sneaked a spinal crab onto old Abdul, I think he picked you up because he wants a handle on me, and doubtless that’s why the rest of the Club’s all here—we’d be first to notice a change in our boy Abdul’s behavior, wouldn’t we? The cad’s obviously set up the sticky wicket so he can bowl us all out in one inning.”

“Dear me.” Laura stood up straight and took a step away from me. “Well, then we’d better be going, darling.” She straightened her attire and looked around, raising one sculpted eyebrow at my dishevelment. “Do you know how to get out of here?”

“Certainly.” I took her hand in mine, and led her toward the central lounge. “I’m sure there must be a way out around here somewhere....”

“Over there,” offered bin-Sawbones, pointing: “you can’t miss it, head

for the two hulking eunuchs and the evil vizier.” She pushed me hard in the small of my back. “Sorry, but business is business and when you’re trying to marry the second richest man on Mars you can’t be too picky, eh?”

\* \* \* \*

### 13. Jeremy Pulls it off

The exit was unfortunately obstructed by Ibn Cut-Throat and his merry headsmen—with Abdul in tow, glassy-eyed and arms outstretched, muttering about brains. And Ibn Cut-Throat had spotted us!

One thing I *will* credit the blighter with: his sense of spectacle was absolutely classical. “Ah, Mister MacDonald!” he cried, menacingly twirling the anti-chemwar vibrissae glued to his upper lip. “How disappointing to see you here! I must confess I hoped you’d have sense enough to stay in your room and keep out of trouble. I suppose now you hope I’m going to tell you all my plans, then lock you in an inadequately secured cell so you can escape? I’m afraid not: I shall simply have you cut off shortly, chop-chop. My game’s afoot, and none will stop it now, for the ineluctable dialectic of history is on my side!”

“I don’t care what your dastardly scheme is, I have a bone to pick with you, my man!” I cried. The two headsmen took a step forward, and Laura clung to me in fear—whether feigned or otherwise I could not tell. “How dare you kidnap my concubine on the eve of a drop! That’s not cricket, or even baseball, and it’ll be a cold day in hell before I see you in any of my clubs, even by the tradesmen’s entrance!” Meanwhile, Laura thrust a shapely arm inside my abaya and was fumbling with something in my dinner jacket pocket; but my attention was fixed on the villain before me.

“Clubs.” The word dropped from his lips with stony disinterest. “As if the degenerate recreations of the class enemy would be of any interest to me!” I shuddered: it’s always a bad sign when the hired help starts talking in polysyllables. One of his nostrils flared angrily. “Clubs and sports and jolly capers, that’s all you parasites think of as you gobble down our surplus wealth like the monstrous leeches you are!” I’d struck a nerve, as I could see from the throbbing vein in his temple and the set of his jaw. “Bloated ticks languishing in the lap of luxury and complaining about your parties and fashions while millions slave for your banquets! Bah.” Laura unwrapped her arm from my robe and covered her face, evidently to shield herself from the scoundrel’s accusations. “When we strive to better ourselves you turn your faces away and sneer, and when we give up you use us as beasts of burden! Well, I’ve had enough. It’s time to return your stolen loot to the

toiling non-U proletarian masses.”

My jaw dropped. “Dash it all, man, you can’t be serious! Are you telling me you’re a...?”

“Yes,” he grated, his eyes aflame with vindictive glee: “the crisis of capitalism is finally at hand, at long last! It’s about seven centuries and a Great Downsizing overdue, but it’s time to bring about the dictatorship of the non-U and the resurrection of the proletariat! And your friend Abdul al-Matsumoto is going to play a key role in bringing about the final raising of class consciousness by fertilizing the soil of Olympus with the blood of a thousand maidens, and then crown himself Big Brother and institute a reign of terror that will—”

Unfortunately I can’t tell you how the Ibn-Cut Throat Committee for the Revolution intended to proceed, because we were simultaneously interrupted by two different people: namely, by Laura, who extended her shapely hand and spritzed him down with after-shave: and then by Jeremy.

Now, it helps to be aware that harems are not exactly noted for their testosterone-drenched atmosphere. I was, of course, the odd squishie out. Old Edgy was clearly hors de combat or combat des whores (if you’ll strangle my French) and the Toadster was also otherwise engaged, exploring conic sections with the fembot he’d been chasing earlier. But aside from myself and Ibn Cut-Throat—and, I suppose, Abdul, if he was still at home upstairs what with that crab-thingie plastered to his noggin—they were the only remotely butch people present.

Jeremy had been in smelly, sullen retreat for the past week. Not to put too fine a point on it, he was in musth, that state in which a male mammoth or elephant hates and resents other males because the universe acquires a crystal clarity and his function in life is to ... well, Edgestar and Toadsworth got there first, minus the trumpeting and displays of aggression, but I’m sure you understand? There were no other small male mammals present, but Jeremy was well aware of his enemy, and his desperate need to assert his alpha-male dominance before he could go in search of cows to cover—and more importantly, there was one particular scent he associated with the enemy from long mutual acquaintance. His enemy smelled like *me*. But *I* was shrouded in a blackly occlusive robe, while Ibn Cut-Throat had just been doused in my favorite splash. And whatever Jeremy’s other faults, he’s never been slow to jump to a conclusion.

I do not know what passed through the 80 percent of Jeremy’s cranial capacity that serves as target acquisition and fire control, but he made his

choice almost instantly and launched himself straight for where Ibn Cut-Throat's crown jewels had once resided. Proboscideans are not usually noted for their glide ratio, but, in the weaker than accustomed Martian gravity, Jeremy was positively aerobatic, as he jumped with grace and elegance and tusks, straight for Toshiro's tushie.

"Tally ho, old boy!" I shouted, giving him the old school best, as Laura took two steps smartly forward and, raising her skirts, daintily kick-boxed headsman number one in the forehead with one of her most pointed assets—for her ten centimeter stiletto heels are not only jolly fine pins, they're physical extensions of her chrome-plated ankles.

Now I confess that things looked dicey when headsman number two turned on me with his axe and bared his teeth at me. But I'm not the Suzuki of MacDonald for nothing, and I know a thing or two about fighting! I threw the abaya back over my head to free my arms, and pointed Toadsworth's Inebriator—which he had earlier entrusted to my safekeeping in order to free up a socket for his Inseminator—at the villain. "Drop it! Or I'll drop you!" I snarled.

My threat didn't work. The thug advanced on me, and as he raised his blade I discovered to my horror that the Toadster must have some very double-jointed fingers in order to work that trigger. But just as the barber of Baghdad was about to trim my throat, a svelte black silhouette drew up behind him and poured a canister of vile brown ichor over his head! Screaming and burbling imprecations, he sank to the floor clawing at his eyes, just in time for Laura to finish him off with a flamenco stomp.

Miss Feng cleared her throat apologetically as she lowered the empty firkin to the floor. (The brightly painted tiles began to blur and run where its damp rim rested on them.) "Sir might be pleased to note that one has taken the liberty of moving his yacht round to the tradesmen's entrance and disabling the continental defense array in anticipation of Sir's departure. Was Sir planning to stay for the bombe surprise, or would he agree that this is one party that he would prefer to cut short?"

I glanced at Ibn Cut-Throat, who was still writhing in agony under Jeremy's merciless onslaught, and then at the two pithed headsman. "I think it's a damned shame to outstay our welcome at any party, don't you agree?" (Laura nodded enthusiastically and knelt to tickle Jeremy's trunk.) "By all means, let's leave. If you'd be so good as to pour a bucket of cold water over Edgy and the Toadster, I'll take Abdul in hand and we can drop him off at a discreet clinic where they treat spinal crabs, what-what?"

“That’s a capital idea, Sir. I shall see to it at once.” Miss Feng set off to separate the miscreants from their amorous attachments.

I turned to Laura, who was still tickling Jeremy—who by now was lying on his back, panting—and raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t he sweet?” she sang.

“If you say so. You’re carrying him, though,” I said, ungratefully. “Let’s hie thee well and back to Castle Pookie. This has been altogether too much of the wrong kind of company for me, and I could do with a nightcap in civilized company.”

“Darling!” She grabbed me enthusiastically by the trousers: “and we can watch a replay of your jump together!”

And indeed, to cut a long story short, that’s exactly what we did—but first I took the precaution of locking Jeremy in the second best guest suite’s dungeon with a bottle of port, and gave Miss Feng the night off.

After all, two’s company but three’s jolly confusing, what?