
Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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Editorial

Down at the Bottom of the Sea!

Being able to treat ourselves to colour covers raises a lot of potential problems. There is so much more to think about – the stark simplicity of our previous black and white covers is now a fond and distant memory, and the potential for making a mistake is all too large, as I fear I discovered in the course of creating the over-cooked cover for issue fifteen. This issue, however, the potential of colour was demonstrably unlocked, as we procured the wonderful piece of illustrative artwork that has already met you on the way in. The artist of this amazing window into the world of Howard Phillips is one John Shanks, proprietor of Homegrown Goodness, which he describes as a site for people who don't care that they can't draw. "With animals. And celebrities." It's at www.homegrowngoodness.co.uk – visit now, while he's still taking requests!

Said cover has doubtless alerted you the main content of this issue: the next instalment in the Saturation Point Saga, as Howard relates to us *The Doom That Came to Sea Base Delta!* The serialisation of this novel will be concluded in issue seventeen (unless something better comes up before then). If any readers are tiring of Howard's neverending quest, I'm very sorry! I'm just glad to see an old friend reunited with his muse – if he wrote a novel every week I would up the frequency of TQF to match, that I could publish them all!

In previous issues, forty or so pages of prime Phillips would have been considered more than enough to make an issue complete, but not this time! This is the issue that keeps on giving. For dessert, Lawrence Dagstine, editor of esteemed journal, *The Literary Bone*, brings us the tale of a "Our Plight on Amaros". If there's one thing we love at TQF, it's a high concept tale with lashings of adventure and thoughtfulness, and that's exactly what we have here. After reading it, ask yourself, would we have treated *them* any better if they came to *our* planet?

This issue also brings the next part in what is intended to be a five-part serial of very short stories, *After All*, by Michael Wyndham Thomas. The first part of this mysterious tale appeared in issue fifteen, as part of our Silver Age Treasury of Fantastic Literature.

Wash that down with another sip of Newton Braddell! Surely there will come a day when this series will be regarded as one of the greatest short story cycles of all time, if not the greatest of them all! Maybe it's time for the Foundation saga to make room on that pedestal!

What else? Another Lost Classic of the Silver Age, a tale of one Cleabella Danger, thanks to the plucky fellow who rescued her book from a space pirate! And dropped into the mix at the very last minute, an extract from the novel-in-progress, *Chameleon Man Gets Lost*, by Caroline Marwitz: "The Good Fortune Driving School for Men". You lucky readers! There's also another incredible episode in the life of Helen and her magic cat! – *SWT*

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News

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction: the Future of Fantastic Literature!

Despite the exciting title, this is a fairly technical, dull news item, so feel free to hop onto the next one along if that isn't what you are in the mood for right now!

In issue fourteen you might remember a brief news item declaring that with its next issue TQF would switch to an A5 format.

Readers might have been surprised, then, when issue fifteen arrived on their doormats, to find that it was still A4-sized.

We thought that our many, many readers deserved some kind of explanation, especially if they had gone to the trouble of rearranging their bookshelves and buying new binders in anticipation of the new format.

Switching to A5 seemed like a good idea at the time – copying and postage are cheaper at that size, and we could have done the binding ourselves. It would have let us cut the price per issue to a more reasonable level, one where we might realistically have hoped for people to buy a copy or two!

However, we then started to look into other options, and found that with www.lulu.com, for about the same price as before, we could continue to print the magazine at A4, add a colour cover, and even increase the page count quite a bit, all of which is in addition to the distribution benefits of having the issues available on Lulu.

Overall, it means that the prices of an individual issue remains ridiculously high, but, to balance that, all issues are still free to download, and we'll be publishing a very cheap bound volume at the end of each year. We have already collected years one, two and three of TQF in appropriately titled volumes, so be sure to check

out www.lulu.com/silveragebooks and buy them! For only about twenty quid you could hold our entire history in your hands!

Great thanks to Genie Printing and Mailing of Bull Street, Birmingham (formerly known as a branch of Alphagraphics), who did a terrific and professional job for us on all of our previous issues, on what must have been quite a fiddly little job.

Why Not Join the British Fantasy Society?

Deep inside this issue, you will find an advertisement for the British Fantasy Society, to whose august membership our own SW Theaker was recently admitted.

Perhaps you should consider joining him there? All it takes is a paltry £25, and in return you receive a year's subscription to two publications, the respect of your peers, and the chance to enter into conversation with some of Britain's greatest writers, DF Lewis and Ramsey Campbell among them!

One thing to bear in mind during your decision-making is that the Society covers not only fantasy in the modern publishing sense, but fantastical fiction in all its many forms, so fans and writers of science fiction and horror are as welcome there as the devotees of Robert E Howard.

Consider the example of Silver Age Books – a week ago no one had heard of us, save our trusty band of readers, and now we are household names – surely you heard Margaret Atwood praising the incomparable quality of our talking squid in outer space (as seen in TQF#11) on BBC Radio 9 this week?

THE SATURATION POINT SAGA

THE DOOM THAT CAME TO

SEA BASE DELTA

Howard Phillips

Previously, in the Saturation Point Saga...

After releasing an album which, despite its colossal commercial success, failed to achieve the artistic heights of which he has dreamed, Howard Phillips travels the world to assemble the members of the perfect band. He has recently returned from an adventure on a far-off world, but don't worry if you missed his account of that voyage, he'll fill you in as he goes, unless his mind's on the teletext again...

Howard in a Hotel Room

For my efforts in saving the world from the clutches of the evil Envians, and their nefarious leader, Zuvanos, my fame increased, for a short while. For the year following my return, I was able to do little to progress the sound of my band, Howard Phillips and the

Saturation Point, due to the necessity of appearing on various talk shows, news programmes, and children's radio broadcasts to explain that the threat was over. The world took a long time to be reassured. I was something of an Al Gore in reverse. While he spent years travelling the world to convince everyone that it needed saving, I did the same, for one year at least, to show them that it had *already* been saved, though from a different danger.

My band continued to practise among them-

selves, even going so far as to play a couple of support slots – under the name The Grand Burton – and it did a lot for their confidence. At that point there were still just the two of them. The drummer I had recruited during the adventure of *The Ghastly Mountain* (as yet largely unpublished). The guitarist had formerly been a Prince of Envia, enslaved and exploited by his evil father. I won't explain the awful details of his treatment here, for fear of spoiling the plot of that book for any who encounter this one first, but suffice it to say that he was quite literally one with his guitar – and it showed in his magnificent playing.

It might seem odd that I spent so long away from them, rather than combining my talents with theirs to take music to the next level, but even from our very first jam I had known that there was a missing element to our music, and hence, as I travelled the world, delivering my message of optimism and peace, I kept my eyes open for a bass player who could bass like no other.

I pondered these things as I sat, alone, in my hotel room. Far, far away the Mountain Drummer and the former Prince of Envia would be in a similar room, doubtless enjoying themselves in ways that could only be conceived of by musicians. Maybe I should have brought the guys with me, I thought sadly. Who knew how long this quest for a bassist would continue? What's more, the two of them would be fine allies to have alongside me in any adventure, the Mountain Drummer's great strength being beyond compare, and the Prince's guitar being an extremely effective weapon when needed.

From the minibar I took a tiny bottle of whiskey, and enjoyed the drinking of it. I could drink no more than that for now, partly because of my history as a sometime alcoholic, and partly because I was due to appear on Letterman that night. Here I go again, I thought to myself, laughing to distract others from the pointlessness of living. They had been saved from enslavement at the hands of the dread Zuvanos, yes, but they still faced inevitable death. We all did. Well, perhaps not Letterman. He would probably be archived at some institute, frozen,

just like King Arthur (for further details see *My Adventures in the Future Camelot*, not yet published), ready to be disinterred in times of great national need.

I laughed, and began to look forward to the interview. On the occasions when I had watched his programme, Letterman had been frequently hilarious. At times he showed too little hesitance to go for the easy jokes, ones based on media caricatures of celebrities, rather than real insight, but who could blame him? He had a show to perform, more or less every weeknight, and people tuned in, expecting to hear those jokes – they would have been disappointed if he hadn't – and no one else could tell them quite so well.

There was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" I called. "I'm busy."

"Sorry! I didn't mean to disturb you. I'm here from the show."

It was a female voice, and she sounded pretty. Immediately I was intrigued. Howard Phillips is known for many things to many men, but to women he is known above all for the intensity of his passion, and the candour of his gaze. I got to my feet and opened the door. It had not been locked, but I would not have had her open the door to see me wallowing on the bed, locked in maudlin theorising.

"Hello," I said, with a suaveness that surprised even myself.

She blushed, and struggled to find her voice. She fluttered a hand in front of her face, as if to give herself air. I was not unused to this effect. Women tend to find you fascinating when they hear that you have saved the world. Whether Al Gore experienced the same effect from merely *planning* to save the world, I know not. Some day perhaps we would run into one another on one of these chat shows and find some time to talk between ourselves, and compare notes on world-saving strategies. Perhaps, but that is for the reader to find out. As is often the case, the tale I am about to tell is a terrible one, and I would not want you going into it with the assumption that I survived. All my life I have been an inveterate chronicler of my own affairs, and so you would not be to know if this chapter had been the last I ever wrote. I could die in mor-

tal torment, battling some beast from an alien dimension, right after writing this word – or this one here! If that should ever happen, or if indeed it has already happened, by the time you read this, I hope that some other writer would pick up (or has already picked up) the pen and brought my narrative to a close.

Sorry, where was I? Ah yes, a blushing lady – does the story need to go any further? I suppose it must, though I concede the point with great reluctance.

“I’m sorry,” I said with a smile. “I did not mean to put quite so much fervour into that ‘hello’. If it startled or overwhelmed you somewhat, you have my fullest apologies. I’ve been alone in my hotel room for a number of hours, and to have such a lovely voice reach in to rescue me from my loneliness was the stuff of which my dreams were being fashioned, ready for when I sleep tonight.”

She smiled, swallowed, and finally found her voice. “Sorry, Howie, I just got a bit flustered. It’s the British accent, you see. And you saving the world and everything. Not every celebrity I meet has done that. A few of them think that they have” – she raised her eyebrows in pretend amazement – “but making a movie is not really in the same league as defeating an alien dictator.”

She called me Howie.

Here I was faced with a situation which most men encounter at some point. A promising encounter with a good-looking girl, who seems to have taken an interest. (It could just as easily happen to be a good-looking fellow, of course.) Then she says something that, normally, would cause you great offence. Some girls will say something offensive about foreigners. Others will reveal that they watch *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*. I once knew a girl who believed that we can see ghosts when we are children, but that we train ourselves to ignore them. All such things are guaranteed to fill a man with horror, disgust or pity, none of which are emotions providing an ideal impetus to courtship. The question every man must ask himself then is whether the hotness of the woman in question will compensate for her

offensive opinions. The answer to that will often depend on the purpose for which you have engaged with her: in the short-term the answer, is the statement is not too repulsive – say if she watches either *EastEnders* or *Coronation Street*, but not both of them – might be yes, while in the long-term it will be no.

Where did calling me Howie fit on that scale? It was, objectively, not as bad as racism, I thought begrudgingly, but certainly worse than believing in ghosts. On the other hand, she was exceptionally pretty. She did not have brown skin, but although my expressed preference is for ladies of that hue, due to certain teenage experiences, I can appreciate women of all kinds for their own virtues. I can find a tall woman attractive because she is tall, and a short woman attractive because she is short. I can desire a chubby woman on account of her plumpness, and a skinny woman on account of her skinniness. So although I do have a particular type, as seen in the hiring of my palanquinettes (see *His Nerves Extruded*, published in *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* #9–11), that has never stopped me from appreciating other women. This lady at the door had striking black hair, parted in the middle, and rolling in waves away from her face, almost as she was walking into a breeze. Her skin was pale, with a hint of freckles across her cheeks. I could tell she had taken some pains to conceal them, and felt like advising her against it, but perhaps she felt society, that cruel tyranniser of women, demanded it, and maybe it did, because who can ever see a pretty freckle-faced girl without marvelling at her cuteness, and thus giving not a second's thought to what she is talking about? Apparently research has shown that men pay less attention to female newsreaders in general, and tend to just stare into their eyes – in such a world, how could I criticise this lovely girl for covering up her lovely freckles?

Her eyes were green, which you must surely agree is a very beautiful colour for eyes. I found them enchanting, and was almost reduced to an apoplexy similar to hers after I allowed myself to stare into them a bit too long.

Her arms were long, but not too thin, and not too long.

At that time I could not have told you anything about the rest of her figure – I would have been embarrassed to undertake a thorough examination at such close quarters, and at such short acquaintance. However, I later noted that her bosom was of a size that performed all necessary aesthetic duties, without being so large as to cause her any back problems in later life. Her legs were long and slim, but her knees perhaps a bit chunky, though as I say I did not discover that during our first encounter.

She was wearing a pale blue v-necked pullover with no shirt beneath, and a small shining diamond on a golden necklace did its best to tempt my view into an area which I am too much of a gentleman to invade until invited. My gaze is candid, but not intrusive. Did the necklace's location provide such an invitation? Such an argument could be made, but as any such invitation was in likelihood only offered by her subconscious impulses, taking her up on it in such a blatant fashion might lead her conscious mind to take umbrage.

A knee-length black skirt complemented the sweater. She was dressed in a casual but efficient manner. There was no flim-flammery about her – she knew she looked good without weighing herself down with gimcracks and trinkets.

But look at this – it is long past time to end this first chapter! I have found myself utterly captivated by my own description of this unknown caller at my door, and lost my way entirely. No matter – she will play an important role in this narrative, and in the next chapter we might even learn her name.

On the Way Down

“Yes, I’m Howie,” I said to her. “Um, Howard Phillips, that is. Sorry about the accent. I’ll try to dial down the charm a bit – wouldn’t want things to become unprofessional!”

She smiled again, and it was a smile that transformed her face from top to bottom, making it beautiful in an entirely different way. The

dullest faces are those that never change, however beautiful they are. The most wonderful faces are the ones that never look quite the same from one moment to the next, those that offer surprising new aspects with each glance. “Howard, I am the most professional production assistant you are ever going to meet!” She stamped her heels together and gave me a sharp nod. “And on that note, we had better get moving. You don’t want to miss the taping.”

I nodded in agreement, and went back to my room to pick up a jacket.

“We can sort out your wardrobe when we get there, if you want,” she said.

I folded the jacket over an arm, and picked up my wallet and keys from the table top. “Am I that untidy? I have been travelling a lot lately.”

“Not that bad. You don’t smell, at least. I’ve had to wait for one or two guys – and girls too, for that matter – to take a shower before taking them anywhere. Rock stars, you know? And novelists.”

I left the room, closing the door behind me, and double checking it was locked. If any of my enemies wanted to lie in wait for me in there, the lock would do little to prevent them, but it was as well to at least make the effort. As far as I knew the agents of Envia had all been recalled by that planet’s new rulers, but one or two might well have been deep undercover, and hence unaware of the regime change I had brought about. That was not to mention any remaining agents of my foes from the Ghastly Mountain. I had to take care. With every day I felt a little safer, but it would only take one crazed out-of-the-loop assassin to do me in.

I was a good fighter, of course. It had become a necessity in the course of my adventures for me to learn to defend myself, and much my training had taken place during my adventure on and around the Ghastly Mountain. I had learnt numerous secret techniques that would make me a worthwhile opponent for all but the best and strongest fighters in the world, but those techniques would be worse than useless against a dagger thrown in the dark!

I smiled at her. “Shall we go?”

“Let’s, Howard,” she replied with a little

laugh. We set off for the lift – or, I should say, given that this is one of my American adventures – the elevator. “I suppose I should introduce myself.”

“Please do,” I interjected. “But don’t feel you have to. In fact, no, don’t, unless you must. At the moment you have no name – your identity is nebulous, intangible, mercurial – you have so many possibilities! To set a label on you so soon would be to jam you into a particular box, to baton you down, to bind you with words. You should remain free of such restrictions, and I should be the last to impose them upon you!”

We reached the elevator, and she pressed the button. “How about if I tell you a name, but it isn’t my real one? You need to have something to call me, in case Dave asks you how I did or something.”

“That sounds fair. I accede to your request.”

“Great. Let me think for a moment.” She puckered her brow, and put a finger on her chin. “You should call me Harriet,” she decided, or pretended to decide, as the elevator doors opened.

“Harriet it is,” I agreed, and we stepped inside.

The elevator was relatively large, and so there was no excuse for us to stand closely together. Even so, we did not exactly distance ourselves. I did not for a moment think that Harriet was particularly attracted to me – she was simply doing her job – and it was my job to make it as pleasant and easy for her as possible, just as it was her job to make things as pleasant and easy for me as possible. There was no reason for me to break the illusion of our flirtation, and so I chose not to. It has often been my experience, in any case, that such superficial flirtation shades easily into actual flirtation; much more easily, at any rate, than it would be to attempt the same level of intimacy, assumed or otherwise, from a standing start of no flirtation whatsoever.

The elevator stopped. The lights went out. The doors did not open.

I threw myself against the wall, and I heard Harriet do the same. A brave and sensible girl, to move to a safer position, rather than waste time

screeching and flailing around for what imagined safety she might have found in my arms.

“How far down were we?” I asked her, after taking a few deep breaths to calm myself.

“We were between the tenth and ninth floors,” she replied. “We should press the emergency button. Was it on my side or yours?”

“Mine, I think. Let me see.”

I began to inch along the wall, but the moment I moved, an awful noise began, as if I had placed my foot into a waste disposal and my very bones were being shredded. So powerful and intense was the noise that I couldn’t help but bend down to touch the right leg to check that everything was all right. The leg was whole, but the noise did not cease. Now I imagined it the noise of every bone in a man’s body splintering at once, and I began to break. Did some terrible creature approach in the shaft? Would we be plucked from our pitch-black cage to be fed on with as little ceremony as an owl devours a mouse? Or did this evil approach from within? Was that the sound of my own body being destroyed? Would I burst apart like an animal cooked in a microwave?

“It’s okay, Howard,” called Harriet. “Hang on. I know this noise.”

“What?” I screamed, or at least I think I did. For all I know, coherent speech was beyond me at that point. I might merely have screamed, and might have been screaming yet if Harriet had not been there to help.

“I know this noise, Howie – take it easy,” she shouted. “I know it sounds bad, but it’s just a sound that’s been specially engineered to make us feel crazy.”

At least, she told me later that she said that. By that point I was in no state for understanding human speech. My logical forebrain had shut down, and there was little more of me left than a gibbering monkey waiting for the cosmetics to be poured inevitably into my eyes.

“Cool down,” she shouted, and she crawled over to me through the darkness.

Some part of me felt a woman’s hand upon my leg, and could not help responding. I forced my eyes open, and saw a gaunt white visage looming over me. I stared in shrieking terror, scream-

ing till my lungs felt as if they would collapse, then realised it was none other than Harriet's dear face – more dear to me at that moment than life itself – illuminated by a small pocket torch, and somehow still looking just as lovely, with, once I looked more carefully, no hint of the ghoulishness that most faces present in such reverse lighting.

“Howard, stop it! Stop screaming!” She slapped my face, hard, then kissed me, then slapped me again.

I shook my head, and sat back up. Called back to fully conscious thought in that way, the sound now began to recede, slowly beginning to merely grate, where once it had terrorised. “If I carry on screaming, will it be a slap next time or a kiss?”

“If you carry on like that, I can guarantee it'll be a slap, Howie. That kiss was a freebie.”

“So I have to pay for the rest?”

I found out the hard way that she had not been joking about the slap.

“Harriet, I was just joking... There was no need to do that.”

“Sorry, Howard, I thought you must have been slipping back into unconsciousness. If you were conscious there's no way you could have been stupid enough to joke about me being a hooker, is there?”

I rubbed my face. It was going to be sore for a while. “You've given Letterman's make-up department something to think about.” She laughed. “That noise is still bugging me – what is it?”

“I read about it in the paper – it's something they've been using at Guantanamo Bay, edited to hit a number of frequencies that trigger terror in humans. It has elements of the noise of a buzzing bee, a hissing snake, a creeping spider, a roaring lion – things like that. They stopped using it, because it was only effective for short periods, but a cut-down version of it, one geared for teenagers, made its way onto the internet, and there was talk of being used to disperse crowds, riots, things like that.”

The more she talked, the less I heard of the sound, until finally it was altogether gone. My mind, now assured that the sound signified no

actual danger, was doing its usual great job of filtering out the noises I wasn't interested in hearing. Before long I got back to my feet and went over to press the emergency button. Ten minutes later or so the doors were being cranked open, and we were being offered effusive apologies by the hotel staff. Harriet began to tell them about the strange sound, but I cut her off with a little nod, and said that I thought it had just been the echo of my screams. The staff were extremely sympathetic, and offered us a complimentary dinner for that evening. I thanked them, and said that I hoped we would be able to take them up on it, with a wink at Harriet. The staff escorted us to an alternative elevator, and this time our descent was undisturbed.

“Care to tell me what that was for?” asked Harriet, once we had left the building.

“That wasn't an accident, and it wasn't a prank – someone used that noise on us deliberately; it was an attack of some kind. I don't know what their purpose was, but I intend to find out, and I don't want to involve the hotel staff in our problem.”

“What about me? Are you going to let me be involved?” She held out a hand to hail a cab. Just the sight of those yellow cars made me feel as if I had stepped into a movie. I hoped it would have a happy ending.

“Let's see how you manage getting us to the studio, then we can talk.”

She rolled her eyes, and then we were in the taxi.

Wherein I Meet David Letterman

After my appearance on Letterman I was in a good mood. He had of course gently mocked me, and had a little chuckle about my poetry, and the parlous condition of my publishing career before I had taken my detour into music. He had asked the leader of his band what he had thought of my album, and I was embarrassed at the pro-

fuse praise that ensued, almost as embarrassed as I had been when the band played "Bandit Planet Funk" as I had walked out onto the stage. Dave asked if there was any chance of me teaming up with The Sound of Howard Phillips ever again, maybe to appear on the show, but with real, heartfelt sadness, for the twentieth time in as many weeks, I had to explain why that could not happen. It was not a story that painted me in a good light, but it always aroused the interest of the audiences, if not their sympathy. I had formed The Sound of Howard Phillips a few years before, and recorded with them an album, but the process had been torture for my bandmates. (I dealt with this difficult but inspirational period in my life in "My Rise and Fall", a novella published in *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* #8, and destined to form the first part of *The Ghastly Mountain*, in its eventual publication.) I thought of the band with a wry smile. They had gone onto success – I had left them a treasure trove of new ideas with which they had forged themselves a real career in music – the kind of career to which I could never have led them. My muse had taken me elsewhere, and I had gone in search of a dream, a dream of a band that might never exist, but which I would do all in my power to build.

"So how does it go, Howard?" asked Letterman. "How do you know, when you meet a musician, whether he – or she – will be a good fit for your new band? And how long have you been putting the band together?"

I smiled, and leaned back in my chair. "It's been a good couple of years now, Dave. But I did spend quite a bit of that time marooned on an alien planet." The audience laughed appreciatively. "I don't know that I'll ever find everyone in my band. Maybe, to me, that doesn't matter so much as the journey. All I know is that I keep having these adventures, and they keep leading me to musicians. Maybe someone is leading me around by the nose, maybe there's an agenda I'm missing, I don't know. But you should hear the sound we make now, Dave. It's like no music ever sounded before, nothing on this Earth ever made this kind of racket. No offence," I said, smiling to Paul Shaffer.

"None taken at all," replied the leader of the house band, an accomplished and respected musician in his own right. "Every musician has his calling. Yours is to go out, find new worlds, and bring back alien musicians. Mine... is to... um... laugh at Dave's jokes!"

"Don't listen to him," said Dave.

"Oh, I'm not," I replied. "I've heard them play. They know how to kick it. I saw him play keyboards with the Pixies, for cripes sake."

"So, Howard," Dave continued, "why not get an album out? Why keep us waiting?"

"Well, we've put a few things on tape already. So if something happens to me, you'll get to hear a bit of it. I'm not taking unnecessary risks with this sound we've got. I don't carry it around in a backpack."

"That's good," said Dave. "You never know when you might have to fight a dinosaur or, what was it you called them? Mastors?"

"Mantors," I laughed. "It was a mantor. Did you like the movie?" Upon my return from Envia I had arranged for the cinema release of our footage of that planet. Johnny Quondam, the cameraman, had originally been engaged to record the progress of my palanquinade across Europe, and had wisely kept the camera running when that palanquinade took us all the way to an alien world – a world on which he had found himself both a bride and an empire!

"We loved that movie, Howard. That was some crazy ssshhh... stuff. Crazy stuff. And talk about doing your duty – that princess was some hot stuff, hmm? Did you think about God and the Queen as you got busy saving the world?"

"I should think the Queen would be the last person I'd be thinking about in such a spot..."

Letterman laughed, and held out his hand to shake mine. "Thanks for coming on the show, Howard. Ladies and gentlemen, Howard Phillips, the world's most adventurous poet!"

So, as I said at the opening of this chapter, I was in a good mood. I felt that the interview had gone well, and if he had made gentle fun of me and my adventures on Envia, that was all part of the plan. If people were laughing a little at me, and thinking a little bit less of my achievements, that could only reassure them as to the safety of

the planet. (At least as far as invasion from Envia went, I supposed. Who knew how many other inhabited planets were out there, looking with covetous eyes upon our green and pleasant lands? Although there was an interesting point to be made about that – if there really were Martians of some description on Mars, would they really come after Earth, a planet so different from their own? Wouldn't they feel more at home on the dry and dusty Moon? Or would they go to live in the Grand Canyon, or somewhere like that, where they wouldn't really get in our way? It was an idle thought, and not really worth the setting down, but I have devoted most of this chapter to my encounter with David Letterman, and so we might as well find something inconsequential to tide us over to the next one. Rest assured, if your attention is beginning to wander, with the next chapter the adventure will begin in full force – there will be action, adventure, terror, and monsters! Well, maybe not all of those will be in the very next chapter, but I can guarantee they will turn up before the story is done. If you cannot wait that long, flip ahead now to get to the good bits. You will be able to identify them easily, because there will be at least one or two words in capitals, LIKE THIS!)

Called to the Bar

After the show, I hung around, waiting for Harriet to be finished with work. I felt very awkward, like a party guest who has slept over when the offer of the couch was only made out of politeness. No one had to be nice to me any more – it wasn't as if they were unpleasant, of course, none were that unprofessional – rather that they didn't have time for me. I sat quietly, reading the latest issue of *TQF*, which I had downloaded and printed out a night or two before. The publication was going great guns, as ever. It certainly benefited from the fact that my ambitions were now in music. If I had wanted to pursue a career in novel-writing – or write my travel memoirs, you could say – there would have been no short-

age of highly lucrative offers. But that magazine's editor, the founder of Silver Age Books, had stood by me in my darkest days, and offered me work when no one else would even have allowed me into the building. I owed him this little favour. What's more, I could trust him to publish my writings well-nigh unedited (whether by restraints of editorial ability or of time), and so my thoughts would reach the reader in their purest form. He had not chosen to truly exploit the commercial potential of my writings, that much was true, since he gave my work away freely, along with the rest of the magazine, on the internet, but that was not something that concerned me. My personal wealth had been guaranteed in perpetuity by the inadvertent proceeds of my adventure upon the Ghastly Mountain. If he chose not to enrich himself, then so be it.

The issue I was reading, issue thirteen, happened to have none of my adventures within it, the serialisation of *His Nerves Extruded* having finished two issues previously. I was very interested by the main feature, an adaptation of an episode of an old TV series, *Space University Trent*. I had never heard of the show, but apparently that was part of the charm for its fans, and the reason for its underdog status – it had been a Dutch/US co-production, but many episodes had never been shown in the US, and very few had been shown in the UK. Silver Age Books had somehow got hold of the adaptation rights to the series, and had hired a big fan of the show, one Walt Brunston, to do the honours. It was a brave move for the magazine, but with my writing at their disposal, perhaps they felt confident about taking a risk here or there. This first story, "Hyperparasite", seemed to be a good read, and the issue as a whole hung together well. I would have to dash a complimentary email off to my former boss as soon as I got the chance. I would have to ask him, too, if he was planning to write anything more himself – it had been two years since *The Fear Man*, and he was in danger of letting his muse stagnate.

It feels inappropriate to segue from a stagnating muse to my delightful and brave new female friend, but that is what I plan to do, if we are ever to get this narrative on the move, if my

story is not to grow as dank, rotten and ultimately lifeless as the writing talents of my erstwhile colleague were becoming. Perhaps he had made the right decision – focusing on his editorial duties might well have been the best way forward for him. After all, *The Fear Man* had shown a remarkable unevenness of tone, lurching between low comedy and high melodrama as the mood took it. I owed the author of that novel much, for all the reasons I have already mentioned, but also for the shock of inspiration it delivered to my musical career – and yet, our old enmities, even now, threaten to overwhelm this story! Let this be the last time I mention that name, that Stephen William Theaker, and if you should read it once more in this novel, cross it out with your own pen and pretend it had never been written.

Finally, Harriet approached, and I realised I had read less than half a dozen pages, thanks to my reveries about the past. I folded the issue up and put it back into my jacket's inside pocket, right next to my moleskine notebook and Folio Society Parker pen.

"Hi, Howard," she said, with a warmer smile than I probably deserved, after all my screaming in the course of our last encounter. "How's your face feeling?"

"Not too bad. I don't think Dave noticed it." I began to get to my feet.

She put a hand on my shoulder to keep me in my seat, and leant in to have a closer look. "I'm sorry for hitting you so hard." I struggled manfully to keep my eyes away from the vista that presented itself, forcing them to focus upon her chin. There is a flaw with that strategy, though. "Is there something on my chin?" She rubbed at it with irritation.

"No, I was just trying not to stare at your boobs."

She stared at me, probably wondering whether to hit me again.

"They were right in my face," I said in my defence, finally getting to my feet. "Where was I supposed to look?"

"Why are you constantly aware of them? Why is it impossible for you to talk to me without constantly thinking about my 'boobs'? When

you talk to other men do you spend the whole time thinking about their... you know?"

I held up my hands. "It's not the same thing. I might have dabbled with the odd good-looking gentleman here or there, but women are my obsession. If it were not for my music, my poetry, my novel-writing and my alcoholism, I would think of nothing else."

"Talking of alcohol, shall we continue this discussion of my breasts in a bar? If we run out of things to say, I'm sure we'll find someone to chip in."

We made our way to one of her favourite bars. To me it looked a lot like the regular haunt of the characters in *How I Met Your Mother*, one of the American sitcoms that I allowed into my television diet. It surprises some people that I watch sitcoms at all – they think I am too serious, too self-important, too pompous – that I would see such things as beneath me. They could not be more wrong. When your life is lived on the high wire, with action on one side, horror on the other, and a deep pit of depression beneath your feet, watching a twenty minute sitcom each day can do a lot for your spirits. *How I Met Your Mother* was witty, spry, played clever narrative tricks, and above all else had at least one character, Barney, whose response to any given situation was guaranteed to be funny and surprising (at least, as long as the writing staff kept up their end of things). I also had a soft spot during that part of my life for *Two and a Half Men*. Irredeemably silly – not to mention unforgivable for its portrayal of chiropractic as a respectable profession, rather than dangerous chicanery that leads to dozens of unreported deaths every year – it still found a way to make me chuckle with every episode. Sometimes it aimed low, especially with regard to its portrayal of the half a man of the title (that is, a boy) as stupid, but stupidity is always hilarious, as long as it does not stand in your way. *Entourage* was also very funny, and at that time I still bemoaned the cancellation of *That '70s Show* the year before, watching which had always come with an absolute guarantee of two or three belly laughs. I had little time for British sitcoms. Watching the six episodes of a British comedy requires just as

much dedication as watching the first six of an American comedy – the difference is that after watching the first six of the American comedy you have another eighteen to which you can look forward. The initial investment is rewarded, whereas with British comedies you are often reduced to watching the same pitifully few episodes multiple times. Nevertheless, *The IT Crowd*, *Extras* and *The Mighty Boosh* had recently had their moments. I have no doubt that laughing for twenty minutes a day (whenever possible – they did not have comedy on Envia during my stay there, let alone situation comedy) has done as much to keep me alive to this day as eating my morning cereal and learning some of the martial arts.

It was still early evening, so the bar was not yet very busy.

“Hi, Harriet,” said the bartender. “What would you and your friend like?”

We bought our drinks – I went for a Budweiser and she did too. We each took a sip, as if to pledge ourselves to something, and then moved to a booth at the back. It was snug, and made me feel cuddly, which was an unusual sensation.

“Do you feel a bit funny?” I asked.

“Not really,” she replied. “I mean, I’m not sure if I should be here with you like this. It’s not really encouraged by the management. If we get known for fraternising with the guests, they’ll all expect it, and it’ll become one more thing that has to be made right before they’ll come on to shill their junk.”

“I thought Harriet wasn’t your real name?”

“What? Where did that come from?”

“The bartender called you Harriet – before, you said you were giving me a fake name. There was some nonsense about not wanting to limit your possibilities?”

“Oh, I forgot about that. Well, maybe I don’t advertise my real name when I go out drinking. Did you ever consider that?”

“I suppose I did not consider it. As to whether I ever considered it, I can’t tell you. Maybe when I was young I gave it a thought or two, but who can remember these things after so many years?”

Then we both passed out. The last thing I saw was the table rushing up to hit my face. The last thing I heard was the sound of my nose slamming against the wood.

A Meeting with the Big Man

I awoke in unfamiliar circumstances. It was dark, I had no memory of what had happened to me, and yet I barely smelt of booze, my trousers were dry, and there was no sign of vomit upon my clothes.

Before moving, I felt around in the darkness to get a feel for my surroundings. I seemed to be on a bare mattress, with no pillow or sheets to soften my slumber, but the mattress wasn’t lying on the floor. Most likely it was just on a basic metal-framed bed – and as I shifted my weight the creaking seemed to confirm that. But I was not about to leap off the bed without light. I would not have put it past my enemies to leave me in a darkened room with a dozen lethal traps upon the floor, all the better to be able to tuck their children into bed with a good conscience. I had fought a Buddhist once who felt that way – he had believed that the dictates of karma prevented him from murdering me, but had seen no reason to let them prevent me from murdering myself – with his helping hand, of course. Then again, few of my enemies would have gone to such lengths. Most would simply have pressed a knife to the base of my skull and let me die in the street. Perhaps I was in the grip of some enemy, then, but perhaps I was not. Time would tell.

I decided to sit up, taking my life in my hands you might think, but I had convinced myself for the time being that I was in no immediate physical danger. Even the most psychotic of my enemies would probably be curious as to what information he could garner from me.

The moment I sat up, the light came on. I was in a small cell, but it was far from insalubrious. It was clean, there was a small toilet cubicle to

one side, and there was a small desk with paper and pencils on it. I hoped that I was not to be forced at gunpoint to produce a comic. I have many talents, but sequential art is not one of them. I find it exceptionally difficult to develop the action from one panel to another. I always seem to put the wrong things in the wrong order with the wrong emphasis. In poetry, that is known as style, whereas in a comic it is known as “nobody reading it”. But I was letting my fancy drift away with me again. Surely the paper was simply provided to allow me to draft a confession, or to let me maintain a journal, which they would then scour for clues while I slept, before ultimately destroying it before my eyes to show me the pointlessness of my efforts. I started to be thankful I did not have a daughter, having seen a certain Korean film since my return to Earth in which such a relationship was used to break, utterly, the protagonist.

There I was again, with my ridiculous flights of imagination! I realise that they may be difficult for you to read, as you hold fast to the hope that this tale may become a bit more exciting, but I write also for posterity. My reveries are an essential part of my process, whether I am planning to form a group, romance a woman, or escape from a cell. One must be open to ideas from all angles, because the ones that come from strange angles are the ones that are new – the ones most likely to surprise and succeed with your audience, your object of potential affection, and your captors. Admittedly, I have been known to succumb to the lure of the old standbys, such as concealing oneself or faking illness to tempt a guard within, but it is better to be original where possible, especially on Earth, and in the West, where the guards will have seen all the same movies as you.

As it turned out, no attempt escape proved to be necessary. Within minutes of the lights coming on, three men appeared at the gate to my cell. Two of them stared at me, glowering in their plain black suits and white shirts, their hair immaculately sculpted to embody the very image of the modern, efficient government operative with a gun. Both stood over six feet tall, giving them a good few inches over me. The

third of them (though he was standing in the middle, so I suppose that really he should have been counted as the second), was much shorter, shorter still than I. He had a large pear-shaped head. His hair was white, though all that remained of it was a bizarre Caesar-ish fringe across the top of his forehead. Well, that was all that was left of the hair upon his head, at any rate. He had bushy white eyebrows that looked as if they were planning to leave and set up a new colony somewhere nearby. His nose was an ineffective wedge doing its best to separate two bulbous cheeks. His mouth was wide, and he was smiling. He had noted my glances at his two angry colleagues.

“Don’t take any notice of those guys!” He laughed. “They are pussycats, honestly. Pussycats who could kill you with nothing but a paper clip, even if every bone in their bodies was broken, but pussycats nonetheless. In fact, I often get them to curl up on my lap for a quick stroke, don’t I, boys?”

The glowerer on the left bent to whisper something in his ear, then resumed his position, and glowered even harder, if that had been possible.

“My employee here” – he stressed the word employee – “just wanted to remind me of the trouble I have already got in for sexual harassment. I used to be straight as a die, you know? But after the court case I had them use the gay serum on me to turn me the other way. I thought men would be better sports about a bit of friendly banter – but apparently not.”

I shook my head, and laughed. “There’s no serum that turns people gay.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” he replied. “And I suppose you think there were no aliens at Roswell either?”

“I’ve no opinion either way. It seems unlikely, though.”

“You’re a willing puppet of the man, Howard Phillips! The question is, do you want to continue being the puppet, or would you like to spend some time among the puppeteers?”

I thought about his offer for a moment. Was he going to take me behind the curtain, to show me the way the world really worked? If he was, was

that even something I wanted to know? Wasn't I better off living in ignorance? If there was such a thing as a gay serum, did I want to know? Or as an artist was it my duty to take that journey, to take every journey, to experience all that I possibly could? Well, there could only be one answer.

"Okay," I replied, "tell me everything."

"Well, for starters," he said, as he waved one of his colleagues to open the gate, "there is no gay serum. I was born with lust for men in my heart and I will die the same way, God willing!"

"That's a shame in some ways," I noted dispassionately. "As an artist, I would have only been doing my duty to try it. I feel that in my writings I pay constant homage to the delights of the female form, yet when I try to do the same for the men that cross my page I fall short, somehow. Some, in life or on the page, may tempt me to play, but none create in me the same burning, aching, horrifying desire that comes from a glance at even the smallest fraction of a woman."

"Maybe you just haven't met the right man yet," he said. "These two have to follow my orders exactly, you know, when we are in the field. I could have them strip off for you, and start doing stuff with each other. They might file a complaint about it later, but I'll just argue that it was part of the recruitment process."

He sat down on the bed beside me. The gate was left open, but there was no sense in trying to escape. These men were trained, armed, and expecting trouble!

"That won't be necessary," I said. "I don't think that would be likely to produce the effects I'm thinking of."

"You say that," he said with a wink, "but you haven't seen these boys with the black suits off. You've heard of people who say that they are 'gay for Johnny Depp'? Well these boys would be enough to turn Johnny himself."

"Let's make sure he never meets them, then, because it would be a terrible shame to waste Vanessa Paradis on a gay husband. Joe Le Taxi, puffy nipples on Top of the Pops, all that stuff."

"Are you still speaking English, Howard?"

I took a deep breath. My brain needed a bit of

air. "So you're recruiting me. What for? I presume you don't represent one of the gay recruitment organisations of which I hear so much frightened talk in these uptight states of yours."

"No, that's just a personal crusade. You say don't waste Vanessa Paradis on a gay husband, but I say don't waste a good you know what on a woman."

Years later, I would remember what he had said that day, and put it to good use in the course of my rehabilitation of a rap group fallen on hard times, but, just then, all I wanted was an answer to my question.

"Who are you people, and why have you brought me here? Where's Harriet?"

"Howard, you're so impatient. I've promised to let you in. There's no need to hurry. Harriet is fine. We dropped her off at her apartment, and she's sleeping like a well-fed baby." He waved to one of his colleagues. "Have Susan bring us some tea." The man lifted his wrist to his mouth and muttered some instructions. "Howard, have you read *Professor Challenger in Space*, by your friend, Mr Stephen William Theaker?"

I admitted that I had. Apologies for mentioning that name again, despite my earlier promises. Feel free to use your red pen to correct my mistake!

"Do you remember its mentions of the secret organisation to which Mrs Anna Challenger and Lord John Roxton belonged?"

"Of course – the Interstellar Bureau of Investigation and Skulduggery? It was one of Theaker's rare attempts to include something other than a totally linear quest in his writing. He is not fond of characterisation, drama, or indeed anything that does not include combat, space-ships, aliens or robots."

"Be that as it may, but IBIS is a real organisation, and to some extent I believe your friend stumbled upon the truth, before including it in his novel."

"First of all, he is not my friend. You have to make it clear to me that so much is understood before we can proceed any further."

"I understand," he said gravely, though he allowed a chuckle to escape shortly afterwards.

"Secondly, do you want me to believe that

there are human operatives of a star-spanning spy organisation at large upon the planet?"

"Haven't you been saying very similar things on Letterman, Jonathan Ross, and anyone else who has found the time to talk to you?"

"That's different. That was one planet, planning to invade. IBIS, as outlined in that novel, not to mention the follow-up – *Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!* – is a very different kettle of fish altogether. How many aliens do you expect me to believe have operatives here? Have I done nothing, in my time on Envia, but to postpone our eventual and inevitable destruction? Was it all for nothing?" I could not suppress a tear.

He patted me on the shoulder, and I accepted the gesture gratefully. "I don't know about all that, Howard. I don't know anything about alien worlds other than what I've read about them in your work. That's partly why I wanted to talk to you, seeing as you were in the country. Our organisation is called IBIS, true, but the source of the acronym is lost to us. At some point during the First World War, something terrible happened to the organisation, leaving it in tatters. A few scattered agents survived, and pieced together what they could, but almost everything was lost. We were as surprised as anyone when the name turned up in that novel, and whether the details therein were accurate or not was a matter of great debate among us."

"So why not bring Theaker in? I'm really going to pick a bone with him for dropping me in all this, as if my life is not perilous enough as it is!"

"Well, it wasn't a high priority for us, and you were in the country. Anyway, if Theaker did know anything, it would have turned up in his books. He's a notoriously indiscreet blabbermouth. We were content to wait and see."

"It's unfortunate that he hasn't written anything of note for a number of years."

"Unfortunate for us, quite fortunate for any readers!"

"Quite so," I agreed. "Poor David Langford probably has nightmares about another one of those terrible novels turning up in his SFX review pile again."

"Whatever any of that means, Howard, I'm sure it's true, and I can say that because I trust you. In fact, I think I'm beginning to fall in love with you a little."

"That's a common response to my personal magnetism," I responded. "Remember that I am a rock star, and most of us receive that in the complimentary gift pack after our first CD is released. Don't read anything into it. It will have worn off in a month or two, by which time you'll probably have had another dozen rock stars in here for interrogation."

"This isn't an interrogation, Howard. This is a recruitment. We need your help. If you don't give us your help, then of course we will have to kill you, to maintain our secrecy, but there you go."

"What do you want me to do?"

"We have a sea base, and it's haunted. We drugged your drinks in the bar and brought you here because we want you to investigate."

I laughed, long and hard, until I once more produced tears. "Are you a mental incompetent of some kind?" I asked. "Ghosts are a product of overactive imaginations, ultrasonic sound and a failure to realise that sleep has begun. Only a gullible fool would believe otherwise. Why on Earth would you think I could help with such nonsense?"

"Everything you just said, Howard, has convinced me that we have the right man for the job. I know that there are no ghosts, you know it. But I have eighty-nine US government employees at the bottom of the ocean who think otherwise, and are on the point of losing their minds. I need you to go down there and help them."

"Okay, then," I replied. "You have the right man for the job."

It might seem odd that I was so compliant, but I had long since learned that the adventures that presented themselves to me in this way often led me to the discovery of great and unusual musicians. Who would I find at the bottom of the sea? A tuba-playing octopus? A jellyfish harpsichordist? Or the bass player the band needed so much? Who knew, but I was not about to ignore the call of my fate.

Monstrous Attacker!

And so it was that I came to be in a tiny two-person submarine, on my way to the bottom of the deepest crevasse in the Atlantic ocean. I had gleaned little more of use from the fat little man, who had even declined to give me a name by which to call him (and so I decided to call him the Big Man), and yet I had been happy to go on the mission for the reasons mentioned above. I had had one request, and that was for Harriet to accompany me.

“Preposterous!” the little man had said. “If you need assistance, take one of these strapping young men. They’ll be a lot of help to you, down there in the dark.”

But I had been insistent. My adventures often seem to throw a beautiful woman or two in my way, and this one had been no different. If I ignored the role I felt Harriet was destined to play in my adventure, fate would only have had to go out of its way to provide me with another foil.

Therefore the other spot in that submarine was taken by that pretty production assistant from the Letterman show. She was so full of questions that you would have thought she was doing the customary pre-interview, to find out if I had anything worth talking about with her boss.

“Did they explain the incident in the lift? Were they doing that just to scare you?”

We were crammed so tightly into the tiny sub that I could not even turn around to answer her. I call it a sub, but you might as well have called it a reinforced barrel. For large scale personnel changes, for example when a work rota came to a close, a full-sized submarine would be employed, but when it was just a matter of a person or two visiting the base, they just popped them into one of these unpowered tubs and dropped them over the side. We would sink, unpowered, and unable to see outside, until we reached the bottom, at which point divers in special high-pressure suits (or “hypersuits”, as they called them for short) would emerge from the base to take the sub inside. It made for a pretty dull trip, as we did nothing but wait to hit the

bottom, and try not to break wind, which would have been excruciating in such close quarters. We were lying face down – I was at the head of the cylinder, with my legs slanting beneath Harriet. Effectively her face was mere inches from any emissions which I might be forced to make, if we were not retrieved before long.

“No,” I replied. “They said they had nothing to do with it. I don’t know if they were telling the truth or not. I don’t know what they would have had to gain from it, unless they wanted to get me out in a bar, taking a drink to steady my nerves.”

“That does seem extremely over-elaborate. Why would they go to the trouble of booby-trapping the lift, just for that? Why not just put something in your drink at dinner?”

I nodded, though I doubted she could see. “Exactly. I don’t think they would go to all that trouble – they had nothing to gain from it. My feeling is that some other miscreants were to blame.”

“Do you think it was someone who knew that IBIS were out to recruit you? Maybe they wanted to reduce you to a shivering wreck, someone IBIS would just have dismissed as a raving lunatic?”

“It could be. It is also possible that it was some enemy from my past. There have been occasional connections between them, small things that make me wonder if there isn’t some greater organisation of these criminals which I have yet to discern. For example, on occasion I have heard reference to ‘the Chaste’, and I have yet to discover who or what they are.”

“Maybe all your enemies meet up in a Howard-hating, evil-loving clubhouse, and plot their revenge!”

“Well, not any more, dear Harriet. I have a tendency to leave my enemies dead! It isn’t through choice, I must say – I am not a blood-thirsty man by nature – but it almost always seems to turn out that way.”

“So if I turn out to be a villain, some evildoer who has infiltrated herself into your life, you will probably end up killing me? Could you really do that to me, Howie? Have you seen my big green eyes?”

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"I have seen them, Harriet, and I don't think you are evil. There is every chance, of course, that you are manipulating me in some way, for non-evil purposes, or, for example, you might not be aware that you have been brainwashed and sent here to destroy me, but I will do my best to let you live."

"Howie, that's very nearly reassuring..."

"I do my best. I'm a poet, a lover. I'm not boyfriend or husband material, I'm afraid, and so I have never had to learn the intricacies of maintaining a relationship. Like Petrarch, or Adolphe, I believe women should be admired, deified, and then discarded like trash once you have had your way with them."

I felt a finger poke one of my bottom cheeks, quite hard.

"If I thought for a minute that you really believed that," said Harriet, "I would be poking you with something much more dangerous than

a finger right now. I don't think Petrarch believed it either, for that matter."

I squeezed my buttocks to remove the memory of the poke. I heard her chuckle. "Do they spend a lot of time talking about Petrarch behind the scenes of Letterman, then?" I asked.

"Enough to know when you're talking out of your ass – quite literally, in fact, from my point of view."

Was it a mistake to have brought Harriet along on this adventure? The reader might think so. She was not a seasoned adventurer, and as far as I knew had no particular skills that might suit her for such an occupation. But then none, or at least very few, of Doctor Who's companions had had such skills. Some, like Zoe, Liz, Nyssa and Adric were highly intelligent. Jamie, Ace and Sara Kingdom were dab hands in a fight. Ian and Barbara were teachers, with the well-rounded educations implied by that position. Jo Grant

and Sarah Jane brought curiosity and investigative talent. All that is true, and it all came in handy, even if, more often than not, those special skills and that special knowledge only duplicated the qualities possessed by the Doctor himself. In general, though, the companions were characterised by a willingness to adventure, and a reluctance to give up until everything had been sorted out. That is why I like to have someone like Harriet around me. I am not naturally a brave man, but with a woman at my side I will do my best to pretend! She had shown great presence of mind in the lift, and had not, thereafter, been inclined to forget about the matter. Whereas I, if I had not been abducted by the IBIS organisation, might have filed the incident away as one of the multitude of loose ends thrown up by my life, I was sure that Harriet would have been back at the hotel, as soon as possible, to find out what had happened. She was, I thought to myself, a regular Nancy Drew.

What's more, Letterman happened to have been going on holiday that week ("what a charming coincidence!" had exclaimed the Big Man, with an air that suggested it was no such thing), and so she had been free to come along.

IBIS had not let me out of their sight, and so we did not meet again until her arrival at the US Navy base at Saratoga Springs, 35 miles north of Albany. It was a support base, and while they got ready to support our mission I spent a hour or two playing tennis. It was a cold day, but I was keen to relish the sky, for as long as I was able. Once Harriet had arrived, we had been briefed, equipped, taken out to sea, and dropped into the ocean.

After poking my bottom, Harriet had gone quiet for a minute or two, before coming up with another question. "Do you think we will survive this, Howie?"

It is strange that I could not help shrugging, even though I knew she would not be able to see it. Or maybe it is not so strange. I suppose we do the same thing when we are speaking on the telephone. Overall, maybe it was better that she did not see my equivocation so graphically expressed. "I do not know, Harriet, but there has to be a good chance. For one thing, ghosts do not

exist. Secondly, if they did exist, are they not supposed to be intangible? Hence, we have nothing to fear but fear itself."

Something hit our sub.

"Howard! What was that?!"

I shushed her. If whatever it was had hit us by accident, perhaps it would simply wander away. If it was curious, the last thing we should be doing was giving it a beacon to home in on.

For a few, then ten, then twenty seconds, everything was silent, apart from the sound of our own heavy, frightened breathing.

I took the chance of whispering something to Harriet. "Probably just a fish..."

Then it happened again. This time, it was not just a noise – we were thrown hard against the hull of the sub, as our entire vehicle was thrown to the side.

This was no small fish banging into us – something – something out there in the darkness! – had taken an interest in us. Was it a malevolent or just a playful interest? Would it make any difference if we ended up dead in the water?

"Howard, what is it?" shouted Harriet, knowing full well that I could not know. "Could it be the divers?"

"No," I called back. "We haven't hit the ground yet, or sent the signal. There's no way they could have found us."

It hit us again, from the other side this time, and both of us yelled with unconscious fear. If it had not been for the strapping that bound us more or less into place, we would have been at risk of serious injury from these impacts alone, let alone from their effects upon our sub.

"Howard, I think it's time to send that signal!"

"We're not deep enough yet. They'll never pick it up as this range."

"We're falling all the time. Put it on now – it might be our only hope. It's got to be worth a try, at least."

She was quite right, and so I did send the signal. Perhaps it would help – and at the very least it would give us a little hope, right up to the end.

"What now?" she asked.

"I don't know," I shouted. "Let's yell at it, see if we can scare it off!"

In all my years of adventuring, I have had weaker plans, but not very often. However, it seemed to have an effect, as for a few more seconds there were no more impacts.

"Hallooooo!" I yelled, at the top of my voice. "Get away, get away!"

"Waaah! Waaah!" shouted Harriet. "Waaah! Waaah!" There was what sounded almost like a hint of hysteria in her voice, as her awareness of the humour of the situation fought, irrationally and bravely, to assert itself against her fear of death.

"Good work," I said. "Maybe it's been scared off."

"Do fish even have ears?" she said in reply, and I was silent, having no answer to that question, and not wishing to provoke further questions. However, she did not require any provocation. "You don't think it was a fish, do you?"

"I don't know, my dear new friend, and I am not sure that I wish to, at that. If it's gone, let's just be glad that we've made it through in one piece."

There was another noise. No sudden impact this: it was a slow creak that made the sub shudder from bow to stern. The rivets in my view strained to escape as the metal began to warp under some terrible, sustained pressure from outside.

"Do you think we have been eaten?" I tried to joke, thinking that we might as well face death with the camaraderie with which I have generally tried to face life.

"Maybe," she laughed, though I could hear the tears in her voice. "Or a giant squid has decided to squash us."

"Is there anything we can do, you think?"

"Only die, probably," she replied.

I had expected somewhat better of her. I am usually the most morbidly fatalistic member of my adventuring teams, and she was invading my territory a little bit. There was only one thing for it – I would have to adopt a different role, and find a way to save us!

How to do it, though? We had no means of defending ourselves, and no way of even ascertaining what threat stood at our door.

Such was the remarkably difficult problem the ocean had posed for me!

Under the Sea

In the course of my adventuring around this and other planets, I have often found myself in parallel circumstances. Death always seems certain – probably because, ultimately, it is! However, at any particular time it is usually avoidable, at least for a few seconds, and the trick is to keep it at bay long enough for the universe to take a favourable turn in your direction.

"Music, my dear," I called to Harriet when inspiration struck, "and not a moment too soon!"

It did seem as if the creature, whatever it was, and if that was indeed what it was, did have the ability to hear sounds, given its earlier reaction to our shouting, and we could use that to our advantage, together with some basic parenting skills I had picked up in order to control the members of my various bands more effectively.

No water had as yet penetrated our sub, so there was still a little time to try this new plan.

"You, Harriet, will drum upon the hull at the far end, with your feet, and I, Howard Phillips, will drum at this end with my hands, in syncopation with your beat. Can you manage that – can your feet reach that far?"

"I'll do my best, Howie. Do you really think this will work?"

"I am absolutely one hundred per cent certain that whatever happens, we will have a good time."

"What song are we playing?"

"I'm going to adapt one of my poems to fit the situation. Now, one, two, three, four – hit it!"

She began to bang away at her end, and then, in between each of her loud, heavy beats, I added my own taps, scrapes and bangs, building a rhythm that would have done any band proud.

Once we had it going, the pressure seemed to lessen a little, as whatever it was took a moment to listen to our playing, but then it resumed, and this time, a little water began to leak in.

We were deep, deep down by now, and so the water forced its way in quick and hard, shooting a jet into my side that soaked and stung in equal measure.

“Stop playing!” I shouted, and we cut all sound. For a second or two we lay silent, waiting to die.

Then the pressure lessened once more.

“Hit it!” I shouted, and this time I began to sing. “Oh, what a world this is / Filled up with sur-pri-zes / In the water I might die...”

The pressure began again. The hull was visibly buckling.

“Cut the music!” I shouted, and we fell silent again.

The water was pooling around my feet, but I was wet from the waist down. Once the lower area into which my legs slotted was entirely full, we would have but minutes to live, at most. There was no time to patch the hole – our attacker would only create others. Our only hope was to stop the attack.

There was another great creak, and then a shake, and a twist, as if the thing out there was trying to restart the music, but of course we did not respond. We would live only if it realised that the music played only when the ship was unmolested.

I held my breath. Was the creature intelligent enough to make the necessary connections? I thought of dolphins, and how their intelligence had been vastly overestimated because of the size of their brains. Researchers had recently found that the main reason for the size of their brains was the amount of insulating and padding material made necessary by the coldness of the sea.

If even our old friends the dolphins had turned out to be less intelligent than expected, what could I hope for from this attacker from the deepest, darkest, coldest place on Earth?

Sea Base Delta

The pressure eased off, and there was a huge

groan as the plates of the hull were pulled back into place. There was no time for celebration, though – we had to reward our attacker’s good behaviour.

“Let’s play like the wind,” I shouted. “Play for your life! One, two, one, two three, four!”

She began to drum again, and I resumed my syncopation, and finally brought my voice back into the mix.

“Oh what a world this is / Far far from the music biz / In the water, time to party / The sub is small so don’t get farty.”

We carried on playing, and singing, and after a verse or two, I let Harriet take a turn on vocals.

“Oh what a world this is / I have to say I am dis- / gusted that I have to sing / To save my life deep in the sea / But else we’ll die Howard and me.”

Luckily the unhappy mood of her lyrics did not infect her singing, which was light, sweet and balanced. Before long, I detected a movement in the ship – it seemed as if we were being rocked! (Rocked like a baby, that is, rather than rocked like Madison Square Garden by the Beastie Boys.)

We might never know what creature had us in its grip, but I suspected it might be mammalian, from this behaviour. I remembered my encounter with the Denizen of the Deep Blue Sea, a massive but intelligent being that had lived and died in the ocean, but which was as sensitive and emotional as you and me. Might the denizen have reacted similarly in such circumstances? Could this conceivably be a relation to that amazing Envian lifeform? I doubted it – he had not been a mammal, for one thing, at least when I had met him, and would have been unlikely to rock us in such a way. He would have grasped us in one gargantuan tentacle, risen to the surface, and taken a good look at us in the daylight. This creature to which we now sang showed no sign of such intelligence. I estimated it to have the capabilities in that area of a dog, or perhaps a chimpanzee, though admittedly I had little to go on.

Harriet was still singing, and eventually I realised that she was trying to communicate with me.

"Oh what a world this is / Howard could you tell if / The depth meter shows we're still sinking / Are we nearly at the bottom?"

Searching my memories, I realised with shame that she had repeated that verse half a dozen times until I finally heard her. I consulted the bathometer and realised she had made a good point. I waited till she had finished her current verse, and then took my turn to sing.

"That is a very good point / We are almost at the bottom / Let's keep singing as long as we can / Soon we might be saved by a man."

The creature did not seem to mind how bad our rhymes were. Something about the music seemed to please it, and even after we reached the ocean floor the sub continued to rock from side to side. We kept singing, and playing, and eventually the movement ceased.

We had survived!

The singing went on for a little bit more, but eventually we decided that our friend had probably fallen asleep.

"Do you think we can stop now, Howard?" asked Harriet. "I think my feet are bleeding."

For the first time I noticed the pain in my hands. In my determination to keep going I had ignored the damage I was doing to myself, but now, seeing the blood, the barrier went down, and my hands began to scream.

"Yes," I replied quietly, trying to keep the agony from my voice. "I think we should stop now, and recover while it sleeps."

"How bad is the leak? Do you think we can fix it?"



I had almost forgotten. When composing poetry, even in such circumstances, I tend to lose track of all other thoughts. Nothing seems to matter, other than the mechanics of locking one word to another, building beauty upon a framework of rhythm and rhyme, syllables and feet. That is probably one of the reasons why I turn to it so often in times in trial – the other is that we must all make do with the tools at our disposal. Poetry, if you'll allow me a moment of immodesty, is one of my most powerful tools.

I twisted my head to look at the leak. With incredible relief I saw that it seemed to have closed when the creature loosened its hold upon us, probably as two panels re-tightened their grip against each other.

"It seems fine," I whispered back to her. "There's no more water coming in, as far as I can see. You know what, Harriet, there's a small chance we might actually survive this misadventure."

SNAP!

There was sharp noise, loud but quickly over, and then we felt movement again. This time, though, it was different. We were not being squeezed, or thrown, or rattled – the movement was all in one direction.

We were being slowly dragged somewhere.

I dared not voice my suspicion to Harriet, for fear of giving her false hope, but it seemed to me that the divers from Sea Base Delta might have found us, hooked us up to a winch, and were now guiding us back to the base. I did not, as I say, convey any of these thoughts to Harriet, for the reason already given, of course, but also for fear that any further noise we made might wake our ocean-going horror-child. If the divers had found us, they were probably trying to sneak us away from its clutches – assuming it had not already left, which I doubted – without waking it up. It was probably a wise decision. Even if they were armed, humans in water are literally out of their element, and do well to stay out of unnecessary trouble. And what if they had temporarily fought the creature off to get to us, only to be followed back to the base, perhaps by the creature and all its friends? The risk was not worth

taking – it was much better to let the horror-child sleep.

Perhaps Harriet came to the same conclusions herself, because she asked, for once, no further questions.

Every bump and scrape along the seafloor gave me conniptions, but there were no more leaks – although the water already within the sub was beginning to make me really uncomfortable. It had warmed up a bit, like the water in your Wellington boots when you go caving, but my trousers were beginning to shrink, bunch and gather in very awkward and painful ways. And that is not to mention the pain I felt whenever the salty sea water splashed over the abrasions on my hands.

But even as I winced at the pain, I congratulated myself for being able to feel it. Our survival had been far from a foregone conclusion, and as soon as we got out of this tub I'd be giving myself a good pat on the back, if I could not persuade Harriet to perform that duty for me.

Within ten minutes there was a knock on the sub's hatch.

"We're going to open you up, now. Is that okay, sir?"

We had arrived at Sea Base Delta!

Terror in the Night

It took a few minutes for them to crank open the hatch, but what a blessed relief it was to see even the first crack of light enter the sub! I was all set to clamber out on my own, but the sailors waiting to help me out would not hear of it.

"Please wait a minute, sir," one said. He was a tall fellow, with short blonde hair and a pair of thick-rimmed plastic glasses. "You're not going to have any circulation in your legs. If you just jump out, you could fall and really take a hit. Let us get this hatch right off, and then we can help you out."

I gritted my teeth, and thanked him. Did he not realise how desperate I was to escape from

that steel coffin? I closed my eyes and tried to relax while waiting.

"What's your name, then?" he asked. "I'm Starches, Lieutenant Commander John Starches."

"I'm Howard Phillips, poet extraordinaire, novelist of sorts, musician of renown, and adventurer when necessary."

"Impressive," he replied with a somewhat sarcastic tone, which I did not entirely appreciate. Perhaps I had been a bit bumptious, but I was there to help, and I had been having a very difficult day so far. "You aren't Navy, then? Interesting. Who else have you got in there? That's a two-man tub, isn't it?"

"I've got a girl in there, Lieutenant, if you can believe it. I'm a rock star, you see, so I don't travel without them."

I might have felt something poking at my buttocks again, if they had not been so numb.

"A girl?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "I think we have a few of those around here too. They're really nice, don't you find?"

"Generally, Lieutenant Commander Starches, I agree, they can be very pleasant company, but this one can be quite trying."

She called from the back of the sub. "Shut up, Howard, unless you want me to tell all the sailors how you cried like a baby when the lift broke down..."

I opened my eyes in time to see Starches raising an eyebrow. "There were extenuating circumstances," I explained, "in which the only rational recourse was to cry like the aforementioned baby."

"Okay," he replied. "The hatch is fully open now, and we're going to reach in and pull you out. This is Ensign Bargett – he'll take your right arm, I'll take the left."

The pair of them lifted me out with the efficiency of nurses moving a patient from a stretcher to a bed. They placed me in a wheelchair that was ready and waiting, and another man brought me a towel. "You probably want to talk about the thing that attacked you, but let's save that for the debriefing. Your circulation should be back in ten minutes or so. Talking of

debriefing, do you want us to get those wet trousers off?"

I considered how uncomfortable I was, and then considered how uncomfortable I would be sitting there in my pants, especially once they brought Harriet out of the tub, and I decided to keep my trousers on for the time being. Whether she really had a romantic interest in me or not, I could not have said, but it would be foolish to abandon all hope of something happening – and that would be the upshot of her seeing me shivering and clammy in my pants, with goosepimples all over my legs of deathly pale.

Even an English girl would find that unattractive. An American girl, used to tanned, muscular bodies (not unlike those of the sailors helping her out of the sub at the moment), would be horrified, and so I declined the Lieutenant Commander's offer.

"Fair enough," he said over his shoulder, as he attended to Harriet, "but make sure you get into some dry clothes soon. If you catch pneumonia, we have some great doctors down here, and they'll do their best to help you out, but it does do permanent damage to your lungs."

It might seem curious that I was so concerned about my appearance in front of Harriet. Although she was attractive enough, I have yet to give you any reason to think that I was falling in love with her – but that is missing the point. A man wants every woman unrelated to him that he knows to find him attractive, and certainly more attractive than she finds other men. Even if she is so utterly unattractive to him that he would rather kiss a slug than look at her face, he will take it as a personal slight if she chooses to fall in love with another man. All women I know should be in love with me, and only take other men on sufferance, given that they cannot have me. And so, even though my feelings for Harriet were not particularly strong, it still made my blood boil to see those healthy, strapping sailors manhandling her like that.

And yet – *were* they all that healthy?

As the Lieutenant Commander turned back to me, having put Harriet down in a wheelchair of her own, I noticed for the first time how drained he looked, the darkness under his eyes, the bro-

ken, chewed fingernails. At first, none of these things had claimed my attention, being small and subtle, nothing that would have been notable, taken on their own, but when I saw them all arranged in that way, upon the same, otherwise healthy person, the mark of stress was unmistakable.

"So they've sent you to help?" he asked. "Do you know what's been going on?"

I was struggling to dry my trousers and hence legs with the towel, but it was proving fruitless. I took a glance at Harriet, and, seeing that she looked just as unprepossessing as me, with her bedraggled hair, running make-up, and loosened false fingernails, decided to throw vanity to the wind – or perhaps reinvent it, David Beckham style! A little strength had now returned to my legs, and after unzipping my trousers (what on Earth had possessed me to wear one of my best suits down here I did not know – it put me in mind of when I had worn my school uniform to my first cub scouts meeting, *faute de mieux*) I got to my feet, wrapped the towel around my waist as a sarong, and reached under to pull the trousers down. Their shrinking made that a bit difficult, but I got them down to my knees, and sat back down to wriggle them the rest of the way, with what dignity I could still muster. I saw Harriet chuckling through her shivers, which made it sound as if she were hiccupping.

"I understand," I said, with my best Orson Welles voice, "that you have a little problem with ghosts."

"Howard is an expert," interjected my female companion.

"An expert in ghosts?" asked the Lieutenant Commander.

I was about to provide a serious answer, but Harriet pre-empted me.

"In everything," she said, though she spoilt the joke a bit by sneezing. "Women, music, life, philosophy. Howard is quite the authority. If you have a little problem with ghosts, he is as good a man as any to help you."

"Yes," I agreed, with at least the last part of what she had said. "If you have a problem with ghosts, I am as good a man as any to help, given that ghosts do not exist."

The Lieutenant Commander frowned. “You might find that opinion rather provocative down here. I’ve no truck with the supernatural myself, but a lot of strange things have been happening on the base lately. Men have died, and emotions are running high. It might be better to take the lay of the land before diving in feet first, sir, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

I nodded in acknowledgment. Whatever was going on down here, I didn’t really want to make enemies, especially of those people like the Lieutenant Commander himself, who seemed like “an ordinary Joe”, as they say on that side of the world, though well educated and intelligent one.

“I’ll take your advice on that, Lieutenant. I’m here to help, not to cause trouble. Unless, of course, the only way I can help is by causing trouble!”

“I understand you’ve been given a wide latitude in your actions by the Navy? That’s quite unusual for a civilian.”

Harriet was a bit puzzled. “Have you not heard of Howard? He saved the world, you know. That’s earned him a lot of respect, much as I enjoy busting his buns.”

It was his turn to frown. “You mean that was all real? I mean, we saw him on Letterman the other night, and everything, but we all thought it was some kind of comedy thing, what with him being British and everything.”

“No,” smiled Harriet. “It was all real, but I can see why you thought he was a comedian.”

I scowled at her, but neither of them seemed to notice.

“Exactly,” he replied. “I thought he was from Monty Python or something. I don’t mean to be rude, sir, but you do talk a lot like Michael Palin.”

“That isn’t a rude thing to say at all,” I said, pursing my lips.

“I thought you were appearing on Letterman in character, like that Borat guy.”

“You really have been isolated down here,” said Harriet.

“Well, we get a few TV channels, and some radio, but there’s no internet, no newspapers, no other people. No context, basically, so if one guy

reckons you’re a character, pretending to be a spaceman, who’s to say you aren’t?”

“So why exactly did you think I’d been sent, if I’m just a comedy character?”

He smiled and shrugged. “I hadn’t thought about it much. To be honest, I don’t think it matters what you do. This base is going to have to be shut down, and we’re all going to have to go home for a very long rest, before taking up some nice quiet office jobs.”

“Is it really that bad?” asked Harriet.

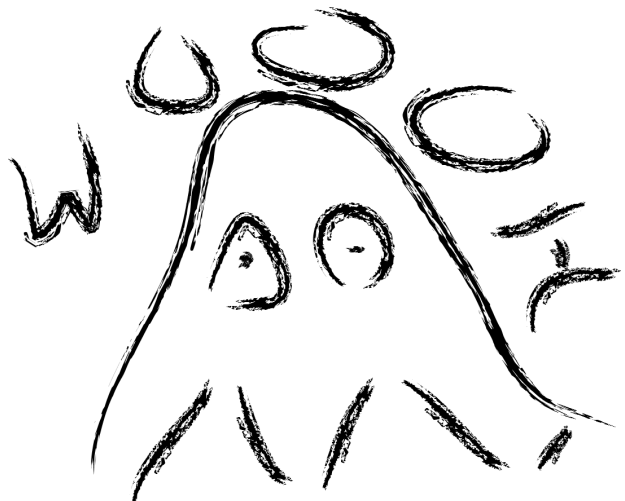
He shrugged again. “Let’s talk about it once we’ve got you two cleaned up, your wounds dressed, and given you some nice dry clothes. There’s plenty of time to get to work – there’s nowhere for you to go till the shift change, and that’s two weeks away.”

“Don’t remind me,” I said, wincing. Two weeks to convince eighty-nine hillbillies that they were losing their minds – without unnecessarily upsetting them, of course! – was on one hand a pretty tall order, but on the other, it was a long, long time to spend at the bottom of the ocean, without the internet, without teletext, and without the sun.

The Lieutenant Commander motioned for the Ensign to take hold of Harriet’s wheelchair, and he took control of mine, just as I finally managed to wriggle right out of my trousers.

“Do you want us to fix them up?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Throw them out and give me



some coveralls – for the next two weeks I want you to think of me as one of the guys.”

“No problem,” he replied, chucking the trousers in the general direction of a garbage bin.

“By the way, do you have any tea down here?” I asked. “My preference is for Tetley, but if you have Typhoo I don’t mind the sacrifice.”

“Just one of the guys...” said Harriet, with a laugh.

Lunch with the Commander

I felt much better after drying off and putting on some fresh clothes. A naval something – I am not so well acquainted with the ranks of the US Navy that I can identify them if they do not identify themselves – came to the room they had assigned me, and took me to collect Harriet from her room. We made our way to the mess, and as we walked I marvelled at the incredible feat of engineering to which we had travelled. The base appeared to be in the shape of a cross, with four great wings of roughly equal length emanating from a central dome, pointing, conveniently enough, north, south, east and west. The east wing contained the crew’s quarters, and we were travelling to the mess hall on the far edge of the west wing, taking us through the dome of Central Operations, or C-Ops, as we were told the crew called it. It was a vast open-plan area, fully eighty metres across, full of bustling personnel, flashing lights, computers, and metre-high monitors. As we walked through, no one paid any particular attention to us, but although I spent more than a moment dazzled by the sheer spectacle of it, and wished that I would turn off the main lights to see it all light up the darkness like a Christmas tree, I then paid careful attention to the people, even before I lifted my eyes to consider the seascape above. All moved with quiet, confident efficiency, just the kind of behaviour you would hope to see in people possessed of such destructive weaponry. But something

dragged at their determination – not apprehension, as the famous line by Trevor Denyer would have it, because each of them was as brave as the next. No, it was something else. A lack of confidence, perhaps. These men and women feared nothing on Earth, but they looked as if their confidence in the Earth they knew had been shaken. It was the look of someone who had just seen the end of *Unbreakable* or *The Sixth Sense* for the first time... Whatever was going on down here, these men and women believed it to be supernatural – even the most casual glance at them betrayed that to the artist’s eye, and I took more than a casual glance.

And then, my initial assessment of the personnel done, and just before we left C-Ops, I did look up, finally, to be stunned by the beauty of the ocean. I could not guess what material it was made of, as I had never heard of any transparent material strong enough to resist the ocean at such depth. Of course, no light from the surface reached this far down, but lights from the base beamed up into the darkness, and numerous bizarre deep sea fish swam obliviously in and out of those beams, careless in their blindness of their exposure to our gaze.

I put a hand on the young crewman’s shoulder to ask him a question. He jumped as high as if I had dropped an ice cube down his shirt.

He quickly pulled himself together. “Sorry, sir,” he said. “Everyone’s a bit jumpy at the moment.”

They certainly were. I had never seen nerves so frayed – unless you count those of my guitarist, after a long jam session! (That is a joke you will have to have read my previous novel to understand.)

“I just wanted to ask,” I said, once his composure was fully restored, “about the dome. What material could possibly resist the strength of the ocean at this depth? Surely glass or plastic would just crumple. Has there been time for the military to exploit the materials found in the ships I brought back from *Envia*? I can’t imagine that there has been.”

The young man smiled, obviously relieved to be back on firm ground. “It’s a bit of a trick, sir. It’s an illusion. The top of the dome is as thick as

the rest of the base, but an image of the ocean outside is projected onto it, to create the illusion of a great window onto the ocean. It's supposed to be good for morale."

"That's very impressive." (He beamed, happy to see his base appreciated.) "Is it really good for morale, though? Doesn't it just bring home to you the weight of water pressing down upon your heads?"

He looked pensive. "Maybe... I don't know. I hadn't thought about it much."

"Well, I shouldn't worry about it too much, my boy. That's why I'm here, to work out what is making everyone so unhappy."

"Oh, I can tell you now that it isn't the C-Ops dome that is making us unhappy, sir. Quite the opposite, in fact – everyone looks forward to coming in here. It's just about the only place we feel safe."

"I suppose," said Harriet, "that even if the water broke through the dome, at some subconscious level you'd probably still feel you could swim to the surface, however insane that would seem to your conscious mind."

"That could be it, ma'am," replied the young man. "If you want to find out why we are so

frightened, just wait till this evening, and then you'll find out, and you'll wish you hadn't. Now, I think we should carry on to the mess hall, as quickly as we can. The Commander doesn't usually have to wait for people very long. I don't want to get him mad at me."

"If he decides to airlock you," said Harriet, "it'll take a while for NCIS to get down here!"

He gave her a withering look. "We don't generally joke about our commanding officers being murderers in the Navy, ma'am."

"Fair enough," she said, with a wink at me, and we continued on our way to the mess.

The Commander was waiting, somewhat impatiently, but at least it had given him a chance to finish his meal, and so he was able to get straight down to business.

"Well," he bellowed, "so you're the mighty Howard Phillips, conqueror of worlds, here to save us all!"

"Erm, yes," I replied, looking down at my feet, even though they were hidden by the plastic table at which we sat. "I hope that you are suitably impressed."

"Not so much, son, no."

MIDNIGHT STREET

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He left it at that for an uncomfortably long time.

"I don't generally think the US Navy should turn to poets in times of need, do you?"

I shrugged. It seemed that no one was aware of the role IBIS had played in sending me here. I presumed the Navy had just presented me as some kind of civilian specialist, and left out the part about the secret space organisation at whose behest I had been sent!

"But these are peculiar circumstances," he continued, finally. "Maybe it will take a poet to make the necessary connections."

"How do you mean, sir?" asked Harriet, once the introductions were over.

Only four of us sat at the table. Harriet, Howard, Commander Brigson, and Chief Banks, a slightly overweight man, with a head that was mainly bald and a beard that threatened to overwhelm his face. He sweated a little too easily, which I could tell after just a few minutes in his company, and was clearly frightened half out of his mind. Commander Brigson, on the other hand, was lean, with short cropped grey hair and a firm set to his clean-shaven jaw. I didn't think he would have been frightened of a ghost even if it had turned up in his nursery. He looked like a man who even as a child would have had little to no time for flights of fancy or concern for things ineffable. What both these men seemed to share was a determination to do their duty, in the face of whatever challenges the world had to throw at them. In all honesty, I felt, from the very first moment I met him, that he saw me as a greater challenge than anything else he had encountered.

"I mean that we are military men," he told her, keeping eye contact with me. "Now, I'll have no nonsense about the military mind being set in its ways or anything like that. There isn't a man or woman on this base the nature of whose duties won't have changed utterly between their conscription and their retirement. We have to train and retrain, learn and unlearn, constantly and unerringly. However, we are trained to think in certain ways, certain ways that are perhaps not useful in the situation in which we now find ourselves."

"Do you mean to say," I asked him, "that you are trained not to believe in things like ghosts?"

"You might put it like that," he said.

Chief Banks nodded, to draw our attention to himself. "We don't believe in ghosts, and yet here we are, being haunted."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," said Harriet. "Haunted is a pretty strong word, gentlemen. And Howard doesn't believe in ghosts either, for that matter."

"What?" said the Commander, not shouting, but coming very close, and now looking at Harriet for the first time. "What do you mean, he doesn't believe in ghosts?"

"He thinks they are nonsense," she answered. "Haven't you read any of his novels? In his last one he wrote something about knowing that ghosts aren't real because he sees such terrible visions every single night. Due to familiarity with them, he discounts a supernatural origin, which someone only experiencing such a vision once might fail to do, because of their vividness."

The Commander was silent, and just looked at the Chief, open-mouthed.

"When did you read my novels?" I asked Harriet, half-flattered, half-suspicious. "And when did you spend so much time thinking about what I wrote in them?"

She made a face. "Don't get all uppity, Howard. You were missing for a few days before I got the call to meet you at Saratoga Base. I downloaded the issues of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* that had your stuff in, and caught up on it all. It made for a great evening's reading."

It was my turn to make a face. "Is that your way of saying that I haven't published very much? That you were able to read it all in a single night? Well, thank you very much for making a joke of my writing career."

"I'm not saying anything, Howard. You were lucky to find that you had a talent for music, that's all."

"That's cold," I said, and, it has to be said, my feelings were indeed a bit hurt. So, I had not published very much by that date, but I was very proud of such work as I had done. It was autobiographical on the whole, of course, and maybe

that reined in my creativity somewhat, but still, I had put at least a month of my life into each of my novels, writing for very nearly two hours every single day! Granted, some people are under the misapprehension that writing great novels takes more than a month, but those people, in the main, are easily identified by their failure to write any novels whatsoever. If I had to spend more than a month writing one of my novels I believe, quite sincerely, that it would lose much of its zest, novelty, and inspiration. For the same reason, I regard anything more than four or five hours spent editing my work as a waste. What would be the point? More seriously, what would be the result? The first task of any editor would surely be to delete any reveries such as this one, and though they may not advance the plot very much, they do everything to convey my state of mind, and part of my purpose in writing is to put that frame of mind on the record. It could be that no one else has ever thought the way that I have, and many people might not have thought at all about the things that preoccupy me to such a degree. Maybe I do use my adventures as a convenient hook on which to hang my little thoughts on life, but that makes me all the more fortunate in having such incredible adventures at my disposal!

“Sorry, Howard, you know I’m just teasing.”

The Commander finally regained his voice. “You have an almost free rein down here, Mr Phillips, so long as it doesn’t interfere with our operations. But if you don’t believe in ghosts, I’m at a loss as to how you intend to deal with them.”

I laughed, but quickly stifled it when I saw his reaction: his brow had furrowed, his eyes had narrowed. I swallowed, visibly gulping to show respect for his attempt at intimidation. It would make him feel better about me, perhaps. “Commander, if you don’t believe in ghosts, what exactly did you think someone who does believe would be able to do? Surely they either exist or not, regardless of whether you believe in them.”

“I believe in mass hysteria, in contagious insanity, shattered nerves, and any number of other reasons for men and women to see things that don’t exist. I could tell them a million times

that ghosts don’t exist, and they wouldn’t believe me. It wouldn’t make a blind bit of difference, because they’ve seen them for themselves. But if someone turns up who does believe in them, and investigates, and performs an exorcism or something, then maybe that would set their minds at ease. Can you not just pretend to believe, and then pretend to believe that they have been done away with?”

“That would make me a liar and a hypocrite,” I said, for the first time letting him see a little of the firmness I reserve for special occasions. “And I sense that you are being one, too.”

Chief Banks looked at the Commander with elements of both panic and glee in his eyes. Harriet put a hand over her mouth, to hide, very ineffectively, a smile. The Commander took a moment to consider his response.

“How’s that, Mr Phillips?”

“Because you’ve seen these ghosts too, haven’t you?”

He said nothing.

“You probably don’t want to admit it, because you don’t want to spread panic among the crew, but you’ve seen them all right. You’re as eager as the crew for someone to say it’s all right.” I almost went on to say something about wanting a hug from his daddy, but thought better of it. I was a good fighter, of course, but he had eighty-nine men and women at his command, not to mention a huge amount of the finest weaponry at the disposal of the US Navy. I might, with a bit of luck, win a fight with him, but there could be no doubt who would win the battle.

“Have you finished?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” I replied. “I have, for now. Let’s stop talking in general and get down to specifics. Why don’t you tell me what is going on down here?”

He barked. I think it was supposed to be a laugh, but it didn’t come out that way, not at all. “You seem to have all the answers, Mr Phillips. Maybe you are the man for the job after all. The Chief will fill you in on the last few weeks. I’ll see you in the morning, and then we’ll see who is a hypocrite. Good night, miss. Enjoy your stay on board. Chief. Mr Phillips.” He got up and left.

The volume of conversation in the mess rose considerably the moment he left. I thought to detect a higher pitch to the voices than had previously been present. The crew didn't like their commander to see their fear, just as he did not like them to see his.

We took the opportunity to grab ourselves some food. It was early evening at that point, despite the difficulty of persuading your body to regard time as having passed when the light was wholly artificial, and we were both growing hungry. Then we sat back down with the Chief, who had waited patiently for us.

"So, Chief Banks," said Harriet. "What's the scoop? What's been going down? Who's the big kahuna?"

He shook his head. "This might seem funny to you, miss, but people have died down here."

She was shocked "I'm sorry, Chief. I really didn't know that. Did you know, Howard?"

"I was aware of it," I said, as vaguely as I could manage without actually lying.

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't think you would come."

"You were quite right to think that. I've half a mind to slap the back of your head for this, Howard."

"You're a woman," I replied, deciding, perhaps unwisely, to release some of the tension that had built up during my interview with the Commander, "you only have half a mind full stop!" I tried to soften it with a smile, but my goose was cooked before the words had even left my mouth. Still, I considered, that might not be such a bad thing, in some ways.

"Howard, you insufferable—" She failed to finish the sentence, as her fury took hold of every one of her faculties, in preparation for violence. Perhaps sensing this, she picked up her tray of food and stormed out of the mess.

Chief Banks watched her go with appreciation. "Are you going to go after her? She's too good-looking to be left angry for too long. Someone else will be happy to step in if you've stepped out, especially down here."

"Let them," I said firmly. "She isn't my girlfriend. I didn't insult her by accident. If you are going to tell me about people dying horribly, I'd

rather she wasn't here, not from any gallantry on my part, but because I don't want you to temper your tale for the sake of her sensitivity. You and I know that we hate to see a frightened woman, that biologically we are impelled to lessen that terror, in any way that we can. I don't want you to do that. I want you to tell me everything, to rub every horrifying detail in my face, to do everything you can to scare me out of my wits. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'll do my best," he replied.

He did such a good job that I will try to repeat his words verbatim. They do not need me to paraphrase them.

Preparations for Death!

It had been a queer day [said the Chief]. There had been something off from the very beginning. The weather report said that storms were expected up top, but of course those would not affect us down at the bottom of the ocean. Nevertheless, I felt I could feel the oppression that hangs in the air just before a storm, even down here in the base. The air seemed thick, my skin felt clammy, and, naturally, I assumed that I had caught a cold from somewhere. After a two-month stint down here that was a bit unusual, given that there had been plenty of time for viruses to make their way through the population a half dozen times over by then. I just assumed that somehow I had found a new one, and soldiered on.

My duties that morning were unusual, which added to my feeling of unease. I am quite meticulous by nature, and my job is to be meticulous, which means I am generally quite happy with my work. In this case, though, we had to put together a mission very quickly, and the speed with which the excursion was being organised was flustering me somewhat. I worried that something would be missed in our rush to get the men into the ocean, something crucial, and

though I worried for myself, I worried more for them. But there was no option – the orders had come from the very top, and, just as if we had been engaged in a battle, we had to make haste and get underway as quickly as could be done.

So I ate my breakfast quickly, nervously, and left the greater part of it. My movements were mechanical, but sluggish, like a robot whose batteries were running low, all resources diverted to my brain, as it frantically searched my memories of the mission plan, hunting for any flaw, for anything I had missed.

If you miss one thing down here, Howard, you might as well have missed everything, because someone will die regardless.

I could not find a flaw in our preparations, but something nagged at me anyway. I put it down to the supposed cold, and shook myself, heading to the mini-sub bay as soon as I had been to the head. You might think it was reckless of me to not give more thought to that nagging feeling, but I have found many times that my brain is more likely to come up with the answers if I don't keep tapping it on the shoulder. Pressed hard, my brain will seize up, like the original typewriters would when typed too quickly. Better to let my brain get on with its work quietly, in the background – it would let me know when it had its answer. What's more, perhaps something at the bay would trigger something in my memory, maybe I would notice the device that had not been thoroughly checked, or the valve that had not been properly oiled.

"Hi Chief," said Lieutenant Commander Starches as I went in. "You don't look so good, if you don't mind me saying, sir."

"I don't feel so good," I replied.

I led him over to the mini-sub being prepped for the mission. You probably noticed them when you were being brought aboard, Howard. [I confessed that I had not, given my slightly frazzled physical and mental state at that point.] Well, okay then. They are about three metres long, and about two high. You could think of them as being a bit like a wheel-less motorcycle in a plastic oval bubble, and in fact that is not as inaccurate a description as you might think. They share quite a few bits of engineering with

your typical Harley Davidson. One man can sit within each. A dashboard offers navigational assistance, sonar, a directional reading for the base's beacon, and communications, both with other divers and with the base. One unusual feature is that the interior of the mini-sub is flooded at all times once it is in the ocean. This might seem odd, but the pressure down here is such that if it were otherwise, a single chip in the viewscreen might be enough to explosively destroy the entire machine. In any case, the mini-sub is designed for exploration – the divers have to be able to leave them to investigate and take samples. The hypersuits worn by the divers protect them from the pressure.

"But I'd be grateful if you didn't mention it again," I continued. "I'm trying to soldier on, Starches."

"I understand, sir." He nodded, and began his report. "We seem to be all set for the mission. These two mini-sub is ready to go, with all necessary safety equipment, hypersuits, and... the weapons you asked for."

"Why the hesitation, Starches?"

"Weapons, sir? Are we expecting the men to get into a fight?"

"It's always best to be prepared. You know about that creature out there."

"Fair enough," he replied, reaching out to grab a weapon holstered on the side of one of the mini-sub, "but these pistols won't do a thing against that beast. It would be like firing peashooters at Godzilla. It wouldn't make him angry – he wouldn't even notice it!"

[I tried to interject at that point to ask further questions about the creature that had assailed Harriet and me in the submarine.]

Let's talk about that later, Howard [he said]. That beast is not crucial to this story, and deserves a story in itself. The story I am telling you now is one you need to hear, and, ideally, one that you need to hear before you go to sleep tonight.

[I agreed to save my questions on the beast till later.]

Thank you [said the Chief]. I will carry on with my story now, if you do not mind. I know that you are a novelist, Howard, and it must be

difficult for you to let another decide in what order to tell a story, especially a simple navy man such as myself [I assured him I did not see him that way], but you are probably, quite literally, out of your depth down here, and if you do not pay attention to what I have to say, you will begin to flounder sooner than you think.

"That's right," I said to the Lieutenant Commander, "but that beast might not be the only thing out there tonight."

"Something you can't talk about, sir?"

"I'd like to say more," I replied, "but I cannot."

In truth, I knew no more than he did, that there was an urgent mission being sent to a certain location, but it never hurt to let the other officers believe I knew a little more than I did. If I had explicitly said that I had no idea why the men were being sent out there, that would have caused doubt among the men. Uncertainty is a dangerous thing to spread among men who carry weapons as a matter of course. Starches is a sturdy type, of course, Howard – you've already met him, I believe? [I acknowledged that I had.] Yes, he's a good man. Tough, brave and loyal to the Navy like no one since Nelson. If he was ordered to stub a cigarette out on his own nose his only question would be as to which brand he should use. [I silently wondered if that was the kind of thing that would appeal to Harriet.] But there are others down here who are more nervy. If they thought no one had a plan, if they suspected things were being done on a wing and a prayer, their mood could easily turn nasty. [He looked around the mess hall before saying that, to check that no one was within hearing range.]

I was involved in a mutiny once, you know, Howard. We were in the waters off Iraq, in the first Gulf War, running marines in to the coast on a small twenty-man boat. I don't know if you know this, but Iraq is pretty much landlocked, so there was no mystery about our destination, which made us the next best thing to a sitting duck most nights. That would have been bad enough, but the CO was taking a few too many risks, and one of the men caught a bullet in his eye. Later that night, the word went around the boat that the captain was going overboard. I

didn't believe my ears, and had little idea what to do. Should I take a stand, and risk going overboard with him? Or let it happen, and live with the shame forever?

I radioed for help, anonymously, and had a battleship meet us within an hour. The plotters were taken aboard and went to prison. I stayed with the ship, and within a week another man was dead, again because of the captain's recklessness. Eventually I asked for a transfer, and got one, after hinting at my reasons in a private chat with an uncle in the service. The captain was quietly shuffled back to duties on dry land.

My point is, I've seen a mutiny [he whispered the word], I've seen what it can do to people, the way it destroys lives, and the way it preys on fear. When it happens, it's nearly always an internalisation of the fear we have of what's out there.

So I always found it better to minimise that fear, to project calm self-assurance whenever possible. [I looked at his slightly sweaty brow, his dark-rimmed eyes, and his very nearly unkempt beard, and then cursed myself for so visibly doubting his words.] That might seem surprising to you now, Howard, but a month ago things were very different. Things around here have changed. We are not afraid of what's *out there*. We're afraid of what's *in here*.

"It looks like you've done a good job," I said to Starches. "You run things in a ship-shape fashion down here."

"I like to think so, sir," he replied, his face betraying no hint of a smile, but he was clearly proud.

"Do you think Cooper and Nicks are the right men for the job?" I asked him.

"Hard to say, sir, without knowing what they are going out there for, but they are both good men, and good all-rounders. If it's a job that can be done, they'll do it."

"Good," I said. "Good. Who knows what they might encounter out there, but a pistol might make all the difference. Sometimes all it takes is something much smaller, Starches, sometimes all it takes is a loose screw to change the course of a battle, a war, a nation."

"Yes, sir."

“Okay, get them down here.”

Starches went over to the intercom, and sent for the two divers. Both arrived in a matter of minutes, calm and unhurried. Probably they had been ready and waiting for an hour at least, sitting in their quarters, reading, wondering when they would be summoned to put their lives on the line again. Going out to collect the unpowered sub of a visitor like yourself, Howard, is dangerous enough, as you know from your own experiences, but travelling further afield is more dangerous yet, and reserved for emergencies and essential research or military needs.

[What exactly do you do down here? I asked.]

The base as a whole? Our primary purpose is to act as a communications centre and submarine base in case of an all-out attack upon the mainland United States. While we wait for the world to end, we perform certain research functions, which have led to such innovations as the hyper-pressure suit and the mini-sub. We do the tests, and someone up there works out what the results mean, and then eventually they send down the new gear. It's a relatively new base – it's only been down here four years, and I've been here for all of those, shore leave aside. There are usually eighty-nine of us down here, but for a few days at the beginning of the month, we were down to eighty-seven.

Lieutenant David Cooper and Lieutenant James Nicks began to suit up, while I took one last look at their equipment. Before they put on their helmets and gloves I asked the Lieutenant Commander to leave us a moment. He hesitated, but only for a moment, as was only natural. It was quite right and proper for him to give at least a second's respect to the thought that something improper might be going on, but to the credit of his loyalty to the Navy, he gave it no more than a second.

“Yes, sir,” he said, and he went to the other end of the bay, to discuss something with the support team.

“Here you are, men,” I said to Cooper and Nicks, passing each of them a sealed printout. “I don't know what's in those envelopes, and I don't want you to tell me. For all I know, the Commander himself doesn't know what's in

there. These are your orders as sent from upstairs, and it's something big. Please open your orders, Lieutenants.”

They opened the orders, tearing along each perforation carefully and slowly, ostensibly to avoid damaging the orders within. I imagine they were also making a conscious effort to maintain a professional front, masking their anxiety and eagerness as if they were not desperate to discover what lay in store for them.

I watched as their eyes went wide, and tried not to bite my lip with curiosity as they tore up the orders and tucked them into outer pockets of their suits, to be disintegrated when they came into contact with the sea water.

“You boys okay?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” nodded Nicks.

Cooper was not quite so quick to answer. He tried once, then gulped, then tried again. “Yes, sir. Ready for duty, sir!”

“Good for you,” I said. “Helmets and gloves on, then, Lieutenants. It's time for you to take a swim!”

I returned to C-Ops, where the Commander was waiting for me.

“Chief.” His manner was as terse as ever.

“Commander.” I nodded.

C-Ops was unusually busy for that time of day. Almost everyone, except the small skeleton crew that had stayed up through the night and was currently sleeping, was up and on duty, ready to monitor the progress of our men.

“Did you find out what this was all about?” he asked. “Did you sneak a peek at their orders, Chief?”

I shook my head. “I would have liked to, sir, but reading them didn't seem to do Lieutenants Cooper and Nicks a whole lot of good. I haven't seen two men go so pale since the last time I had kosher long pig.”

“Ha!” His laugh was hearty, but brief. “You, a cannibal, chief?”

“Only when there's nothing else to eat, sir. This belly doesn't keep itself so large, you know.”

“Let's make sure the food shipments keep coming, then. You know where the men are going, at least?”

"Yes. Four kilometres northeast of here. They had to tell us that much, else we wouldn't have been able to plan the mission."

"Is that a hint of resentment I hear there, Chief?" He raised an eyebrow and looked at me with no small amount of humour in his eyes.

"I just like being able to do my job properly, sir."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, you know about as much as I do. I know where they are going, but I don't know why."

"There's a big mountain there," I suggested.

"There is indeed," he replied.

"I hope they are coming back."

"I shouldn't worry about that," he said, patting me on the back. "We've been down here almost four years without losing a man, haven't we? We won't start now."

"Yes, sir."

He turned to address the staff of C-Ops. At least forty of our people were there, and, as if by some sort of mental compulsion, the moment he turned to address them they fell silent and looked in his direction.

"Okay, listen up, everybody. Two men are going out into the water today, and they're going to need our help to get back again. I want every dial checked, every gauge monitored, and every circuit unblown – we can not afford any mess-ups here this morning." He began to walk around the room, meeting each sailor's gaze in turn. "I want you all at the top of your game, and if you don't feel up to it, please go down to the bay and step into the airlock along with our divers. Without a hypersuit. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," they yelled back in unison.

"Okay, carry on. Put me through to the bay." One of the youngest women on board, Petty Officer Darie Montell, knew that that order was meant for her. She flicked a switch or two, then nodded at the Commander. He flashed her a quick smile of acknowledgment. "Lieutenant Commander Starches?"

"Yes, sir," came the reply over the intercom.

"The mission is a go."

"Yes, sir."

The Commander looked at Petty Officer Mon-

tell again. "Now put me through to the mini-subs." A few seconds later she gave him another nod.

"You there, boys?"

The two of them answered together as one. "Yes, sir!"

"Lieutenant Nicks. Lieutenant Cooper. I want you to know that we are all with you in spirit. Take care of yourselves, first and foremost. If you find yourselves in difficulty at any times, get back here as quickly as possible, regardless of the orders you have. Do I make myself absolutely clear?"

"Crystal clear," answered Cooper, I think it was. It was hard to tell them apart over the radio.

"We'll hightail it out of there as if the devil himself were on our tail," said the other diver.

"Godspeed," said the Commander, and he nodded to Petty Officer Montell. They closed the connection, and the men were on their way.

Lost at Sea

I was beginning to fall asleep by this point of the Chief's story, and despite his eagerness to tell me everything, and my eagerness to discover everything, he was just taking too long.

"Look, Chief," I interrupted him. "You're giving me a huge amount of valuable background information, but I'm afraid I can't take in any more. I need to get some sleep. Can we pick this up in the morning?"

He scowled, and in that scowl I saw a man who had perhaps been pushed a bit too far a few too many times.

"Suit yourself," he growled. "But you'll regret it tonight, when the ghosts come knocking."

He got to his feet and stormed out of the mess.

I seemed to be having that effect on people!

I shrugged and finished my meal. It was unappetising, but filled my stomach well, and I washed it down with tea – though it tasted like no tea I had ever tasted before, and I had had to ask specially for them to add milk – not to mention that the first cup they had brought me, in the

midst of the Chief's story, had been cold! They had said it had been specially chilled in the fridge for me. I had made the effort to restrain myself from becoming angry. It would have done my mission no good whatsoever to lose my temper with the kitchen staff, and so I had simply smiled sweetly, and asked if they could warm it up for me, which had been done with a cheerful, "Whatever you say, sir!" Sometimes, it is true, you catch more flies with honey. Whether you can then eat those flies without feeling sick to the stomach at the repression of your true reactions is another matter!

There was little else to do, and I was extremely tired, so I headed for my room. Rather than walking directly through C-Ops, I circumnavigated it, to give myself a better feel for the base's geography. Taking the anticlockwise tunnel took me past the mini-sub bay, where so much of the action of the Chief's interminable story had taken place, and where I had previously been extricated from my little metal coffin. Peeking inside now, I could see the mini-sub that I had previously failed to notice. There were three of them, each mounted in a cradle, while a fourth cradle stood empty. I wondered if the Chief's story would have explained that, if I had listened to the end. The bay was empty of people, and I considered going in to have a proper look around, but it seemed like too much hard work for that time of night. It was almost ten by that point, the Chief's story having extended my mealtime to such an extent, and I really did need to sleep. Even Sherlock Holmes would miss clues if he were sufficiently tired, and I was not, and will never be, Sherlock Holmes. I might make a passable Watson, I think, in my later years, but it might chafe to be solely the chronicler of the adventures, rather than the instigator of them as well!

I returned to the tunnel that arced around C-Ops, and it turned now to the northeast, as I approached the east wing, and with it the crew's quarters. Whether by design or not, my route took me past Harriet's room. The door was closed, and I paused a moment to listen for any sign that she was still awake. There were no sounds, and for a moment I wondered whether to

knock, and see if we could make up for our squabble, but, tired though I was, it was easy to see that no good could come of it. She would assume my intentions to be ignoble, which would not have been a problem if they *were* ignoble – ignoble intentions are something of a speciality of mine! – but I did not want to do irreparable harm to my friendship with her. My adventures often lead me into strange places, but my sense of the strange is often a little distorted. It is always useful to me to have someone along for the ride who will be more sensitive to such issues.

So I left her to her slumber, and went on to my room. There was no lock, and so I opened it quite carefully, peering around the edges of the door to make sure that no trap had been left for me. This time, though, there was no trap, no tripwire, no guillotine, no bucket of water, nothing to cause me any death or, worse, humiliation, and so I stepped inside, bolting the door behind me and switching on the light.

There were no windows, of course, but it was a nice little room. It had a small bookshelf, which is the first thing I look for in any place I stay, and it was stocked with a small selection of books for visitors to read. I had browsed the books earlier in the day, while waiting to be summoned for our interview with the Commander, and been surprised by the range of titles on offer. Presumably these books were just spares donated by the crew, or left behind when they shipped out, but it was a nice touch nevertheless, which did a lot to make me feel at home. There was a copy of *The Da Vinci Code*, it goes without saying, and a Star Trek novel written, in theory, by William Shatner. A volume on *Deep Sea Diving for Dummies* had naturally drawn my attention, and Patrick O'Brian's *The Surgeon's Mate* was very well thumbed. I laughed to see a copy of *Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!* by my former employer (you know the one), and wondered if I would ever escape his overbearing presence! At that time he had sold less than 50 copies of that adventure "with vital organs missing" (as the SFX review had it), and yet one of the blasted things had followed me here!

There was a wardrobe, with a selection of

coveralls in my size, a few towels, some underwear, and space for the pair of plimsolls I had taken from there in the afternoon.

The room also boasted a washbasin, a bed, a black and white television set, an intercom set into the wall, and a desk and chair.

I quickly divested myself of my clothes, washed my face, cleaned my teeth, turned off the light, and jumped into bed in my boxer shorts. Little did I realise what kind of night I was in for!

A Bad Night's Sleep

I was in bed, allowing myself to drift off to sleep, secure in the knowledge that I would soon be assailed by the usual awe-inspiring and horrifying visions that came to me every night.

However, this night was unusual, in that I did not notice myself slipping under in the usual way. I normally had a few warning signs first, a sense of things growing hazy, a random concatenation of images that leapt unbound into my mind, and finally the shudder across my body that signified the disconnection of the mental and physical for the evening, that which prevents us all from acting out our dreams and injuring ourselves in the bedroom.

None of those things happened.

The visions simply began, though not in their usual horrifying way.

It began with a knock on the door.

I got up to answer it, letting my covers fall to the floor. (You can tell that I thought I was asleep, from the way I made no effort to conceal my partial nudity.) I opened the door. It was Harriet.

"Howard," she said, in a very sultry tone. "Hi, Howard."

"Hi, right back to you," I said, surprised that my dreams were being so kind to me tonight. Perhaps I was more deeply asleep than I had imagined?

"Hi Howard," she said again, and as those words required little in the way of extra consid-

eration, I looked her up and down to see what she was wearing.

It was the way of dreams, I supposed, that I had not noticed at first – until you ask, in your dream, what someone is wearing, quite often, I find their clothes are not sketched in. Whatever part of the brain creates dreams will sometimes consider clothes essential to its artistic purposes. At other times, they are afterthought, slapped on to meet the expectations of the dreamer.

In this case, the dream did more than meet my expectations. Harriet was wearing something so silky and ineffable that it might well have come fresh from a spider's web, resting upon her body as if it was afraid to crease itself. It shimmered with blue, and I silently thanked my dream for remembering my favourite colour.

I smiled at Harriet. "Hi Harriet. It's good to see you. Good to see all of you!"

She smiled, which spoilt the illusion a bit, as I knew she would not have appreciated such a comment in real life. But then in real life she would not have come to my room like this, and so whatever fidelity the dream Harriet might have had to her actual person was already long gone. At least she had the same body, my dream-self thought to itself, as it made plans to kiss her.

I leaned forward, and pressed my lips to hers. They were just as I had imagined – unsurprisingly, given that this was all happening in my imagination! Not all that soft, and not all that full, but far from hard or unwelcoming. They were much hotter than girl's lips usually are, but I took that as a sign of her passion. I closed my eyes during the kiss, as is my tendency. The first kiss with a woman is a special moment, and can all too easily be utterly spoilt by seeing her physiognomy in gigantic close-up! Even the most beautiful woman looks like a grotesque, malformed ogress at such close range, and so it is better to keep your eyes closed at first, and become accustomed to her features at a more leisurely and suitable pace.

The kiss over, I leaned back again, then opened my eyes to look into hers, to see how the kiss had affected her. I always hope that my kisses will have some kind of effect on my paramours, but it is always very difficult to judge

one's approach to the first kiss. If you are tentative, some girls will see that as passionless. If you are too passionate, many girls will be put off. My approach is generally this: to approximate as closely as possible a classic Hollywood kiss, and then, that done, to follow the lady's lead and see where she chooses to take us. As I opened my eyes, I hoped at least to see pleasure in her eyes, if not something more.

She had no eyes.

Her eye sockets were blackened, charred holes, and the eyeball sac had boiled and burst, its contents streaming down her cheeks, like horribly ultimate tears.

I could not help screaming, even though some part of me knew it beyond doubt to be a dream.

"Hi Howard," she said again, leaning forward for another kiss.

I backed away, into my room, but she stumbled towards me, almost tripping over her own feet. I could not help looking down, to see her intestines sliding down her legs, wrapping themselves like snakes around her feet, writhing as if they were alive, red, bloody, and seeming to be fit to burst in places with undigested food. I watched on in horror as her guts split open in a dozen places, hairless pink rats forcing their way through the gaps and then turning back to widen the holes.

"What is it, Howard?" asked Harriet, her voice full of concern for me. "Why are you frightened? It's just me, Harriet."

I failed to contain my evening meal, and spewed it out onto the floor. The rats looked up from their own evening meal, and realised dessert was now ready, and they gathered about the pale yellow vomit, nibbling as if it were a delicacy.

"Howard, what is it?" she said again, and I forced myself to look at her face once more. I tried to compose myself, to demand that my dream return to pastures more pleasant, but could not prevent it from showing me her tongue, sliding between her teeth, pushing them apart, wider and wider, levering them into horrible new shapes, forcing them into terrible new angles, breaking through her skin, extruding through her jawline, flicking out, long and las-

civiously, to lick at her own cheeks, licking up the remains of her eyeballs. "Let's kiss again, Howard."

I blinked, again and again, and pinched myself. I was at the bottom of a deep, dark well of dream, it was clear, and so I tried to force myself back to the surface. If my conscious self could take control, this nightmare would soon be over. But it would not happen. I could not feel any change at all. Normally, in such a state, I can feel the barrier of wakefulness against which I am pushing, but this time there was nothing. It was like kicking at a dandelion, to knock off its head, and missing, leaving your knee in agony. I put all my mental power into waking up, but I was pushing against nothing, and only succeeded in straining myself, making pain shoot through every corner of my mind.

"Howard," she cried, "it's still me! Come and kiss me again, Howard! I've seen how you look at me, especially when I lean forward, like this. You can't help looking, can you, Howard?"

She leaned forward, bringing her cleavage into view. It was a gaping chasm, the gap between her breasts extending down deep into her chest, where I saw a rotten, maggot-ridden heart fitfully, almost defiantly, beating. The breasts themselves drooped forward, falling out of her nightdress, slumping onto the floor, unspooling like tape from a broken cassette recorder. They pulsed, threateningly, as if possessed of some secret power, and began to crawl across the floor towards me, pushing aside and slumping over the rats, never losing their long, thin, pallid, scrawny connection to their hosts. The nipples cast about, resembling nothing so much as the noses of the rats nearby, seeming to sniff me out and lead the rest in my direction, before splitting in half, a division that continued right up to the root of the breasts. They all rose up in front of me, blood dripping from every line, like four huge leeches, ready to clamp upon my flesh and drain me till I could be drained no more.

I tried to scream again, but realised that I had never stopped.

As it all lunged at me, I rolled to the side and let it slump onto the bed. Harriet, or whatever

she had become, struggled to regain her feet, and I dodged past and ran through the door, trying to ignore the crunch of the rats that I stepped upon and the squirms of the intestines that I slipped upon.

Then I was out of the door, and looking around, hunting for a way to escape to a better night's sleep. Surely I had now paid my dues to my subconscious! Surely it would realise that I now had enough material for another dozen or so horror stories, and would get on with the serious business of sorting the day's events into the relevant parts of my memory. There was a lot to process – and perhaps that explained the vividness of my nightmare?

My dream-self's thoughts were interrupted as a wet, tentacular breast clamped itself around my right foot, and I was swung back into my quarters. My head slammed against the frame, and I came close to passing out, but unmercifully I did not. The Harriet-thing dangled me in the air, and then, with another of its appendages, produced a long, straight razor, and it proceeded to skin me, slicing my skin off with a cold efficiency that suggested it was practiced in such matters. I stopped screaming, once my tongue was gone, and stopped seeing, once my eyes had been split open.

"Howard," she said gleefully. "Don't you see, it's just me. It's just me and you, together here, now, forever. Isn't it wonderful?"

I shook my head, feeling as I did the skin flapping away from my face, the air catching at my exposed nerves.

Somehow I managed to wriggle free, and, after dropping to the floor, I staggered back out to the corridor.

"Oh, Howie!" she, or it, shouted after me. "If you don't want to play, you might as well have your stuff back, and I felt a slimy, soggy impact upon me. My skin. She had thrown my skin at me.

I gathered it up from the floor, and ran as best I could. It began to seem that the damage to my eyes had not been total, and some vision began to return. Maybe they had just been cut slightly, or perhaps it had been the brow that had been sliced, pouring blood down to block my vision.

Either way, I could now make out where I was going, and I immediately wished that I could not. All the doors to the quarters stood open, and within each appeared a scene from the Inferno. Men and women were undergoing tortures similar to those I had gone through, though I noted with disgust that many were actively embracing what was happening, and seemed to relish it, ghastly smiles upon their faces bespeaking some horrendous joy being found in their torment.

It was all a dream, I reminded myself. I was simply working my negative feelings towards military people into my dream. It meant nothing, I reasoned, even as I reeled in horror from one door to another. In this one, I saw the young Ensign who had guided me through the base being ground into paste by a colossal mill-stone. In another, Lieutenant Commander Starches was being rent into raw strips of flesh by a towering slug-beast. In this one, and I stopped, it was Harriet, in a nightmare of her own, being assaulted by a dozen fat sows, each guzzling on her flesh. How to reconcile that with my earlier encounter with her? I put it out of my mind – this was a dream, after all, and it did not need to follow any logic.

On I went, still trying to find a way out. Finally, I was away from the crew's quarters, and the horrific encounter became less frequent.

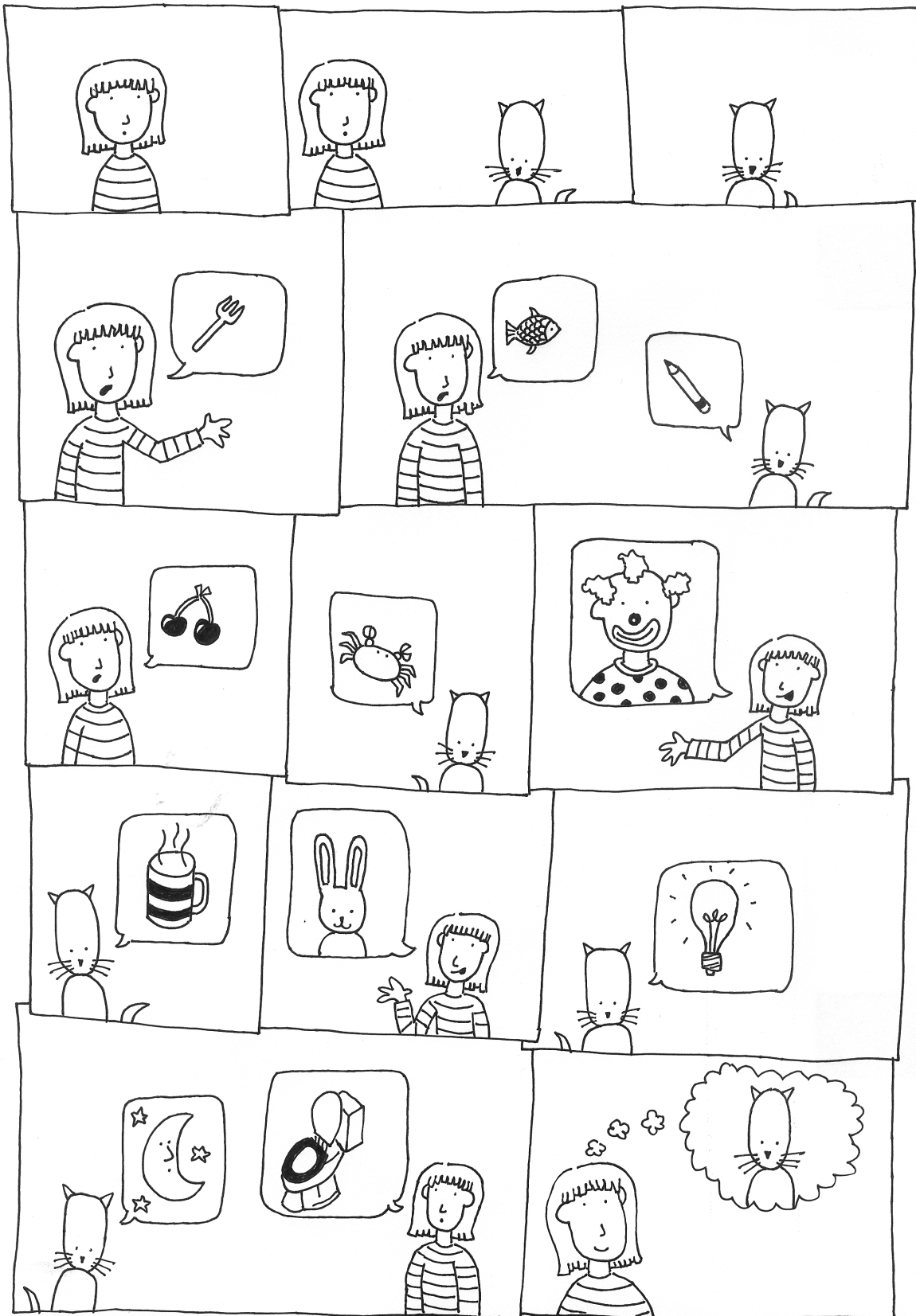
Then I stepped into C-Ops, to be confronted by a scene of such malignant bacchanalia that my throat froze up, as if a cold brick of ice had been jammed into it. I can hardly even attempt to describe the sights I saw in there that night, the horrors I witnessed, the acts I was eventually persuaded to perform, and in fact, it would be too much. Even trying to remember pushes me too far, and trying to actually write it down would be likely to bring the writing of this narrative to an abrupt halt.

Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity of dream-time, I returned to my quarters, finally resolved to let the dream take its course.

There was no sign of the nightmare-Harriet, or of the rats, or the maggots, but the floor was still caked in blood. I sat down on the bed and waited for the dream to end.

Come morning, I was still waiting.

HELEN AND HER MAGIC CAT



Our Plight on Amaros

Lawrence Dagstine

Dorian Rebal came in quietly and stood by the fledgling's bed, very tall, thin, his face green and his hair silver in the gloom.

"Merona?" he whispered to the human. She could have howled at the sorrow of hearing the Chief Architect's whisper and knowing what she had lost.

Freedom.

He stroked the tangled damp hair back from her face. "Have you had a decent sleep, my girl?" He sat on the edge of the bed. "Put on one of those pretty dresses, the kind your species wears, and we'll have dinner with Chief Builder Jansonglen. He wants the company of a pretty human girl, old dog that he is. I think he wants to celebrate his new urban oceanic development project and building itinerary for the People's Republic of Amaros."

"People's republic?" Merona muttered sleepily.

"Yes. An architect's work is never done. We've already touched the clouds of this world. The heavens are next."

"And you did it with the slave labour of my kind," she said angrily, fully awake now.

"But after your world's sun went supernova we gave you a home, food," Rebal pointed out.

"My ancestors didn't know what they were getting themselves into. We could never love your architectural dictatorship. We could never live in peace. So what you did was exile the human race to the streets while your pretentious civilisation took to the skies and new heights."

"And if you escape again, Merona, like you did the day before yesterday, then I will make sure you are put down to the slums like the rest of the rabble-rousers. The Amarosian government has no time or patience for resistance." Rebal cleared his throat and began again. "Now, we can stay at Jansonglen's unit until we have power again. Your belongings have come from the ship, so you needn't even pack... It shouldn't be long. Kromheller's expert at acquiring reliable servants from the streets."

"Kromheller," she said from a scrappy throat, "is not touching my things, nor is he using any of my race for it!" Was he actually stupid? Or did he think *she* was, and that a nap had restored her nature? Just because she had been a pretty young woman living the lavish life one from the slums could only dream of did not mean she had

to sit quietly and let her own people be forced into servitude.

“Whatever you say, my dear,” he murmured, trailing his warm greasy fingers down her throat in a way that, until this afternoon, had not only made her cringe but had sometimes also bewitched her. Like all fledglings, she was confused. “And I think it’s time we picked out a higher position for *you*,” he added. “Would you like that, my sweet? The first human on Amaros to be given an architectural post?”

She wrenched herself out from under his hand and sat up, pulling the covers tightly about her. “Dorian, I’m not a child who’s had a tantrum and can be bribed into smiling again. I’m a woman who’s seen something dreadful done to her race, and it’s still going on. It’s only the beginning of the torment for my people.”

“Jansonglen’s given them all the—”

“And I suppose he’s congratulating himself on his generosity! I couldn’t sit at a table with him without wanting to hurl my plate in his face.”

“Merona, Merona!” He tried to take her into his arms, and she fought against him with elbows and fists. Laughing at first, he had to let her go. “What a spitfire. I never dreamed it.”

“Don’t you understand, Dorian? You are a part of the awfulness that exists on Amaros. I saw what you did, and there was no pity in you. Do you honestly think a few hours’ sleep could erase that from my mind? Then you wonder why I wanted to escape here.”

“They’ll survive,” he said coldly. “The human element will roost somewhere.”

“If someone like Jansonglen or your elders lets them. Or if they try to stay on some marshy bit that isn’t even fit acreage for developments or buildings. If they had the money to emigrate to their own colony, some of them might survive.”

“Who’s been poisoning your mind with all this? Cambridge? Nazareth Rogers of Stillwater? Perhaps I should confine you, never let you set foot in the streets to shop again!”

She ignored the last bit. “They’re being used and dispossessed, and so am I.”

He looked wildly at her. “This is your home! Not the slums.”

“I never thought I could fall in love with another species. *You* were my home, my whole universe, Dorian. Then I found out how you’ve been lying to me, along with the elders and architects, conspiring with Jansonglen.” The name practically gagged her. “You’ve talked me over with your colleagues. *How dare you!*”

His face contorted. “Quiet already!” he shouted at her. “I’ve had enough!” He seized her upper arms and savagely shook her. She made no resistance, her head bobbing loosely from his overpowering strength. “Three hundred years ago a ship came from the stars. Five thousand families, your ancestors. We embraced them with open arms. But little do you know that the same way we took human beings in is the same way we can take them out!” Suddenly he threw her back against the pillows and slammed out of the room.

She remained unmoving until she heard a hoverbike retreating along the sky. Then she dressed in her black velvet jumpsuit with matching neckerchief, tied her hair back with a long steel clip, and took the elevator downstairs to the hundredth floor kitchen. She found leftovers from the processor for her supper.

When she had eaten, she took a drop of oil to her service droid, Nana. In this empire of humanoid mogul builders, a robot was the only one she could trust. “At least I have you,” she murmured, recharging Nana’s circuits. “I know that a mech won’t betray me or my people.” She put her face against the droid’s binary plates. What perfection it had once been with Dorian. She thought she had been a lucky girl, when he rode the elevator down to the slums and chose her. That was a very long time ago. In retrospect, it had even been heaven aboard *Cassandra Shuttle*, when half the planet was being reaped and outfitted for new seven hundred story buildings. The way they held each other’s hands and tenderly bathed each other’s bodies... Perhaps he didn’t know then what being Chief Architect would mean, at least to her. In the end, he was like Jansonglen, not really what he seemed. He had even known this himself after the skyscrapers had finally gone up around Amaros and its

Stillwater districts, when the treachery and deceit had begun.

Back on the four-hundredth floor, back in the empty apartment, Merona took bedding from the chest to make up a bed for Dorian in the workroom across from their sleeping quarters. Then she locked herself in the spectacularly metallic blue and white bedroom and locked the hatches to it from all sides. She read books to kill the time, straight through the Amarosian twilight until she could see no more, hardly knowing what the words said or the history meant because she kept an ear open for his return. He hadn't come when she put aside her books, and she lulled herself to sleep by trying to remember the poetry and art her own kind had created.



Dorian was not home when she went cautiously into the passageway, early the next morning, wrapped in her old silk robe, which offered her more than warmth. She went down to the icy-cold, one-hundredth floor kitchen and was preparing all the thermostat regulators for the building when he came off the elevator.

"What are you doing?" he exclaimed harshly. "There are slaves coming up to do the heat regulation until we hire a staff. Go back upstairs and change out of that human attire at once!" A new tactic this morning: the masterful architect – angry, unshaven, rumped, inebriated, with no patience for her notions.

"I know how to work them," she said calmly.

He gave her a despairing look. "This is a nightmare!" From his light-headed swaying, she realised he was slightly drunk.

"Yes, it is," she agreed.

"Can't we wake up from it?" His marble eyes wooed her. "Come upstairs with me," he whispered. "We'll banish it together."

"I don't know how that can be," she said coolly. "You see, Dorian, it's not only our nightmare."

"*Them* again! Will you ever forget them?"

"Never," she said. "Or that you deceived me."

He stalked out of the kitchen, his heels striking hard. Next time you'll do the begging, his

attitude said. He left hatches open behind him all the way. Laughing riotously, she processed caffeine in a packet, liquefied it, and sat at the table with the manufactured drink.

When Dorian was gone from the building, Merona went upstairs to dress in her jumpsuit. She brushed her hair, letting it slip through her fingers. The silence of seven hundred floors was that of bereavement. The ticking of the giant clocks had a sorrowful cadence. She felt as if she were being pressed into a coffin by all this heaviness. Well, at least she could be outside all day. She would drive, drive for hours.

Then she remembered: she hadn't given Nana the money from her savings to take to Nazareth. She would do it now, first thing.

She unlocked her wall safe and lined up her monetary hoard on the bed. She scooped up the platinum pieces, dropping them into a velvet bag. She slipped the cord over her neck and thrust the bag into her bosom. She put on her blue-lined jacket and tied a narrow scarf of fine red wool around her neck. Then she went to the top floor, the garage level, and out onto the floating balconies. Scrambling for her keycards, she finally opened the side door of one of the vehicle holding blocks and the two Amarosian suns came in with her, heating her back while she radioed for Nana. Motes danced in the sunbeams; emptiness answered her voice. She had even checked the robot's charging bin. So few things and amenities to furnish a servant droid's life, but such a major vacancy now that she saw that they and the robot were gone.

She would take the money to Nazareth Rogers *herself*.

She took Dorian's fastest hoverbike out to the balcony strip, then set about putting on her helmet and strapping herself in; it was the best model the architect had owned. When she had finished buckling up, she switched on the jet engines, which gave off a fiercely irregular roar. She rode out through the skyways effortlessly, then around the roofs of many super-tall skyscrapers and downward into the bridled paths that led to the start of the streets over the slums.

A short while later she was following the low-income avenues from Stillwater. She kept her

head turned away from the gang violence in the streets, the fires and ruined buildings of minimal size in the hollows. How silent most of the slums were, now that no one could reside there. Eventually these torn-up tracts of impoverished land would be the next step in higher development for colossal structures by such affluent Amarosians as Jansonglen, Kromheller, and Rebal. Once again, humans would be forced into slavery to help build the new structures, if they ever wanted food, clothes, or a roof over their heads. Still, she thought, if only there was a way to deal with the Chief Builders on a more *personal* level. The planet elders were a malevolent lot, too.

Now the only sounds were the odd wooden wagon wheels, a few human boots trudging on jagged turf, and the helpless cries and pleas of the homeless. Driving high above the hollows, she passed the area where the oceanic skyscraper project was under early remedial construction. She thought it was safe to look down, and the lake-like waters were lustrous as satin; no wonder Jansonglen had primed for building in this spot. Above its high weathered shores, the windows of Nazareth Rogers' wooden cabin winked reflected sunlight. She couldn't see any denizens of Stillwater around the manmade lodge, nor could she see any smoke coming from the chimney. When she turned out of the lower skies and off the main path, there was a soft track among the rocks and debris above which she could hover. Visiting such a place had given her an emptiness in her stomach that wasn't all hunger. At the same time she wasn't surprised to find no one there, and her hope gone.

Not wanting to go back without leaving the platinum for the resistance effort, she parked the hoverbike beside the water and walked up to the door. She knocked at first, but when no answer came she opened the door and went inside. She walked along the short corridor all the way to the kitchen area, where there were some rice patties and a slice of cold meat on the table. Food of the Old Generation, she thought, and her childhood. Her mouth watered and she ate one of the patties, chewing carefully and washing it down with a nearby pitcher of water. She reached

between her breasts for the velvet bag, but she couldn't make up her mind whether to stay or to leave the money and go. When she finally decided to leave the money, placing the bag on the table, she turned and noticed a man standing in the cabin's doorway.

Nazareth Rogers straightened up and rubbed his face. "Hello, missy," he said, with no great enthusiasm. There was silence for a few moments. "Morning, Merona," he continued, finally recognising her. He took off his dirty cap and shoulder holster, which housed a small laser gun of sorts. His outfit was that of a ship's flight attendant, a tattered green and tan jumpsuit that was basic wear nowadays for a male resident of the slums. He drew his wrinkly brows down as if the light bothered his eyes. He hadn't shaved, but despite that she could see his chin was chiselled to perfection.

"Oh, sorry. I've brought the money myself," Merona said diffidently. "Nana is out of commission, and I know how much it is needed down in these parts. There is enough to fund the effort for a month."

"I'm not surprised," he said, approaching her. "Will you be stepping down?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, a confused look in her eyes.

"Tell me, what's it like to be the only human to live up in the clouds with what the people down here see as the *real* alien threat?"

"I... I don't know. I just want what's best for my race."

"Have you eaten?"

"Yes. I snacked on one of your cakes, thank you."

"Let's go outside. I'm sure there is much you'd like to know."

"Yes, I... I *do* have questions to ask."

They drove their bikes to the lake's edge and dismounted quietly. Where the Chief Architect's bike could touch the heavens, Nazareth's model could only level a few feet above the slums. Much could be said about the other hover vehicles the human populace drove, the Amarosians enacting skyway restriction technology a few decades before Jansonglen had made chief builder status.

Merona now pointed up at the Stillwater ghetto. "So that's where you work?"

"Yes." Nazareth knelt by the water, scooped up a handful to drink, and then dashed some more in his eyes. "Sorry, I have not slept more than a few hours."

Merona sat down on a small boulder behind him. "I promise I won't keep you long if you'll let me ask my questions."

"Ask," he said. He dried his face on a fold of his torn jumpsuit collar and took a seat beside her on the boulder with his knees drawn up. "But *I* should be asking the questions." He spread his arm out to the panorama of skyscrapers opposite, the metropolis in all its majesty, touching the heavens. "Morning after morning you get up and look down at us, querying places like Stillwater when you should be questioning *those* instead. Look at it! Structures that wouldn't exist had it not been for us and, some sixty years ago, the creation of chief builders and the architectural laws. And it goes beyond the economic growth of Amaros. The skyscrapers and the people who built them, run them – *they* are the true nemesis. Those very laws and decrees of old have become somewhat totalitarian."

"You're very well educated on the subject," she said respectfully. Though she was almost his age, the knowledge *he* had surpassed many Amarosian locals.

"Over three hundred years ago," he went on, "the Earth died. A ship with our ancestors travelled through the Cassandra Belt, all the way here. Resembling us in certain ways, the Amarosians opened their hands and hearts and took us in. Who would have thought that over time this would all change? I sometimes think we'd have been better off if our ancestors died along with the Old World."

"What about the people who fled to the valleys?"

"They never made it. Amaros just *expanded* too fast architecturally, and even now it's still expanding."

Merona put her head down in shame. Sadly, she now asked him, "What will you do now? What happens once Jansonglen and Rebal turn Stillwater into a sea of skyscrapers?"

"If I am forced out, along with the rest of the population, I won't live in a cave or halfway retreat for slaves, that's for sure," he answered. "So I will have to cross the ocean. But not until I know it's a life-and-death choice – which the people left in the slums already regard it as – because I am sure it will be my death."

She was mildly impressed by his dignity. "Will you tell me whenever you have news of Stillwater and your people? Perhaps I can send them a little more money. It's not often that Dorian gives me an allowance. Still, it's something."

"Whatever you ask, I will do."

"Thank you. Here, I'll give you something else." She stood up and turned her back to him and took the necklaces off her neck. She did up her buttons again and threw it on the flat top of the stone where she'd been sitting.

Nazareth looked at the jewel-adorned chains, which caught the twin suns in a small dual blaze. "Are you sure?" he said.

"I don't cherish these anymore. Please, take what you think is best," she said.

He took four necklaces, feeling that the money from before would be enough, then put them in a purse and put the purse in his jumpsuit pocket. "Old Phargran will use it where it's most needed. Thank you."

"My mother died a poor woman in the slums," she said, as she scooped up the remaining chains and put them back on her neck, "so I was chosen by Rebal to go upstairs to the higher levels, my innocent beauty, he felt, not to be wasted on such foolishness as the riots between the lesser sorts." She turned around and knotted her scarf back up. "If I hadn't been of an impressionable age, I would never have ascended the Great Elevator."

"Maybe you don't have to go back up," he said. "Stillwater and the lesser sorts can use a person like you, more than you know."

"I don't follow." Her look was now one of bewilderment.

"You want to help the human race," he began explaining to her, "yet you feel all you can do is donate these little baubles to fund the cause. You shouldn't have to live up in those skyscrapers amongst the enemy. Perhaps you don't realise

that you possess a certain skill, a leadership quality that I could only dream of having. These people, *your* people, need a strong voice to guide them.”

“And I’m that voice?” she cried. “Please, be serious. What am I to do?”

“Remember when I told you about crossing the sea?” There was a moment of significant silence between the two. “There’s a *spaceship* to the west. Rumour says it’s been there for over three generations, and it’s our ancestor’s ship from Earth.”

“Impossible!”

“No, it’s true, Merona. And it might still work. The technology is powered by an old form of compact nuclear reactor – *many* reactors, all in one big section of the craft. The ship itself can house five thousand families. We wouldn’t be able to fit everyone, but we could transport a good number of people off of this rock, go to the nearest world and start over again. I’ve seen Phargran’s blueprints and layouts, now all we have to do is find it.”

“And how will you make it work?” she asked him. “The Amarosians will crush you. They are too great in number.”

“The fledglings who stay behind will sacrifice themselves for their children, put up a fight to stall the Amarosian armies, while we make our way to the ship. I worked as a slave engineer for the chief builders for three years, along with many others. We all used different forms of nuclear technology to power the buildings, *not* solar-based. We’re already familiar with such old science. It’s in our blood.”

“But once you take flight where would you go?”

“You mean once *we* go. Your voice needs to be heard, Merona. Your monies could fund a storage system for food and water for the families, and you would be a strong hand next to mine, leading the expedition with me. And there is another world not too far from here, the satellite, Morpheus.” He produced an interplanetary star chart – more an outlined sketch – of nearby moons and worlds with proper resources. “I’ve been working on this for weeks,” he said. “It also acts as an information diagram of the bod-

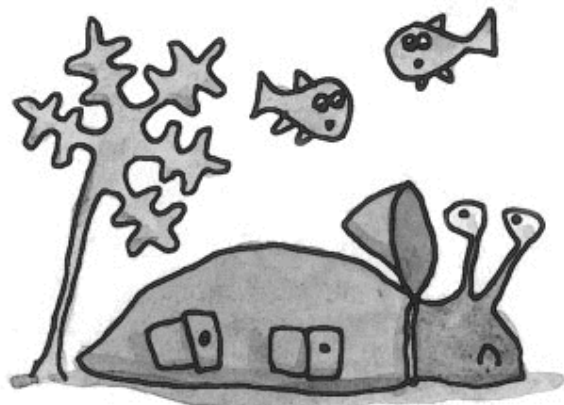
ies within the Cassandra Belt. It seems that Morpheus is only a few billion miles away, and it possesses the resources humans need to survive: there’s a breathable atmosphere, water and plant life, a great wealth of minerals for energy and rebuilding, a ponderous range of wildlife for us to hunt and feed on, as well as places to start centres for agriculture. If we incorporated a light drive system, like Amaros uses for its merchant barges, into the combination of the nuclear energy feeds, we’d make it there in less than two years. Phargran is an old man, yes, but he’s one hell of an engineer. He could pull it off. Your assets and leadership are all that would be needed to start a rally, and I foresee the people of different slums and ethnic backgrounds coming together in full force.”

She was slightly incredulous. “The humans of the streets in war with the builders of the skies, for the purpose of escape and a new life. I can’t see it happening.”

“Then will you at least voyage with me to find our ancestor’s ship?” asked Nazareth, in a final attempt at righteous persuasion.

She considered it, but before she could speak another word she heard engines buzzing and the descending roar of a hoverbike. Fearfully, she swung around and saw Dorian standing at the lakebed between the two jagged outcroppings

The Encyclopaedia of Sea Creatures: Page 11



The sea slug wears a hooded kagoule to protect him from exposure to deadly salt water.

homegrowngoodness.co.uk

through which she had come. He was bare-headed, his rider's helmet tucked between his arm, and an errant gust of wind ruffled his silver hair and wispy brows. Her first reaction was a jolt of consternation at the sight of him. Almost instantly that was killed by a new response: her heart beat in a solicitous, irregular rhythm, causing nausea and breathlessness.

Dorian pedalled the bike down the small slope, and Merona, knowing well she had disobeyed his wishes, welcomed him with a dumb-founded look, while Rogers sat and watched with curiosity. Coming to the lake's edge, he knelt down for a sip of water, all the while keeping his eyes on Merona. His face was flushed. "Filthy," he said, spitting it out. "Full of human contaminants. Jansonglen is right to build over this spot." He then came forward and said loudly, "You will oblige me, young lady, in coming home at once."

Her answer was quiet. "When I am ready, I shall go back."

The flush darkened. "You will mount now and fly with me."

"Don't command me, Dorian. I shall follow you in good time."

"Did you make an assignation with this man?" he shouted, stabbing his electric blade toward Nazareth, who observed him without moving.

"Oh, Dorian!" she cried. "That's too much, even from you!"

"Too much? There is no excuse for your shameless behaviour and your leaving the building. Come along now!" He jerked his head toward Nazareth. "As for you, come here!"

Nazareth refused to get up. "Even if I were your slave, that tone wouldn't put the leap on me," he said. "You don't even know who I am."

Dorian's mouth worked as if he were cursing in whispers. "Oh, please, I know who you are. Nazareth Rogers, the Stillwater troublemaker. It's only a matter of time until Jansonglen arrests your lot and throws away the key." He put his blade back in its recharging sheath and walked over to the hoverbike, switched off the ignition control and removed a pair of spike-tipped knuckles from his small carry on. Merona, unsure of what he was going to do, tossed her

head timorously and stepped out of arm's reach. She didn't move, but gave Dorian a long, fearful look. Dorian swore aloud and tore at Nazareth's bike with his metallic hand.

Nazareth stood displeased. "If you don't mind, don't go striking my ride."

Dorian whirled to face him, the knuckles raised. "I'll strike you then! There's many ways to rid this place of slag like you. If one doesn't work, another will. Do you know the penalty for conspiracy?"

"Don't be an idiot," Nazareth advised him.

"Please, Dorian," Merona finally said, "go home before you disgrace yourself. I'll go with you." As she walked toward him, *he* pushed her away.

"I'm already disgraced. *You've* disgraced me!"

"And will my word be no good at all?" she asked. "Why else do you let me live in the clouds?"

"Fledgling!" He spewed the word at her. "A traitor who disobeys her guardian and runs with the lowest of the low. Conspiring with this—this—"

"Human?" Nazareth suggested softly. "Though I don't hold great pride in any of my Amarosian connections either."

Dorian looked wounded and confused.

Merona said, "I'll warm up the engine and ride behind you, Dorian. We'll go now. Please."

She took a step to go past him, and he swung out his arm and swept her out of the way and off her feet. He brought the knuckles down across Nazareth's face. Then, throwing his architect's mantle aside, he seized Nazareth by the throat with both hands and began to throttle him. Merona had fallen backward and sprawled full length. "Dorian, no!" she cried desperately, but he did not hear her. Scrambling up, she grabbed Dorian's arm with both hands, and shook it with all her strength, but he was too strong, his muscles iron hard, and he was possessed with lunatic fury.

Nazareth, his face growing blue, struggled beneath that Amarosian might. The moment he tried to pull away, he saw Merona run to his airbike for the blade, and she used the hilt to beat

Dorian around the head and shoulders. Then, as Dorian let down his guard, Nazareth gave a sudden fierce kick, driving his knee upward and hard. From the architect came a whopping intake of breath, and he doubled over, moaning, his arms folded over his lower belly. Nazareth staggered backward, his hands to his throat. As the blood pounded in Merona's head, she heard Dorian's groans and swearing coming from beneath his tongue. Nazareth dropped his left hand, and, with an uppercut that seemed to come from the floor up, he struck the builder in the jaw. Dorian's head snapped up and back.

"There," Nazareth said, breathless. His voice was strained, hardly more than a whisper. "He'll sleep for a bit and be all the better for it." He was rubbing the tip of his chin, the mark of the knuckle's edge showing in a raised red welt across one cheek and the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry, Merona," he then said. "It's just that that was a dirty play to do to a man, and he might have killed me." He swallowed, and it was obviously painful. "I'm going to cut the ignition on his bike's drive. He may have to walk home and be slow at that. But it will do him no harm. Perhaps he'll be clearer in the head when he gets back to his pad. Now you see what we've had to deal with. Who's the threat now?"

Merona looked down at Dorian, still in fear. "B—But I don't know..."

"I hope you will reconsider what I told you," he said, dusting himself off. "The strength and willpower you exhibited here is proof of your leadership skills. Why not at least *think* about coming with me. Our ancestor's ship awaits us. A race in dire need of help, poverty-stricken and enslaved — *your* race, and they need you!"

"I still don't think the human population will accept me, Nazareth, not after I have lived amongst the clouds all these years."

"Suit yourself. But even you can't bear to watch the riots and slavery persist." He now picked up his things and prepared to leave the lake. "We won't be able to fight them all, that much is certain... but the same way they evicted us down in the streets is the same way we'll evict ourselves from the planet."

She looked down once more. Dorian's face,

tilted blindly to the light, seemed vacant. *Unlived-in* and *cold* were the words that came to mind: he looked so miserable, so diabolical, and so frigid. Nazareth was right: how long *could* she sit on her balcony and watch women and children be seized or slaughtered? How long could she watch tens of thousands in the streets burn or starve to death? The thought troubled her, as even she felt that funding the lesser sorts wasn't enough. A new voice *was* needed, and a new home. Morpheus seemed the place. Dorian, curled up on the floor and groaning in agony, now defenceless as a sleeping child, had come within a breath of being a murderer; his disposition was very much like that of the elders, and no better than Kromheller and Jansonglen.

"I brought this on everyone," she finally said. "I'm sorry. If there's a backlash from what happened here today, then I am to blame. I will be the cause of Dorian attacking the people of Stillwater."

"There won't be any repercussions." Nazareth kept looking at Dorian while he rubbed his throat and chin. "We'll be long gone by then, and no Amarosian likes to admit to defeat."

"Nazareth," she said, the soft sound of his first name from her mouth calming him, "drive back to your house and put ice on your wounds. I'll stay with him and see him home."

"I'll wait with you." He glanced down at Dorian with a judgmental face. Here, lying before his feet, was the defenceless, empty shell of a head. An uncaring one. The arms flung wide, the hands lying loose, open, palms upward, and knees bent, oddly awkward. All that moved was the silver hair on the blue-green pockmarked scalp, stirring slightly in a little breeze. Sweat droplets poured down Merona's face and neck. She saw his breathing diminish slightly. Kneeling down beside him, she lifted one of the flaccid hands, but she felt no pulse. Then Nazareth knelt opposite her and put his hands on the side of his throat. His hand was shaking, his skin went pale, and the fist mark stood out like a bloody wound.

"Stillwater is finished," he said, shaking his head. He stood up carefully and walked down the slope toward the lakebed. Things had hap-

pened so suddenly, so unexpectedly. Merona couldn't believe that Dorian was dead from a kick and a jab, yet at the same time she couldn't look into his still face. Her held breath erupted in a harsh gasp; she sprang up and stumbled after Nazareth.

He was shaking violently, as if with chills. She spoke fast, "If the Amarosians confront you before I can withdraw all of Dorian's assets, then I will swear for you before a court of appeal. You have the cuts of an architect's duelling weapon on your face and throat. The elders will see them if you go to them before they fade. I will go with you."

"No! Just come with me to the ship," he insisted. "The elders are strict. There will be plenty to swear to the marks on *him*. Jansonglen will order a trial. They'll use a mind probe on me, find out we were conspiring against the planet."

"But—" She was half-wild with terror for them both.

"Drive back. Say you found him like this, alone. Can you lie?"

"Yes. To save a life."

"Good. The architects know you've lived up in the towers most of your life, so you won't be a part of it if you say you *found* him like this. By the time they come with an air hearse, I'll be long gone. Here, lead his vehicle back by remote. The bike shouldn't be left out here."

Above them, in the dark soiled ridge along the route to the Stillwater slums, a tall and thin shadow moved. Nazareth jumped back, Merona's legs gave out, and she collapsed to the turf. Blackness now flickered and menaced around the arc of her vision, and once more she was filled with fear, the fear of being caught. A lisp of voice flowed down the rise. She lifted her head up and, before she knew it, she saw Nazareth coming with a bent, frail, elderly man who hobbled with the help of a cane.

"This is Old Phargran," Nazareth said. "He lives in Stillwater."

Phargran took off his skullcap. "Good day," he said, as if they had merely met upon the lakebed. "What's this? The Chief Architect

looks as if his neck is broken. How could that be, with only one blow?"

"Perhaps I didn't know my own strength this time, old man," Nazareth said.

"Wait! He saw it all!" Merona exclaimed. "He can be our witness."

"Phargran is a sensible man of science, yes, and an engineer. But he is worse than no witness at all. Like any human on this world, an interdisciplinary court'll tear him to pieces. Carry him away from his work and his friends, and he will be confused and frightened. No, *forced* is more like it. They'll be twisting his confusion to make the story *they* want."

"Accidents *will* happen, Nazareth," Phargran said, as he inspected the corpse. "But once we get off this planet, things will be different. You must locate the ship. Here," – and with that, he handed Rogers a small metallic device – "this is it. The light drive. It should fit. I made some minor programming changes, of course. A lot of humans were put into slave labour camps just to get a hold of one of these."

"So this ship is operable with the drive?" Merona asked him. "Everything that Nazareth has told me is fact? We would be safe out there, humans, and if..."

Then her impetus ran out. She knew how intolerable it would be to continue living on Amaros – as well as in suspense – waking each morning to wonder if this was the day when people like Jansonglen would make things all the more unsightly and the planet's conditions all the more unliveable. Still, at the same time, who could know what rumours might reach what ears if she returned to the skyscrapers to live as if nothing had ever happened. In her mind she foresaw herself summoned to appear as a human witness before the builders – also looked down upon as a criminal – then condemned as a conspirator and accessory to the Chief Architect's murder.

Her chest constricted; she gasped for air. "Please, tell me this. Names needn't be mentioned, but you have an idea in mind, haven't you?" For this she turned to Nazareth. "If you don't find the ship you're not going to live out the rest of your life as a fugitive, are you?"

He was wary. "But I *know* the ship exists. I know where I'm going."

"It wouldn't be safe for you either," Phargran added. "Not after today."

She then said, "And I could survive the journey, reach it from here?"

"In a few day's time, yes."

Her mind made up, she answered, "Then I'm going with you. I have no other choice. We can use my bike as a transport, at least until the fuel runs out. Here I can take you up on that offer and help my own people be safely out of reach of the Amarosian onslaught." She watched his dark green eyes shift away, then return in dour acceptance.

He had no more choice than her, when he thought about it, but deep down he was glad she had decided to come.

Now he spoke in private to Phargran, whose answers came back quietly. She watched the old man's eyes as he spoke what was clearly a plan for the thousands of inhabitants of Stillwater and its neighbouring slums, as well as an assault on the nine-hundred storey Amarosian capital, and a large-scale exodus.

Finally Nazareth turned back to her. "He'll hold fast to what conspired here today as if it were his life." Phargran nodded vehemently to it, and she breathed a deep sigh of relief. "*He'll* say he came upon the bike and the body, and the builder lying so. I'll wait until the sun drops over the waters. Then, after you collect the assets, we'll ride together to the west, and try and install the light drive in the ship. We'll be far away by then. But in the event we *are* caught, remember I took you captive by force. You're a hostage. No sense in both of us hanging."

She cried, reassuredly, and burst into tears, sitting on the ground and weeping into her hands. No one came near her. After a time she lifted her bleary eyes. At one point she expected to find herself alone except for Rebal lying dead; both the old man and Nazareth could have taken the chance to slip away, but they were up at the cabin, plotting. Nazareth was hanging his shoulder holster and neck guard over his back. She went down to the water's edge and washed

her face and drank. Nazareth soon joined her there.

"Phargran has given us what supplies he has. He can take whatever he needs from my house, and I gave him your moneybag to put in the hands of Stillwater's locals. He'll do it; he swore to it. And it's a start."

Merona nodded. "All right," she said. She was free of any emotion now but relief. She knew that she was doing the only thing possible for her, as well as her people. A *better* life; for this she felt completely strong. She turned toward the bikes and took Dorian's helmet under her arm. Then she reached out and stroked Nazareth's neck. "I didn't think that this day would change my life on this world forever," she murmured tearfully. "Or others' lives."

Nazareth whistled to Phargran, and he hurried back down to the lakebed.

She looked away toward the mountains and valleys and waters in the west; by the time she withdrew her and Dorian's remaining funds and went airborne, how deep and far would they be?

"Are you still sure?" asked Nazareth from behind her.

"Yes, I'm sure." Phargran was with him now, and she put out her hand to the old man. "Thank you, Phargran."

"Take care, my dear. I may be old, but trust me, I'll be there soon enough; we can fly off this rock *together*." He closed his gnarled fingers over her hand. "As for you, Rogers, be good to yourself." Then he and Nazareth embraced, with the wish for a safe journey, and it was over.

Merona sent Dorian's bike home by remote, taking one last look at his corpse. She took *her* bike and boarded with Nazareth and crossed the lake and went up to the opposite side of the slum; the way west lay before them. She communicated a relay message to her servant droid, Nana, to say farewell and to transfer all funds from the Chief Architect's account into Stillwater's secret treasury. Looking back now at the colossal skyscrapers in the distance, getting farther and farther away, she'd have gladly run sooner if it were possible. She wanted only to be far away, after all, and to help liberate her people.

Chameleon Man Gets Lost

The Good Fortune Driving School for Men

Caroline Marwitz

Davis drove. A forty-something psychic named True, short for Gertrude, sat beside him. True pulled out a notepad, and began to doodle. She seemed like the kind of woman who could take things in stride – even leaving at a moment's notice to go on a road trip.

“Do you like to draw?” he asked.

She shook her head and her India-ink hair shimmered in the high winter light. “I’m trying to come up with fortunes. You remember Lily, my sister? She and her husband decided to make their own fortune cookies instead of paying a factory in California. They’re almost out of fortunes.” She doodled some more. “I just think of the hierarchy of needs from my undergrad psych classes and usually I’m off and running, but for some reason, I’m stumped. Tell me something people need.”

“A place to call home.”

“Ah. Good.” She scribbled madly for a moment. “Okay: ‘You will find your home between the tiger’s tail and the dragon’s back.’ A little Feng Shui-ish, a little mysterious. There. That’s a start.” She scribbled some more. “Decorate your home with laughter and joy before

you invest in a sofa.’ What do you think about that? I’ve never seen the word sofa in a fortune – it’s kind of cool. How about ‘May the winds of happiness blow through your home.’ That’s a nice, conventional one.”

They drove for several miles through south Denver as she scribbled.

“Are you really a psychic?” He navigated the burgeoning lanes as they passed the University of Denver’s clock tower.

“Are you really an artist?” She kept scribbling.

He changed lanes as the traffic sped up on the approach to the Tech Center. The mirror-coated skyscrapers seemed as indifferent as a highway cop’s face. Slow down, slow down, he told himself. His mother had died in a car accident when he was a teenager – the same accident that had nearly severed Davis’s foot and had cut up his father’s face, scarring it so badly that ever since he’d worn a beard.

“I draw what I see. If that’s being an artist, then there you go.”

“Well, I say what I see. If that’s being a psychic, then there you go.”

He tilted his head toward his window to try

and see what was in front of the particularly slow truck in front of him. "So, ah, what do you see right now? Which lane should I get in?"

She didn't even look up from her sketchpad. "I see a fender bender in the far left lane. Better get over to the right."

"Sure thing." He changed lanes and moved to the far right lane. Soon he was passing the cars on his left, and a moment later he saw two SUVs smashed in a bumper clench that looked nasty. "Was that psychic or what?"

Her long silver earrings jingled. "Who knows? I don't actually read traffic. Just palms. And Tarot cards." She put her sketchpad down. "Now," she said, "Tell me everything you know about your father."

So he threw a confetti of memories at her. First he told her the good stuff he remembered, like how Hash had stood up for him when Davis's first grade teacher said he was "defiant" for drawing a leaf red instead of green. And how Hash read each of Davis's textbooks when Davis was in high school so he could quiz him.

And he told her the not-so-good stuff like how Hash acted like he never thought anything Davis did was good enough, and how Hash had cried that first year after Davis's mother's death every time he heard her name mentioned. And how he'd get lost real easy. And how he screwed up his pension by leaving the railroad when Jolene died, so he could have a normal job in town and raise Davis, even though Davis told him not to and left home a year later when he was eighteen.

"So," he finished, "Do you still like him? Or are you totally scared off now?"

"Both. But I'll certainly be able to impress him with my psychic knowledge about his past."

"I told you the wrong things about him," Davis said. "I'm sure my mother could have told you lots of good stuff."

"I'm sure," True said.

"That was the wrong thing to say, wasn't it. I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about," she said.

A movement in his rearview mirror caught his eye and he nearly slammed into the car in front of him, swerving into another lane just in time.

True clutched her seat. "Except maybe your driving. Yikes."

"Sorry," he said. He glanced in the rear-view mirror again. A man and a woman were sitting in the backseat, huddled together and holding hands.

Christ. They were, and yet were not, the man and woman he'd painted from a photograph a week ago. For their grieving relative, a man named Eusabio. He blinked hard several times. They didn't disappear.

"I need to pull over." Davis spied an exit ramp and swerved across to it accompanied by the sounds of honking horns.

"Something's wrong?" True asked.

"Gotta check the back tires," he lied, pulling into a gas station. He got out, then peered into the backseat through the window. They were still there, looking up at him worriedly from reddish brown faces. They had black hair that reflected no light, and they wore matching white Disneyworld t-shirts with pictures of Mickey Mouse screenprinted on them.

He walked around to the trunk and opened it, so True wouldn't see him. Then he stood still and waited. Sure enough, they suddenly stood beside him, looking at him as if he were all they could see. "Can you hear me?" he asked.

They nodded.

"Why are you here?"

"We're afraid," the woman said. She looked at the man. The man spoke.

"We have nowhere to go now."

"Was it because I painted the picture?"

The man shrugged and looked away. "Could we go there?" he asked, pointing to a sign. It read, St. Francis Jesuit Chapter House, 4 miles.

"Sure," Davis said.

They stood there, still, looking at him.

"You want me to bring you there?"

They nodded.

"Okay."

He closed the trunk and got in the driver's seat again. He glanced at the rear-view mirror. The couple was back in the car. "Uh, True? We need to take a quick detour. Won't be long."

True raised her eyebrows. "Is everything okay?"

"Uh, yeah." He followed the two-lane highway away from the interstate, up into the foothills.

He glanced at her. She was seated as far away from him as possible, up against her door, facing him. "There's a perfectly good answer for my behaviour. But you won't believe it."

"Try me," she said.

So he told her as he followed the signs to St. Francis how he'd begun seeing these people he'd painted from photographs. They were supposed to be dead, and he was painting pictures of them on commission for their loved ones. But now these supposedly dead people were showing up in the oddest places. Like cars. Cars he was driving.

"You don't seem scared," she commented.

"I'm long past scared. Pissed off is more like it. Here I finally get a great way to make a living painting and then this happens."

"Why not just leave them where they are in the back seat?" she asked.

He caught his breath. "You can see them?"

"No," she said. "But you obviously see them there. Why not let them ride with us?"

"Because they want to find a home. They have nowhere to go. I know it sounds strange, but bear with me. I'm learning that it's simpler to listen to them and do what they say instead of trying to ignore them. I know, it sounds like I'm crazy. Maybe I am." He turned on a dirt road that wound around up a great hill until the road ended at a gray stone building surrounded by cottonwood trees and huge blue spruces. "This won't take long."

He got out of the car and waited, not looking at the car but at the gravel beneath his feet. Then he saw them walking. They ignored the building and walked across the lane to a small pool where a fountain bubbled. Beside the fountain, a red-haired man was kneeling. The couple stood near him and watched him. Davis walked over to join them. When the man saw Davis, he smiled and got up.

"Photographing hummingbirds – I don't know why I keep trying," he said. "Someday I'll get one on film that doesn't look like a fuzzy cigar. I'm Father Ansel. May I help you?"

Davis looked into the freckled face, older than him but oddly younger looking too. "I'm in a bit of a hurry, so I'll cut to the chase. I stopped because two people in the backseat of my car said they have no home and wanted me to drop them off here. They are standing by the water but you probably can't see them and neither can the woman I'm driving with. They might be ghosts or I might be imagining them and therefore I'm crazy. Either way, I was wondering if you could humour me and give them a home."

"So they're either ghosts or a sign that you're going crazy?" Ansel asked.

"Yes. I don't like either option, actually."

Ansel looked thoughtful. "I think I wouldn't limit myself to just two possibilities – that either they're ghosts *or* you're crazy."

"So it's both, you mean? Don't you think that's worse?"

"Maybe neither option is the truth, is what I mean."

Davis looked over at the man and woman who sat together on a rock. Carved into the side of it were the words, "All who are thirsty, come to the water."

True got out of the car and walked over. "Hello," she said. "I hope we're not bothering you."

"Not at all," Father Ansel said.

"Do you work here?" she asked.

"I'm one of the Jesuits who live here," he said. "I'm in charge of the retreat programs."

"I told Ansel about the people I see," Davis explained.

"And what do you think?" she asked, turning to the man.

"I'm not a mental health practitioner," he said. "But I've learned not to jump to conclusions."

She laughed. "Well, I have to admit, I've already jumped. Let's see, in the last five minutes I've come up with ten different conclusions just trying to remember what my Diagnostic Manual number 4 says."

"Psychologist?" Ansel asked.

"Psychic counsellor, actually. With a Master's in psychology."

"If you'd feel better, you could stay here the



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night," Ansel said. "We're having a retreat right now but I know we've got some empty beds."

Davis looked at True. "Maybe you should stay here and call someone to come and bring you back to Denver."

Ansel said, "We have a van that goes up to Denver once a day. You could be home tomorrow by lunch time."

True studied Davis closely. "No, we'll continue on our way," she said. "But if you see any more people, maybe you could just ignore them for a while. At least till we get down to Arizona."

"Okay," Davis said. "But won't that make you wonder if I am seeing more people?"

She sighed. "Well, you've got a point. I may

go crazy just wondering. Fine. Tell me. Only don't let it affect your driving, okay?"

The man and the woman were still sitting on the rock. They nodded as Davis turned to go.

"Do you think I could photograph them?" Ansel asked Davis.

Davis glanced at the man, his arm around his wife's shoulders. The man nodded.

"Stand here," Davis said. He directed Ansel to the right spot, then stood behind him as Ansel raised his camera. "Up a little more. Now point it downwards. A little more. Okay." Ansel clicked the shutter release.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your

philosophy’,” said Ansel as Davis and True turned to go.

“What?” Davis asked.

“There’s a fine line between mental illness and phenomena we can’t explain,” Ansel said. “There have been times when I took a picture and only saw later in the photograph what I’d missed seeing the first time, though it was there right in front of me the whole time. Yes there’s mental illness, but we also see only a fraction of what exists in front of our eyes.”

“So I might not be crazy.”

Ansel walked him to the car. True was already sitting in the driver’s seat. “Well, I wouldn’t rule it out entirely. But is an explanation what you want?”

“No,” Davis said, getting into his car. “I want peace.”

True accelerated down the entrance ramp onto I-25 near the town of Castle Rock, her hands gripping the steering wheel a bit tightly, by the looks of her white knuckles. When he told her he was going to take a nap, she seemed to relax a bit. He awoke in Trinidad and they switched roles after a stop at a fast food restaurant. She watched his face as he turned to look in the back seat.

“Anybody there?” she asked.

He looked at the girl as she pushed back her long brown hair and scowled at him. He hadn’t painted her. But she’d appeared after he’d painted a picture of his little daughter Elise, from a photograph he’d saved after her death. “No,” he said. “Nobody.”

“Idiot,” the girl said.

“Let me know when you want to switch again,” True said, picking up her notepad.

“All you have to do is drive and listen,” the girl said.

“Okay. I will,” Davis said. He squinted at the lights of the oncoming cars. Gotta drive slowly, resist the urge to speed up. He’d always been this way – get stressed out, speed up. He counted his breaths. One. Two. Slower, slower.

“You’ve committed a grave error,” the girl said. “You know what sinning is? It’s missing the mark, like shooting an arrow and missing the target.”

“Do you believe in the fortunes you write, True?” he asked.

“Some of them. Some are targeted towards specific people I know and what they want and need. Others are just like little Cupid’s arrows I shoot in the air – ‘they come to Earth I know not where’.” She laughed. “I’ve been trying for the past few minutes to think up a fortune for you.”

“I appreciate the thought,” he said. “But I don’t know if it’s possible to even write one that would fit.”

“That’s the problem with you,” the girl said. “You don’t even know when you’re being hopeless. You’re so blind, you don’t see any possibilities.”

“What do you want?” True asked. “What do you need?”

“You want to see as far as the end of your nose,” the girl said. “You want to keep everything else out of focus. You think life is how you, Davis, created it in your head.”

“I don’t see why anyone should care,” he said. “I am nobody’s problem but my own.”

“You are so wrong,” the girl said. “Such an idiot.”

“I disagree,” True said. “What you want and need is very important.”

“Would you kindly stop using that word?” he asked.

“Idiot. Idiot.”

“What word?”

“Uh, want and need. Uh, yeah, that’s three words. Anyway, I just don’t believe one individual is that important.”

“In the greater scheme of things, no. But in the greater scheme of things, yes.” True smiled.

“Can an idiot learn?” he asked.

“Are you referring to yourself?” True asked.

“Yes,” the girl said. “Even you.”

“Yes,” Davis said.

“Yes,” True said.

“You know I had a little girl once, before Keats was born,” Davis said. “I suppose my dad has mentioned her.”

“He has,” True said. “He loved her very much.”

“I had to learn how to be a dad to her. It didn’t come naturally. And just when I thought

we were doing okay – she'd reached the age of four and a half, she could talk, walk, pee in the toilet, and she thought I was an awesome dad – she died of cancer."

"She would have given you hell when she became a teenager," the girl said. "She would have missed nothing – taken all your flaws and thrown them right back in your face."

"You still miss her," True said.

"Every day. I loved her as an infant, I loved her as a toddler, I loved her as a kindergartner, and I would have loved her as a teenager. What kind of god lets a child die?"

"Spoken like an idiot," the girl said. "Here, love this – I'm trying to tell you, the blame you pour on others' heads belongs on yours instead."

"I have a fortune, True. How about this: 'The blame you pour on others' heads belongs on yours instead.'"

"Whew," she said, scribbling it down. "One of those slap-your-wrist fortunes. Sounds like something my Chinese grandmother would have said if she'd spoken English. I guess it's an okay fortune."

"You're not listening to me," the girl said.

"Got any more?" True asked.

"I am. Thinking of more. Give me a moment."

"All I ask is that you listen to me now and then. I'm not a bad influence," the girl said.

"I'm probably a bad influence on you," True said.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Got you thinking in fortune cookie sound bites."

"That's okay," he said. "But we still don't have my fortune."

"Love involves risks," the girl said.

"Love involves risks. How about that?" he asked True. She wrote it down and nodded.

"Short but sweet," True said.

"It was wiped clean," the girl said.

"What?" Davis asked. "Oh, a short fortune. No doubt. The best kind."

"I think it works. It's to the point, clean," True said.

"The steering wheel," the girl said. "When you were driving your mom and dad. Your father wiped your fingerprints off the steering wheel."

"What does that mean?" Davis asked.

"The fortune? I guess it means that loving someone takes you out of yourself and that's always a risky thing," True said.

"You were the one driving, idiot."

"What?" he asked.

"Being taken out of yourself." True leaned over and peered into his face. "What kind of question is that, Davis? There's a rest area coming up. Pull off," True said, pointing. He did.

After True got out, Davis turned to face the girl in the back seat. "What are you talking about?"

For once, she looked sad, not angry. "That car accident. When your mother died. You weren't sitting in the passenger seat – he was," the girl said. And she disappeared.

He got out and leaned against the car.

"Davis?" True came around to his side. "I'm driving the rest of the way."

"Okay," he whispered. He walked around to the passenger's side and got in. She got in too and started the car. "Could you please talk the whole way? I don't care about what. Just talk. And don't stop talking."

True's face was white and her dark eyes were wide. "I should take you somewhere – to a doctor or something."

"There's nothing out here," he said. And it was true. There were no towns for miles, just rugged pine-covered hills. "Just drive. Drive and talk. Drive carefully and talk."

"Jesus," she said. "I don't know what to say. I can't – I can't just talk on demand. People talk to me, they tell me their problems. I don't talk until they talk." She got the car going and started driving. "I don't – I should be – I should be taking you somewhere. When we get to a large town. Maybe Raton. Yes. I think they have a hospital or something. Or Albuquerque. Yes. We'll stop there. I wonder if I can speed. The roads seem good. Oh, God, I don't know if I can do this."

"Please," he said. "You're doing fine. Just keep going."

After All Sparks or Something

Michael Wyndham Thomas

I was like my mother. There'd been scores of afternoons when our meal was interrupted by a ring at the door-bell or (from those who somehow managed to overlook the bell – and there was a bafflingly large number) a fumbled rap of the letterbox. My mother never marched straight into the hall. Instead, she would go round the table and lean against the far side of the window. From this improbable angle, she would seek to identify the caller – perhaps by the back of their head, or simply the way their coat fell. Most times her efforts failed. She ended up marching to the door anyway, a regular concoction on her lips: “Who on earth? ... What's this now? ... Not insurance day, is it?”

So it was with me. Had there been any net curtain, I should have fallen to with some mighty twitching. Marjory spoke as I leaned hard against the window:

“Perhaps it's my friend,” she said. “Or your Karen. Come to get fetch us. Tell us there's been a ginormous mistake.” Her voice wavered a little. She didn't believe herself. And “ginormous” sounded strange on her lips. Picked up from a grandson, I thought, as I twisted my head further round, stared hard into the fog and saw – nothing.

Opening the door, I had the bewildering sen-

sation of being seven again and looking at the lid of a well-scuffed biscuit-tin. This had nothing to do with memories of mother. The girl who looked up at me had, it seemed, escaped from a tin-lid I remembered from Junior One. Such lids did as palettes in art lessons. Well, call them “lessons”: they were more like admissions of defeat by hard-pressed teachers who, exhausted by whipping along a herd of subjects till two o'clock, were perfectly happy to let us express our raw-faced, wrinkle-socked selves in the guise of creativity. One time, I turned a lid over as we washed them clean. There was a girl, holding a... pet cat? Small dog? Gerbil? That I don't know – not at this distance in time – especially as this distance is an indescribable compound of mortal years and post-mortal – something or other.

And now, here she was again. She'd looked the picture of serenity on the tin. Perhaps she'd been photographed at the instant when, like Marjory and me, she'd melted out of life. Perhaps she'd had to wait until someone – an overweight seven year-old with a snake-clip belt, as it turned out – flipped the lid over and, all unknowing, set her on her way. But she didn't look wholly serene now. And if she did recognise me as the unlikely agent of her passing, she

didn't show it. (Assuming I was such an agent – assuming that this wasn't daft speculation, a small legacy from a life marked by such daftness.) She was ever so slightly anxious, almost but not quite hopping from foot to foot. When it came, her voice all but vanquished my dream-gubbins of tin-lids and gerbils. It was rich and womanly.

“Two of you here – yes?” she asked, consulting what looked like a modest tablet of stone. My mouth fell and stayed open. Luckily, Marjory joined me, answered her question and gave our names.

“Right,” said the biscuit-girl. Her tone couldn't make up its mind. Soothing or brisk? It hovered midway between nurse and dispatch-clerk. “Someone's joining you.” She turned away from us, beckoning prettily to someone who'd been hanging about in a veil of fog. He came forward: a man of about my age, perhaps younger. She stepped aside and then, pocketing the tablet in a cream dress that seemed to have no pockets, she waved goodbye.

“And who are you, dear?” Marjory called to her. A gust of wind blew out of the fog, not disturbing it in the least but expertly bearing away whatever the girl said. She did speak. Surely she did. Or perhaps the wind blew from her very mouth. Anyway, she disappeared.

“I think it was something about coming back,” Marjory improvised.

We filed back into the lounge. Now, from nowhere, there was an array of tea, coffee and – good grief! strong drink! – on a table by Marjory's armchair. There was also a tin of biscuits, whose lid I reflexively prised off and inspected. No girl, no pet. The lid showed a valley at twilight. Was that where we were – what we'd see once this fog cleared away? If it ever did?

“Rob Koppe,” said the man amid handshakes, then pulled up another chair and said “yes” to a coffee. He was from the Black Country, Sedgley way, and had melted during a school reunion. School again, I thought, sipping a whiskey-and-sort-of-ginger on the sofa. I wondered if Marjory would turn out to be a teacher.

“I went to the loo,” said Rob. “Outer door and inner door, quite a big space between. As I was

going in the first door, someone was coming out the second. I stood by my door, holding it wide open. They pushed hard at their door, said ‘Ta’ and went, leaving me” – here he set down his cup and pressed his sides – “wedged between the two. Well, it wasn't like I was stuck. I could just twist round and go in. But then I started...” He paused, tapping his head. As if at a telepathic signal, the three of us leaned forward. “You know when you turn an egg-timer over? The sand starts falling, right from the centre of the upper bit. Then the centre widens and deepens. Then all the sand in the upper bit starts” – he shrugged – “I don't know... lurching down.” Marjory, clearly a veteran of a thousand timed meals, nodded eagerly. Remembering a mini-hourglass on a key-ring, a relic of a pulled cracker some long-lost Christmas, I did likewise. Rob nodded.

“That was me. That's how I felt.” Picking up his coffee, he took a swig as if it were stronger than my whiskey, as if he needed it to get through his words. “I was tumbling down inside myself, hollowing out. Pouring through the soles of my shoes, I imagine, though by that time I wasn't in any state to check. The last thing I remember is some song blasting from the main hall – Free or Sparks or something. The last note” – he was all animation now, swishing coffee onto his sleeve – “the last note of the song was the last thing I heard. I can hear it still. I can do it.” He pressed a hand to his ear, cradling his cup against his chest in that classic folkie-with-pint manner.

“Ah, F natural,” said Marjory. I looked at her in admiration. As I did so, the wind blew up again. The window seemed to rattle her words at us in eerie repetition. We all looked. I half-expected the biscuit-girl to be there, smiling contentment that we were all getting on, giving us a ladylike thumbs-up, confirming Marjory's earlier words: “Yes, I'll be back.” But only the fog was watching.

“Well,” said Marjory, “this might not be something you want to hear. I'm not sure I want to myself. But I think we should go out. Find out.”



Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into The Unknown Marsiling's Mantra



John Greenwood



Previously...

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.

The old man, it turned out, was a deaf mute. He had no telepathic ability, but was communicating to me via the Dover and Somerset box using a form of sign language that employed only facial expressions. The origins of this singular system were, he explained to me later, obscured by the passage of time, but one traditional, possibly mythical, account held that the language was developed by a group of human convicts, sentenced to hard labour by their Punggol enemies. After their first abortive escape attempt, the prisoners had been punished by the removal of their tongues. After the second attempt, their arms were amputated. Before a third attempt on the prison walls could be made, the prisoners had to develop a means of clandestine communication, and the facial sign language was born.

Whatever the fate of its originators, the system was certainly a boon to those such as Marsiling, who became the fourth member of my travelling party. There was one major drawback

to Marsiling's method of communication. When he wished to speak to me, his face would be contorted into a series of grotesque shapes. His continual gurning and mugging was disconcerting at first, but, as with many things, time and repeated exposure lessened its impact. Nevertheless, certain words required him to assume such peculiar poses as made me suspect that he was in pain, or suffering some kind of seizure. The word "epistemology" in particular, while it did not crop up frequently in our conversations, seemed to cause him actual physical pain, and "tortoiseshell" looked hardly less uncomfortable.

But once again I have jumped ahead of events, and left the reader stricken in the cave of the vanished bats, still under the malicious spell of that fungal telepath, Thanggam. Marsiling was not then the dear friend which he was later to become. No indeed, I was at that moment ready to beat the poor wretch to death for his misdeeds. And his crime? The evidence was overwhelming. Marsiling had single-handedly wiped

out the entire colony of bats to further his own ends. Their dried skins festooned his withered and bony frame, and their meat dangled obscenely from pointed sticks hung over the remains of a fire. It seemed that I had arrived at the conclusion of a bat massacre. Now Thanggam's appetite for the droppings of these particular mammals would never be satisfied, and I would suffer unthinkable punishments for my failure. I cursed my indolence. If only I had not dallied in those woods, taking my time to enjoy the sounds of the forest!

Such thoughts were, as Eunos would have been the first to point out, of dubious logic. The old man had called this cave his home, it was apparent, for weeks if not months. This had been a slow extinction of the bats, meal by meal. And as Marsiling had filled his belly with bat steak, he had also punctiliously swept the bats' droppings out of the cave, and cast them over the edge, onto the rocks below. My harvest was irretrievable. It only remained for me to exterminate this hygiene obsessive before I must return to give Thanggam the bad news. I approached Marsiling menacingly, baring my teeth in an expression of bestial rage.

This gesture had quite an unexpected effect on my intended victim. Far from taking my furious grimaces at face value, Marsiling, long used to communicating only via his facial sign language, translated my snarling features as a casual enquiry about the weather. He responded in kind, waggling his eyebrows into the lens of my translation machine, which converted his signals into speech.

"I have not been outside for many days," barked the machine, "so I cannot comment. I have been hiding here, you see, where the thoughts of the giant mushroom cannot penetrate."

I stopped dead in my tracks, having backed the old man into a corner, while I considered these remarks. A place where Thanggam's thoughts could not penetrate? It was true: the further I had delved into the cave's depths, the easier I had felt in my mind. While the fear of Thanggam's wrath was still sharp enough to make me wince, the enveloping, crushing pain

of mental bondage had diminished. Thanggam's reins had been loosened, but not cut.

"You know of Thanggam?" I whispered, awestruck.

"Is that what he is calling himself now?" replied Marsiling, using the tip of his nose to form the question mark.

"An acquaintance of yours?" I asked him. Depicted on the screen mounted by Eunos to the front panel of my Dover and Somerset, my simulacra performed absurd facial contortions for the benefit of my interlocutor.

"Only by reputation," replied Marsiling. "Thanggam is responsible, I believe, for the death of my family, and indeed my whole village."

Entranced, I listened to Marsiling's tragic history. He was the sole survivor, on account of his deafness, of Thanggam's oppression. The giant mushroom had appeared, so he explained, overnight on the edge of their territory, and after the initial panic and carnage, he had been one of a miserable handful of peasants to escape into the mountains. Of those who remained, the lucky ones perished almost immediately, unable to withstand the psychic onslaught of the telepathic toadstool. Those of stronger minds were enslaved to Thanggam's will and, like myself and Eunos, were set about the endless task of gathering animal droppings.

Marsiling and his band of refugees had sought safety in a series of caves where, they had discovered, the telepathic beams of Thanggam could not pierce, or could do only in a weak, diluted form. But, as I knew only too well, it was not by thought alone that Thanggam's dominion was assured. The ghastly piping sound he emitted was the constant threat that shackled his slaves against revolt. Even the seclusion of the deep caves that riddled the hillside could not protect Marsiling's rebels from this aural onslaught. One by one they were driven from their boltholes. Some took the ultimate escape route, and threw themselves from a mountain precipice. Others succumbed to the despotism of Thanggam, and joined his army of excrement collectors.

Eventually Marsiling was left alone. His last

companion, an enterprising young woman who had taken the precaution of stuffing her ears with clay until she could hear no more than Marsiling himself, had left the cave in search of food and water, and never returned. Marsiling had no doubt that she too had fallen victim, one way or the other, to Thanggam.

Starving and dehydrated, Marsiling had explored the labyrinthine passageways of the cave system at random. He described to me in detail the madness of thirst, and I knew he was not lying. I was reminded of my own experiences while stranded in the desert, my guilt-induced visions of giant beetles who tried me for murder. But no wandering android had saved this old man from his doom. Instead, after days of crawling blindly through tunnels of rock like a worm, this bat-infested cavern had appeared to him, he told me, like a horn of plenty. Bat blood to soothe his parched throat, and bat meat to fill his stomach. He must have seen the revulsion in my eyes, no matter how hard I tried to dissemble, for he took great pains to persuade me of the merits of a diet of bats. I remained unconvinced, but appreciated that to a desperate man, these flying mice might indeed represent a miraculous gift.

That joyous day was now many weeks past. The bat bounty had diminished in slow degrees. Marsiling had rationed himself to two adult bats per day, or four infants, but even on this regime, his store shrank. The bats themselves, although at first largely indifferent to his predation, in time learned to fear their new neighbour, and hunger pushed Marsiling to more desperate strategies. He showed me a large net, constructed, ghoulishly enough, from hundreds of spun strands of bat fur, which had been used to catch his prey en masse.

For obvious reasons, Marsiling feared to leave his refuge for longer than a few seconds at a time, but in these brief, frantic excursions, he had managed to gather enough dead branches and stones to construct a rudimentary bed and firewood.

"How did you manage to survive beyond the safety of the cave?" was my question, prompted by more than simple curiosity. Perhaps this

ragged old man held the secret to my escape. And indeed, there was a technique, which Marsiling imparted to me, a defence against the telepathic onslaught of Thanggam which had been passed down in his villagers from one generation to the next. Resisting the enslavement of the fungi depended on the repetition of a certain, apparently meaningless phrase, over and over, without a pause for breath. Given sufficient concentration, the words would, I understood, hypnotise the chanter, rendering him immune to the commands of Thanggam. But the duration of the enchantment was limited to the lung capacity of the enchanter. As soon as one had exhausted one's reserves of breath, the spell was broken, and Thanggam's dominion over the mind flooded back, unabated. The time it took the speaker to inhale was long enough to chain his mind once more, and before he could begin his recitation afresh, he would find himself scouring his surroundings for offerings of animal dung.

I urged Marsiling to impart this ancient incantation to me, but here I came up against an apparently insuperable obstacle. My companion had neither speech nor hearing, and it was precisely these shortcomings that had preserved him. When leaving the cave on short expeditions, Marsiling would recite his mantra, not in spoken words formed with air, but simply in his mind. This method had the advantage that his invulnerability to Thanggam was not limited to the length of his exhalation. The danger was that some unexpected sight or sound might cause him to lose concentration, breaking the cycle of repetition, thus leaving him naked against the might of Thanggam's mind. But the greatest disadvantage, in so far as my own preservation was concerned, was that Marsiling's mantra remained incommunicable. It had no analogue in the facial sign language he employed, because the incantation had no meaning. It was a mere jumble of sounds, a tongue-twister designed to keep the brain uselessly busy. There was no semantic equivalent to those silly syllables.

For the second time that day, Marsiling had, not by any mistake of his own, infuriated me. It felt as though the key to my liberation had been dangled through the cage door, just out of reach,

then snatched away by my taunting gaoler. I was trapped here, in a cave that stank of bats, though there were no longer any bats in it, with a man who had gorged himself on bats for months on end, whose whole existence depended on bats, and who had, through his own gluttony, hunted these same bats to extinction. Again, I am not proud to say that I came close to physical violence against this defenceless, starving old man. But some shred of human decency, some emaciated residue of what was right, plugged the deluge of rage.

The effort to restrain my fist seemed to drain me of all energy, and I sank down to the bitingly cold stone floor, dejected. Seeing that he could not reach me in my pit of despair, Marsiling politely turned away, and began to feed his tiny fire with kindling gathered on his perilous outings. The walls of the cave were illuminated with a weak, flickering light.

For a long time I was oblivious to all but my own sorrow. When I did chance to look up, I noticed a shadow dancing on the cave wall. Marsiling, busy about his fire, was projected, monstrously large and distorted in silhouette on the rock face. I was reminded of the games of my childhood, making shadow ducks and swans with my folded hands in the cinema. My mind drifted to other boyhood pursuits, and an idea struck me.

"Charades!" I yelled, leaping towards Marsiling, almost causing him to fall backwards from

his rustic bed, a smoking morsel of bat steak skewered on the end of a twig in his hand.

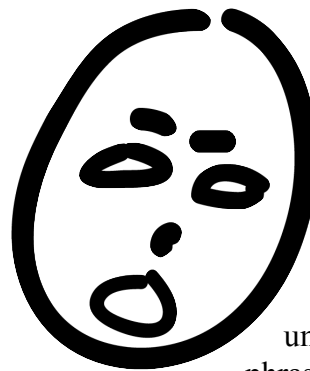
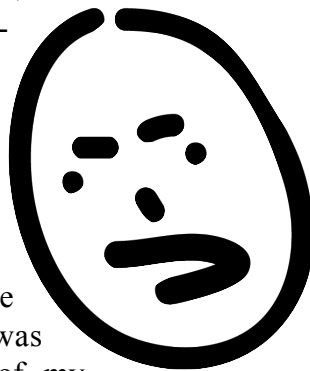
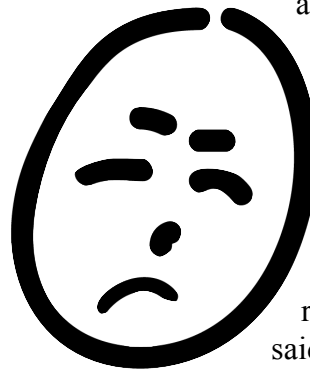
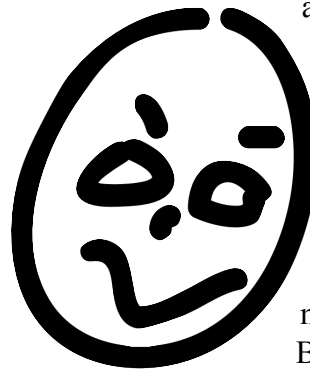
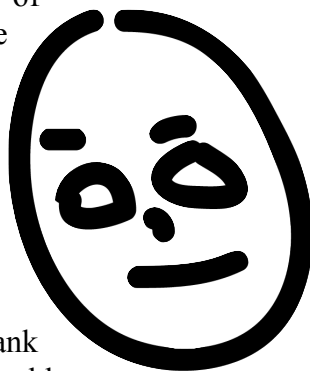
Once the old man had grasped the simple rules, our game could proceed. In each round Marsiling took the role of charadist, and I that of the guesser. I was beginning to appreciate the subtlety of his facial contortions in front of the camera lens. Now Marsiling had to strain his art to new levels of precision, for his aim was to transmit not whole meanings, but bitten off semiotic fragments, which the Dover and Somerset might then assemble into the syllables of his incantation against the great mushroom.

By slow, tedious trial and error the experiment advanced, but we had nothing else to occupy our time, and eventually the mantra was complete. I repeated it aloud several times to ensure that I was pronouncing it correctly. "Potong Pasir," I said slowly, forming the empty sounds carefully.

"Potong Pasir, Pasir Ris. Potong Pasir, Pasir Ris. Ris Pasir Potong Pasir Ris Potong Pasir Pasir." Marsiling clapped his hands and grinned at me in conspiratorial triumph. I repeated the phrase over and over, until

it skipped from my tongue without hesitation or error.

We were ready to emerge from our lair, and face the enemy. I stuffed my ears with plugs of bat fur, and steeled myself for the confrontation ahead.



LOST CLASSICS OF THE SILVER AGE ✦

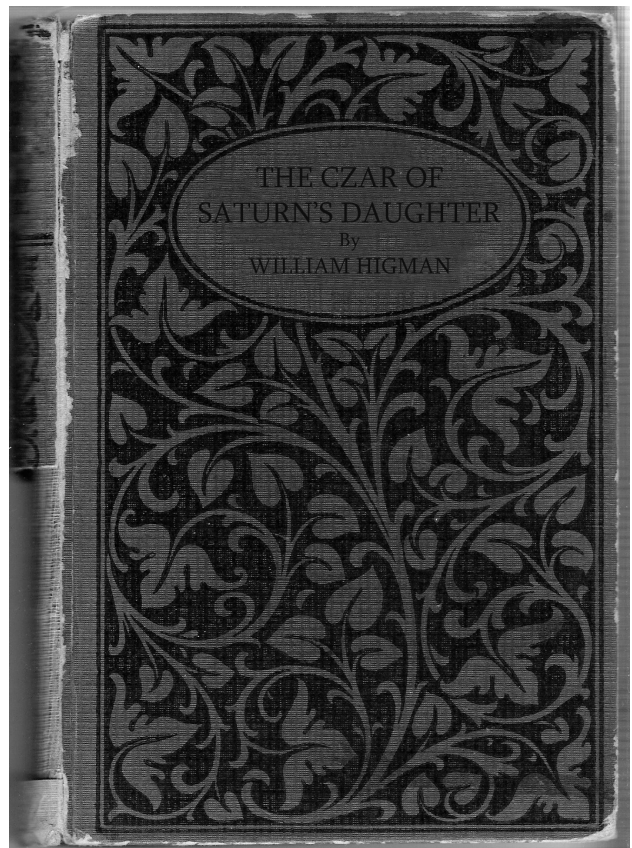
THE CZAR OF SATURN'S DAUGHTER

WILLIAM HIGMAN

Recently, a member of the Silver Age Books team was on his way home from work when he found himself catapulted across space and forced into battle with the ferocious space pirates of Planet Z. It took him a few days to find his feet, but after sinking a number of their lower-level space privateers a challenge was issued by Saddaloo Raddaloo, famously known as Bluetongue, King of Planet Z. Our administrative assistant had the choice of bending his knee to this ferocious tyrant, and thus earning an essential respite for the terrified shipbuilders of Bemoun, whom he had been defending, or continuing to fight a war that could only be lost. Naturally, he chose to bend the knee, but only after equipping it with a concealed weapon, which shot through his patella and killed Bluetongue stone dead. Unable to walk as a result of this sacrifice, our admin assistant was nevertheless acclaimed as the new leader of the pirate hoard, a position he celebrated by having the people of Bemoun craft him the finest of peg legs, carved with pictorial representations of all the achievements of Silver Age Books. That done, he took himself off to examine the treasure chests accumulated by his savage predecessor, only to find, to his immense amazement, a trove of novels and collections published by Silver Age Books of which he had never been aware. None could explain this unbelievable treasure to him.

Over time, he took them all to his private

spaceship, taking them with him to read on his various piratical journeys, and then leaving them there, "accidentally", one by one, slowly enough that none would suspect his purpose. Eventually, there were no more Silver Age Books in the treasure trove, and the next morning he left the doors to the hoard open, and slipped away in the ensuing chaos, leaving Planet Z behind forever.



Where those books came from we might never know – the future, the past, another dimension? Theories abound, but no one else has claimed copyright, and so we'll take them as ours.

We couldn't possibly reprint all of those titles 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 ten of William Higman's brain-bruising freak-out, *The Czar of Saturn's Daughter*, originally published (apparently) in 1933.*

It was Elenia, the former Czarina. I holstered my pistol and kissed her on the lips before we had time to think about it.

For a second she made token resistance, then melted against me, before finally giving as good as she got.

"You have to excuse me," she said, her eyes dropping coquettishly to the floor. "That was the first time I have been kissed by a woman. It was... an unusual experience."

I looked her up and down. She had a figure that would have made a grown man weep, not least because I had got to it first. "Well, Elenia, you better get used to it, because I'm going to be doing it a hell of a lot more."

I took her by the shoulders and prepared to make good my promise, but our fun was spoilt by the sound of far-off gunfire. I laid her a hard, quick one on the lips for good measure and tried to think business.

"You think your dad's making a move on your territory, Comrade Elenia?"

"I knew that his men had infiltrated our colony here on Europa, but I'd hoped they would not be numerous enough to cause any trouble." She fluttered her eyelashes to keep back the tears, in a way that almost broke my concentration. I had a whole back crying out to be tickled by those little green feathers. Whoever had decided this was the moment to start a little war was going to find themselves on the wrong end of a New Jersey fist, or my name wasn't Cleabella Danger.

"Well, if they're making a move, my dear, I think we should too. Your father isn't going to waste men in a futile attack – he'll have sent

reinforcements by space-car. We need to get to your space weapons tower – that'll be the target of these nogoodniks. They'll turn off your artillery and let their pals sail in like a pack of bloodthirsty butterflies."

"Do you think you can stop them, Cleabella? You're only a woman, after all."

I looked into her baby yellows and wondered why I felt like kissing her again. If some ordinary joe had tried that line on me I would have tied his ass in a knot faster than he could have picked his teeth up off of the floor. But this girl did something to me. Maybe it was those canary yellow eyes, maybe it was the dress that acted as if it had somewhere better to be, or maybe it was the green, green lips that had a thousand ways to say "hello". Whatever it was, I had to ask myself a lot of hard questions. Would she compromise my mission? Would her father have a problem with her dating a dame? Would I have to kill him anyway? Girls are a lot of hard work. Guys, they aren't all that appealing. They scratch off your face with their bristles. They often smell bad. They like talking about themselves too much. But they don't get under my skin. I can take a tumble with a dashing young RAF man here or there and so what? It's a notch on the bedpost and another barracks where my name goes down in legend. Girls, that's a different matter. Half the time, you have to start by persuading them to try something different, for one thing, even though you can see the passion in their eyes. But that only makes the achievement more delicious. And then, too many times, too many times by half, they get under my skin, into my head, and before I know it I'm crying like a little idiot about getting on the train, because there's always a train. There's always somewhere that a girl like me has to go. And that's hard. I could feel it now, an angry viper starting to writhe inside, telling me it was time to stick or twist.

Damn all that to hell. A girl like me doesn't have time to play cards with snakes.

I kissed her again, even more brusquely than the time before, and grabbed myself a handful of ass. "Ask me that again and I'll give this baby a spanking it won't forget till the fourth of July."

She smiled, nodded and I let her go.

The Quarterly Review

Weirdmonger

DF Lewis

Prime Books, 2003, 383pp+

This volume collects 67 stories by the darling of the small press of the 1990s, DF Lewis, who has reputedly seen over 1,500 of his short stories published in a multitude of magazines, anthologies and journals.

I make no apology for the lateness of this review – though this book has been on the market for a good few years, it only recently came into my possession, and from its opening words I was convinced of its utmost importance, and felt the need to produce a review. That is the effect that the first story had upon me. However, as to the rest of the book I can say relatively little, with good reason.

One of the editors of this esteemed journal once said of James H Schmitz that upon reading that author for the first time (“Harvest Time”, in the collection *Trigger & Friends*), he immediately put the book down and vowed never to read another word. It was so exactly how he imagined his own writing to be, that he could not have read any more without branding himself a James H Schmitz imitator for life.

So it was with DF Lewis for me, but to an even greater extent. I wouldn't dare to compare my own writing to his, but after reading the first story in this collection – “The Abacus” – I knew that to read any more would doom me to a lifetime of fruitless emulation, or else a lifetime of awkward avoidance of Lewis's themes and styles.

Eventually, the editor I mentioned before became secure enough (or arrogant enough) in his own writing style to venture into further tales by James H Schmitz, bringing him a happiness that is, however, tinged with sadness, because he knows that in only a matter of months he will

have completed all seven volumes of the collected works of that fine author. One day, perhaps, I might unfortunately join him in that complacency, and decide to delve further into the mind of the *Weirdmonger*, and if I do, there will be no sadness, since these sixty-seven “Synchronised Shards of Random Truth & Fiction” barely scratch the surface of this remarkable writer's literary output, and so, when I do gain the courage to read his work, I will never have to stop. – *HP*

Meet the Robinsons

Stephen J Anderson (dir.)

Film, US, 102 mins

The plot of this bright and cheerful film is essentially that of *Back to the Future*, seen from a different character's point of view, but the film has much amusing incidental detail to recommend it. Very young children, though unlikely to follow the twists of the plot, will be enthralled by the spectacular future world and the copious thrills and spills. One thing really struck me, though – what is it about computer-animated films and caffeine? So far this year both *Over the Hedge* and *Hoodwinked* featured caffeine-powered hyperactivity as part of their denouements, and in *Meet the Robinsons* children are again treated to a lesson in the laughs that result from being a low-level junkie, in the form of a scientist hopped up on caffeine patches. Now I imagine computer animators work long, tiring and often quite dull hours, and coffee comes in very handy for them at times, but it seems a strange thing to riff on in so many children's films. What next: *The Elf With The Golden Arm*? *Dogs In Space*, with actual dogs? *Thomas The Tanked-Up Engine*? – *SWT*