
Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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Editorial

Far-Flung Fiction!

Hello! Welcome to TQF#17! This last couple of months have been very exciting for us, not least because TQF#16 was downloaded over 600 times! Not a lot by some standards, but for us it was flabbergasting. Yet it's rather frightening to think that people are actually going to look at our work, and judge it. When putting together earlier issues I had no such fear, and gambolled about in blithe idiocy. But we haven't buckled under the pressure: quite the opposite: we've thrived! For one thing, those extra eyeballs have led to extra submissions, and the extra submissions have led to extra pages! Seeing all those eyeballs rolling in the direction of this issue made me think this might be a good time to put together a manifesto of some kind (or at least a list of our excuses!) to explain what the magazine's all about. It's important, for example, for potential contributors to understand that this is not, in many ways, a respectable magazine, and it doesn't have a very respectable history... After all, it was originally set up with the express intention of exploiting the handful of authors I already had in my pocket (myself among them), and even now, when it publishes authors I have to treat with a bit more respect, it is still rather ruthless in its determination to keep going!

So, what have we got for you in this issue? Which authors have sacrificed their reputations in order to bulk up our page count? As ever, of course, like it or not, there are further instalments in the Saturation Point Saga, the researches of Newton Braddell, Helen and Her Magic Cat, and After All.

Cronies and indentured servants aside, Diane Andrews, new to these pages, calculates for us "The Speed of Darke". In a strange world of filtered legend, recently delivered from the rule of the mysterious Monckes, life tries to go on.

When Richard K Lyon sent me the story of "The Christmas Present War", a quick google revealed him to have collaborated with Andrew J Offut on a series of novels. Given that I only had to look up from my monitor to see novels by the collaborator in question, the story was as good as accepted before I even read it. Thankfully, once I did read it, the story didn't let me down.

Jeff Crouch has provided us with "Glurp", the first story accepted for this issue. Like the substance in its title, this story stuck with me after my first reading of it, and I felt an uncontrollable compulsion to send the author an acceptance note. It might be wise to lock your valuables in a safety deposit box before you proceed, just in case the author has woven some strange, malignant science into his story's telling that might force you, too, to do his bidding.

Sometimes I read and accept stories late at night, at times when I should really be sleeping. How else to explain the appearance in this serious and august journal of such a lunatic item as Dan Kopcow's "Gone English", a tale of the Bearded Avenger? Then again, it does remind me of Grant Morrison and Simon Louvish, a combination which will usually add up to an instant acceptance from these parts!

I hope you enjoy this issue as much as I enjoyed putting it together! – *SWT*

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #17

Summer 2007

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News

Monster Invasion?

On 15 May 2007, I was sitting in my office at home, working away, when a little boy knocked on my door. He was crying his eyes out, so I didn't recognise him at first. But as he ran past me into my home, slamming the front door shut behind him, I recognised him as Connor, a boy who attends the same playgroup as my own child. That made him just three or four years old, so what was he doing out and about on his own? At first he was too tearful to explain, so I gave him a glass of milk and a few cookies, and waited for him to calm down. It turned out that

after a nightmare he had headed downstairs for reassurance from his parents, only to find them being eaten by a monster more terrible than anything he could have dreamed up. Naturally, he fled to his room and hid under the covers.

In the morning Connor sneaked back downstairs, ready to run at the first sign of trouble. Amazingly, his parents were in one piece, preparing breakfast as usual.

At first he relaxed, but then noticed a strange stiffness in their behaviour, and ran for it.

It's probably all nothing, the simple nightmare of a simple child, but I thought it only sensible to record his story, just in case it is true, and they come for me next. The world must be warned!

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THE TQF MANIFESTO

STEPHEN WILLIAM THEAKER

THE GOALS OF TQF!

Lots of people are now hearing about this hare-brained magazine for the very first time. (Hello to all our new readers and would-be contributors!) For example, listings on www.ralan.com and www.duotrope.com have brought a huge and very welcome increase in the number of submissions we're receiving, while a link from the British Fantasy Society website and an advert in *Midnight Street* will have brought other eyes to bear on our work. Some of those people are probably wondering: what is this magazine all about? What is it for? Why is it so peculiar?

Time for some answers!

These are our guiding lights!

KEEP IT GOING!

This is our number one priority. Too many small press magazines peter out after a handful of issues, or even just one. Our own early experiment in fanzine publishing, *New Words*, lasted just four issues, as did our second, *November Spawned*. The primary goal of TQF is to survive. Once we reach #50, who will care if we scraped through #26 by reprinting some Jules Verne we nicked from Project Gutenberg? At every stage of publishing the magazine, from copy selection to printing, the most important factor in any decision is whether it will help to keep the magazine going.

My impression (and experience) is that there are a fairly small number of reasons why small

press magazines stop publishing: it usually comes down to money, enthusiasm or workload. I'm hoping we have all three problems licked.

KEEP IT CHEAP!

We are determined to never put ourselves in a position where an issue of TQF won't come out because we can't afford to publish it, or even because we would rather spend the money on something else. So production costs are kept at an absolute minimum: we print the magazine absolutely to order, and offer no payment to contributors, not even a free copy of the magazine. Realistically, we're never going to sell many copies of the magazine, probably never enough to cover the cost of paying contributors anything more than a nominal sum, and I never want that to be a reason not to publish.

Hence, our only standing cost is the £4 it costs to print and post the copy required by law for the British Library.

We're keeping it cheap to keep it going, and we want to keep it going for a long time!

KEEP ENTHUSIASM HIGH!

Putting out this magazine is a hobby and a source of joy, not a business.

We keep our ambitions small, and thus they are hard to thwart! Once we have our own copies of each issue in our hands, and someone else has downloaded it from the website, they are fulfilled.

We're unashamedly Sunday footballers, kicking the ball around in the park. At the back of every Sunday footballer's mind, of course, is the dream that a scout might notice them and realise they should be playing for England, but that isn't what it's all about. We're having some fun, making some new friends, and getting some much-needed exercise.

With each issue we try to tweak things a bit, but we're not going to break our backs doing it.

Another aspect of this problem is that it's easy for an editor of a well-publicised magazine to accept enough material in a matter of weeks to fill all the issues for years to come. It's great to be in that position, but facing such a huge mountain of work can be deadly to an editor's enthusiasm. For that reason, we won't accept anything that we can't fit into the next issue along, because we want every issue to be a new adventure, not a chore that's been sitting on our desks for six months and counting...

KEEP IT NICE AND EASY!

Publishing even a half-decent magazine like this one takes a bit of hard work. Even if you have a nice simple layout like ours, and a swarm of helpful text-editing macros, all of which makes the typesetting a breeze, the process of proofing, querying, correcting and checking 40,000 words takes a significant amount of time.

Every issue of TQF goes through that process. We're not about shoving uncorrected material into the public domain (though mistakes are bound to slip through occasionally).

With that in mind, it's important to set some limits on how much work will be involved. So we don't accept manuscripts that read like first drafts, however striking their ideas might be. We don't really care if the plots are stupid or the ideas asinine (since most of mine are), but if the sentences need rewriting in order to make sense, we'll have to pass, because we won't let the magazine drown in the work that would be involved in putting everything right.

We're not desperate for material. Thanks to our novel-writing exploits every November (see www.nanowrimo.org for more details) we pretty

much start each year with enough in-house material in hand or in development to fill six 40-page issues, so we can afford to be picky about what else we accept.

GET WRITING IT!

Not all of our goals are dictated by our fear of cancellation and failure! Making me write on a regular basis was the original goal of TQF. I like writing stories, and I don't mind if they aren't all that good. It gives me plenty of free, no-strings-attached material for my publishing ventures. I started this magazine with the intention of hacking out every word of every issue myself, like Lionel Fanthorpe writing a Badger Books anthology. The idea was that each deadline would set me off on a weekend marathon of mad typing to reach the number of words needed to put out an issue. Sadly, it hasn't worked out that way, because I just couldn't keep it up. Luckily, other writers have stepped into the breach – at first, other writers from our Silver Age gang – such as Steven Gilligan, John Greenwood and Howard Phillips – and then, once we felt the magazine was starting to find its feet, writers from all over the world!

MAKE IT A GOOD READ!

One of the inspirations for this magazine is the *Medico-Legal Journal*. Every three months the “official organ” of the Medical-Legal Society publishes 40 pages of in-depth discussion on the interface between medicine and the law: it should be a recipe for dullness of the highest order, and yet the MLJ is never anything less than magnificently readable.

With TQF we want to create something like that: something you can sit down with for a few hours and read solidly.

We're not really about being cutting-edge, changing the world, winning awards or earning respect – though those things would of course be nice... It's all about the fun of writing, and the pleasure of reading! Putting this together is always a lot of fun, and I hope that from time to time it is fun to read as well.

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. A secret organisation, IBIS, has sent him to an undersea US naval base to investigate reports of ghosts. He has just spent his first night on the base, a night of shrieking terror!

The Morning After

Chief Banks knocked on the open door, and waved. "Hi Howard. How was your first night on board?"

I looked up at him. He seemed to be in one piece. "Sorry, Chief, I'm still waiting to wake up. This dream won't end."

He pulled out the chair and sat down, taking a more serious tone. If he had relished the thought of seeing me taken down a peg or two, he probably began to regret it at that point.

"I'm sorry, Howard. It's always hardest the first time." He nodded towards the blood on the floor. "And it looks like you had an especially bad one. If you want to go and grab yourself some breakfast, we'll have all this cleaned up for you by the time you get back."

"I know you mean well, but I'm afraid you are nothing more than a figment of my imagination. When I wake up, I'll be more than happy to go for my breakfast. I don't mean to be rude, but eating during a nightmare seems to be a bit of a waste of time. If nothing else, it would seem to be likely to lead to further frightfulness. Food

that turns to maggots, that kind of thing. You know what nightmares are like.”

“A lot of people take it that way,” replied the Chief. “I can assure you that you are awake, Howard.”

“I can assure you that I am not,” I replied. “I have not woken up. My thread of consciousness since my nightmare began is unbroken. I am still asleep, and I intend to sit here and wait for myself to wake up.”

“I don’t know what to say, Howard. It’s going to be a little while before you come around, it seems. I don’t know how to accelerate the process. Maybe if you tell me something about your dream? That might be a good place to start.”

“If you insist,” I replied. There did not seem to be any other events scheduled for this dream, so I might as well play along with him. If he turned into some slaving demon I would bring the conversation to a halt, in any case. I told him everything that had happened to me during the dream so far. He nodded, and listened carefully.

When I got to the end, he let out a long, deep sigh. “Well, first of all, Howard, let me point out that you are relatively unskinned at this point. You have a few bumps and grazes, but your flesh is generally in one piece.”

I looked at my arms and legs, and it seemed to be true. “That means nothing,” I answered. “You know as well as I that in dreams all is mutable. If anything that backs up my position rather than yours.”

He nodded again. “You can see the blood and the vomit on the floor. I can see it too. I am not trying to convince you that this really happened. Nor am I trying to convince you that it was all a dream. After all, those issues are quite high on the list of things that you are here to resolve, and I wouldn’t presume to tell you your job. However, I can assure you that, right now, at this moment, you are awake. When you made the transition, I do not know. (If there even was a transition, that is!) I know you won’t believe me, but you might as well behave as if you do, because if you don’t we are going to get off to a very slow start to the day, and if that happens we are both going to get into a lot of trouble with the

Commander. It’s up to you if you want to risk that.”

I could not help laughing, despite, or perhaps because of, the horrors I had seen. “You’re talking about Pascal’s Wager?”

“I’m sorry, Mr Phillips, I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s a long-discredited argument for being religious. Pascal said that you might as well believe in God, because if you didn’t believe in him and he existed, the consequences would be so terrible in comparison to those of believing in him if he doesn’t exist.”

“You’re saying,” he said, stroking his chin, “that you might as well believe that the Commander is real, because if he is, and you don’t believe, you’ll get your ass kicked from here to the moon?”

“That’s it,” I said, getting to my feet.

“Then yes. It is a bit like Pascal’s Wager, however discredited that has been.”

“Oh, it’s very discredited,” I explained. “Not least because if you look at how many gods people believe in, all over the world, the odds are that whoever you pick, it isn’t going to be the real one, if indeed there was a real one, which no sensible person would think there is any reason to believe, of course. You’re probably better off, all in all, not hitching your wagon to any god in particular, and hoping that the one who is real doesn’t mind a bandwagon-jumper!”

He said nothing.

“But that isn’t why you’re here, is it, Chief?”

“Not really,” he said. “I would think, given the nature of your nightmare, that you would like to check on your friend Harriet. She’s already in the mess. I don’t think her nightmare was quite as bad as yours.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I certainly would like to check on her,” I replied. “Let’s go and get breakfast, and you can tell me about this blood and where it came from.”

It may seem surprising, but I ate my breakfast eagerly, rushing to refill the stomach that I had emptied so unpleasantly during the night. Harriet was at the table with us, eating just as well as I did, and happily she was entirely devoid of split breasts, intestinal rats, and straight razors.

"I heard you had a good one, Howard," she said, in between mouthfuls of egg and bacon. "Was I in it?"

"Yes, you were," I said, trying not to look her in the eye. "I'm glad to see that you are okay."

"I'm better than okay, Howard." She grinned. "That was exhilarating, terrifying, and wonderful, all at the same time. I've never been on a ride like it. We could bring tourists down here, you know. It would be the ultimate ghost house."

The Chief glowered at her. "Let's not forget that men have died down here," he said. "I'm glad you had a good time, but not everyone enjoys being eviscerated every time they try to sleep."

I needed to get more information. "It happens every night?"

"Pretty much."

"No wonder you all look so tired," I said. "I don't know how you hold out."

The Chief shrugged. "It helps to know that it isn't real. If you just stay put, you can't get into too much trouble. Mentally, though, it's a real strain."

"Whatever is happening, it must be some form of sleep, though," mused Harriet. "If it wasn't, you would all be totally insane by now. You'd be unable to function whatsoever."

I nodded. "That makes sense. You must be asleep during these events. Perhaps you are sleeping, but without your brains relinquishing their usual hold over the body."

"That might well be it," said the Chief. "But I've no idea what might be causing it. Before, you asked about the blood. Well, I don't know where it comes from. It doesn't seem to be our own."

"Have you analysed it?" asked Harriet. "Tested it to see where it comes from?"

"We just don't have the tools to do that down here. We've sent samples up to the surface, but they always seem to be corrupt by the time they reach the labs. We've asked for the necessary equipment to be sent, and they've tried to send it twice, but both times it was destroyed during the descent."

"Someone doesn't want you to test that blood," said Harriet. "It must be important."

"Some of the men think it's ectoplasmic blood," said the Chief with a grimace that showed what he thought of the theory. "They think the visions are ghosts, and that the blood is the ectoplasm that they leave behind. It can't be tested because it doesn't really exist."

"I would have laughed," I said, with my own grimace, "had I not been so terrified last night that every bone in my body cries out to agree with them. As it is, let's call these visions ghosts for now. It's as good a word as any to describe them for the time being, as long as we don't ascribe a supernatural origin to them."

The Commander entered the mess, looked around with a steely eye, and searched us out.

"Mr Phillips. Ms Harton."

I looked at her with surprise, realising that I had never bothered to learn her last name. Perhaps I am not the gentleman I like to think myself to be, since I assume such informality with the women I meet.

By this point I was quite certain that the Chief had been quite right. I was no longer asleep. There could be no doubt of it. The fact that I had learnt Harriet's surname for the first time was not determinative of anything, of course, since dreams often generate such false facts, but, added to all the other conversation we had had, it made it less and less likely that I was asleep. What reason did I have, at this point, to believe that I was still asleep? It was far more reasonable to assume that I just had not noticed the moment when I awoke.

"Commander Brigson," said Harriet. "Good morning. Thanks for an entertaining evening."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," he replied. "You must be pretty tough."

"For a broad, you mean?"

He shook his head. "Just tough, period. There are plenty of men on board who go to bed weeping with fear every night." He turned to me. "Are you going to put a stop to it, Mr Phillips?"

"I'll do my best, Commander," I replied. "I can't make any promises. This isn't the kind of thing I was expecting to encounter, and I'm not really prepared."

"If you had known," he said with a quick,

short smile, "would you have known how to prepare anyway, Mr Phillips?"

"Probably not," I admitted.

"Have you come to any conclusions yet?"

I gave it to him straight. "The base is haunted. That much is true. Let's call them ghosts. I don't mean the kind of ghosts that wear bedsheets and are the lost remnants of the dead. Such things are nonsense. If everyone with unfinished business became a ghost, absolutely everyone would become a ghost. There would be no doubt as to whether they exist, because we wouldn't be able to take a step on dry land without encountering them. Even a 90-year-old man who dies having achieved everything possible in life would stick around in the hope of copping off with the hot nurse who treated him in his dying days. But there are many kinds of ghosts in the real world, none of which run around with their heads under their arms. They exist in the mind, Commander, they are the ghosts in the system, the spirits of our past, the remnants of our actions, and of our past, present and future desires. We are all haunted by the contents of our own minds, and I believe, without, it must be said, having yet gathered all the available evidence, that this is the kind of ghost we are dealing with here. They are being amplified by something, I think, but it's going to take some investigation to find out what."

"A good place to begin," said the Chief, "would be to listen to the rest of my story."

"I agree," said the Commander. "It sounds like you're making progress, Mr Phillips, so keep up the good work. Ideally, I want you making some kind of the presentation to the men within the next couple of days. Things are getting out of control here, and I want everyone back up to full speed as soon as possible. Right?"

"Right, sir," I replied.

"You can rely on Howard, Commander Brigson," said Harriet. "He's saved the world at least a time or two already. A little base like this shouldn't be too much trouble for him."

Commander Brigson raised both eyebrows. "Even if I were inclined to rely on your judgment when making my command decisions, Ms

Harton, your friend's bloodshot eyes and the bags under his eyes would make me think twice in this instance. If he doesn't sort out this problem soon, he's going to be as much a victim of it as we are." With that he spun on his heel and left, apparently disdaining to eat any breakfast, though upon asking the Chief I found out that Brigson had already been on duty for five hours, and had eaten long ago.

"He's only getting four hours of sleep a day," said the Chief, "and those are during the day. When you run into C-Ops at night and start yelling about orgies, he's the one who makes sure you don't come to any harm."

Both Harriet and I blushed.

"Don't worry," he said. "Like I said, you soon learn to stay put, but we wanted you to have the full experience this time."

"I certainly had that," I said.

When the Commander had left the mess, as always, there had been a certain lessening of tension, but now I realised that he imposed that tension for a reason, as tempers suddenly flared in the queue for food.

One man had bumped into the man in front of him, who turned to furiously confront him.

"Jatters, you idiot!" said the one who had been bumped. "What the hell do you think you're doing, dumbass?!"

Jatters dropped his tray to the ground. It had been empty, but still made enough of a noise to attract the attention of everyone in the mess. With all eyes on him, Jatters was not about to back down.

"Are you gonna make me, Brown?" He shoved his face in that of the other.

"I might just do that, Jatters. You haven't got anything on me."

"Don't push me, Brown. I saw you with my girl last week. Don't think I forgot. You got an ass-kickin' coming from that, and if you want it so bad, I got it right here for you."

Brown beat him to the punch, letting him have it on the jaw, then receiving one in reply to the midriff.

Before another second had gone, the two men were surrounded by another ten, cheering them on in their fight, offering advice, and clearly tak-



ing great pleasure in seeing such a release of the aggression they were all feeling.

The Chief sighed, letting himself take a deep breath before getting to his feet.

“Do you need a hand, Chief?” I asked. “For a poet, I really know how to handle myself.”

“I should be okay,” he replied, shaking his head, “but cover my back, just in case. Everyone wants these fights to happen – everyone wants a chance to let off steam, and this could easily get nasty.”

“Especially with all the kitchen knives so close by,” noted Harriet.

The Chief smiled. “I’d best go and get involved.”

He stepped up to the group of rowdy sailors, and clouted a couple of them on the back of their heads. “Get back to your breakfast,” he yelled, with a beefiness which I not previously seen in him. It was clear that whatever doubts he held privately, he was still ready and able to perform his duties. On the surface he seemed a little soft,

but within there lay a core of steel, which, taken together with the evidently powerful leadership of Commander Brigson, went a long way to explaining why this installation was still up and running in such uniquely fearsome circumstances.

Soon only the combatants themselves were still oblivious to the Chief's orders to stop, and he was forced to push himself in between them, catching a glancing blow to the head from Brown for his troubles. Shaking it off, he returned it in kind, knocking Brown flat to the ground with a single punch.

He turned to Jatters. "You'd better tell me you're done, Ensign Jatters."

He waited, staring into the other man's angry eyes. Finally, the red mist faded from Jatters' eyes, and he lowered his fists. "Good decision," said the Chief. "Now pick up Brown and take him to the Medical Suite. Is that clear?"

Jatters nodded. "Perfectly, sir. I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"It better not, Ensign. Dismissed."

The Chief and I returned to our table, and I breathed a sigh of relief that I had not needed to take part in the fight. I can fight when necessary, as any reader of my novels will know, but it is rarely something I relish – the exception being those occasions when I, too, like those two men, have something I need to get out of my system.

"What was all that about?" I asked. "Does it happen a lot?"

He shrugged. "More often than I would like, but probably less often than you would expect. It's difficult for these men. Every night they see these terrible visions of ghosts and demons, but they also see each other, and they never know what is real, and what is not. Maybe Jatters dreamt he saw Brown making out with his girl, or maybe Brown and his girl were making out, but weren't in control of themselves. It's often impossible to know, and that's hard for everyone to deal with."

I nodded, slowly. I could easily see how that would spread tension throughout the base. To see such terrible things, but have no one to blame, and to not even know if they were even right to want to blame anyone. It would have

been enough to drive the greatest of moral philosophers over the edge. "How about you tell us the rest of your story, then? How did all of this start?"

He agreed to continue, though Harriet was keen for him to have the bump on his head checked out.

As before, I will let the Chief's words to me speak for themselves.

The Doomed Mission

Where was I? [said the Chief.] I think we had just got to the point where the divers, Cooper and Nicks, had just started off – is that correct?

[Harriet and I nodded.]

We watched their GPS signals travel across the screen, heading towards the designated terminus of their mission. The trip was uneventful at first. The creature, or any others of its ilk, must have been asleep or otherwise occupied, because the men were not attacked. We did not know how much territory the creature considered its own, but once the men were over 2 km away from the dome, we began to breathe a little more easily. If the creature were to travel much farther than that, it would probably have been encountered at some point by the crew of Sea Base Epsilon, only a dozen or so kilometres to the south, and it had not. Its range was limited, we believed, and its focus, unfortunately, narrow.

Every five minutes Cooper or Nicks would check in, letting us know how they were doing.

"Any problems?" asked the Commander on one occasion, when the men were reaching the three kilometre mark. They had just made their report, but perhaps he sensed something in their voices, something which made him a bit concerned for them.

"No, sir," came the answer.

The Commander glanced at me. "Is that Cooper or Nicks?" he asked.

I didn't know if he was speaking to me or to the diver, but I shrugged, and in a second the

radio buzzed again with a reply from the diver. "It's Cooper, sir. Everything's fine."

"I'm glad to hear it," said the Commander, still not taking his eyes off me, and this time raising an eyebrow. "But I don't want to hear about what's fine, I want to hear about what isn't fine. What's the problem out there?"

"No problem, sir."

Another voice broke in. "Nicks here, sir. It's nothing. Cooper is doing fine. It's just me. To be honest, sir, I'm a bit frightened."

"Frightened? Marines don't get frightened, Lieutenant."

"I know, sir. It's a strange feeling for me. Heh."

"To be honest, sir," said Cooper, "I'm feeling a bit frightened myself. I don't know why. It's hard to put my finger on it. Like a feeling there's someone in the water right behind me."

The Commander frowned. "Maybe it's a problem with your oxygen tanks. Is that possible, Chief?"

I spoke loudly so that the divers could hear me. "That could be it, sir, but I double-checked them this morning. It's possible there was some impurity in the air as supplied to us, though."

"Do you think that's what it is?" he asked me.

"Anything's possible," I replied. "But it seems unlikely."

In light of what has happened in the weeks since then, perhaps I should have given that hypothesis more consideration, but it is worth noting that subsequent analyses of the air down here have shown no sign of contamination. It would be the simplest explanation, but it is not one that fits all the facts, unfortunately.

"It could be an effect of the water pressure. Maybe it's something to do with the suits. They are relatively untested in such conditions in day-to-day use. Something about the suits might be rubbing them up the wrong way."

"Chief, if that pun was deliberate I'm going to have you up on charges. Do I make myself clear?" I smiled, briefly, and the Commander turned back to face the radio. "Do you want to come back, Lieutenants?"

"I had a bad moment a few minutes ago, sir," replied Nicks, "but I think I can suck it up. I don't want to quit the mission."

"For all we know, someone else might encounter the same problem," said Cooper. "If it gets worse, we'll turn back, but for the moment I think we can cope."

"Very good," said the Commander. "In that case, carry on. But Cooper: next time there is a problem you tell me right away. I do not expect to have to infer it from the way you tell me that there isn't a problem. Okay?"

"Understood, sir. Cooper out."

The Commander rocked back on his heels for a moment, closing his eyes to think. I waited till he had finished mulling it over before I spoke again.

"Do you know what they are investigating out there?" I knew that even if he did, he could not tell me what it was, but just knowing that he was in full possession of the facts of the case would make me much more confident, even if I did not have them myself.

"I know what I've been told," he replied. "But I don't know if that's what they've been told, and I don't know if what either of us has been told is the full story. But I know that those two men were selected on the basis of their bravery, their resilience, and their adaptability. If they are getting frightened, that's something we have to take seriously."

I nodded. There would be five minutes to the next report, and I was not strictly needed on C-Ops unless a technical issue cropped up, so I quickly sneaked off to the mess hall to grab a cup of coffee. Worrying about the preparations for the mission had left me somewhat sleepless during the night, and I was more tired than I should have been on such an important day. I knew that depending on coffee to keep you alert as a matter of course is a bad idea, and I detest the taste of it, but it would do the trick for the next hour or so, by which time the men should be back, the mission over.

I was back in C-Ops in good time for the next report. The men should now have been approaching their target, whatever it was.

The radio crackled. "Commander, Cooper here." The voice was excited, almost frantic.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," he replied.

"We've found it, sir. It's amazing!"

Nicks chimed in, his voice equally enraptured, but with a very worrying tinge of hysteria. "It's so beautiful. You won't believe it when you see it!"

"Please remember that you are on an open channel, gentlemen," said the Commander. "Follow your orders and get back here."

"I'm not sure we should, sir," said Cooper. "I don't know if you know what's out here, sir, but I don't think we should be doing what they tell us to in this case."

Every vein on the Commander's forehead bulged as one. "In this case, Lieutenant? You follow orders in every case, or I will keep the airlock doors locked shut when you return to base!"

"Yes, sir," said Cooper. "I'm sorry, sir. But you haven't seen it. The brass can't have seen it. No one would want to destroy anything like this if they had seen it."

"That's enough, Lieutenant! Or I will put on a suit and execute you for mutiny right where you stand!"

"Yes, sir! Sorry, sir!"

"You have your orders." He motioned for the radio connection to be closed.

I did not ask him for further information. It would have been pointless. I already knew more than I should have. Of course, I had been the one to load the explosives aboard their mini-sub, but I had not known what they were for.

Commander Brigson and I stood there in silence, while all around us the usual hubbub of C-Ops continued. As well as the supervision of the mission, of course, the usual work of the day had to be performed, no small task in itself I sipped my coffee, and hoped that nothing would go wrong for our boys out there.

Shortly there was another call.

"Charges are set, sir," said Cooper. "We have retreated to a safe distance. And about the being frightened, sir? It's worse than ever. I feel absolutely terrified, but I've no idea why."

"Lieutenant Nicks, do you feel the same way?"

"Yes, sir, I do," replied the diver. "My teeth are going to need a new set of caps, Commander, because I've worn them all away."

"Well, gentlemen. There's a good chance that whatever's making you feel that way now has a great deal of explosives attached to it. Please do me the service of destroying it and getting your asses back here right away."

"Yes, sir!" shouted the men as one.

A few seconds passed, and then... I don't know what it was, but we felt something, something huge, powerful and oblivious to us, a blast of *something* that hit the base like an undersea tidal wave, as if the storms from the surface had reached down to swat at us.

The map screen lit up like the Alps on the first day of spring, then went dead. A few seconds later it was up again, with nothing but jagged lines of static on display.

The Commander looked at me sharply. "Chief, was that the shockwave from the blast?"

I shook my head. "It couldn't have been, not at this distance. Not unless you were blowing up a nuclear sub and the missiles went off in the explosion." I looked at him pensively, watching for his reaction.

"I don't think it was a sub." He was impassive, unreadable. "Is there any chance that what we felt was an electromagnetic pulse of some kind?"

"I don't think so. It would have knocked out all of our systems, not just scrambled communications with the subs. I don't think we would have felt it ourselves, in any case."

The Commander shouted across the room to one of the technicians who were suddenly swarming over the equipment like woodlice over a damp log. "Jacobson, what was that – what readings did we get from the mini-sub? Brown, have we got contact with Cooper and Nicks?"

Brown was quickest to react. "There's nothing, sir. Just interference. That's not unusual after an underwater explosion, though, sir. We should be back in touch shortly."

The Commander nodded, then yelled again. "Jacobson, talk to me!"

The technician – he's a very gifted officer, with ten years' good experience and a knack for making machines talk nice to each other – turned and held up his hands. "I've got nothing, sir."

Both subs have gone dead. There wasn't time to get anything from them."

"Keep trying to restore contact!"

Jacobson agreed, his face showing no irritation at being given such an obvious instruction, simply a strengthened determination to succeed. That's one of Commander Brigson's greatest talents – he's not always the one who comes up with the idea or the plan, but he's always ready to steady your hand and give you strength and direction when it's most needed. Probably at least three quarters of the men and women at work in C-Ops outrank him in terms of brains, but all would acknowledge him as the best man on the base.

"I'll get down to the bay and prep another mini-sub for a search and rescue mission," I said to the Commander. "It could be that the mini-subs are disabled, and they are trying to swim back."

"Do that," he said. "Make sure you pack weapons. Who will you send?"

"Lieutenant Commander Starches. He's a good man, and adept at handling the mini-subs. If he can find Cooper and Nicks he should be able to bring them back."

"Good choice. Please make haste."

I drank the rest of my coffee down, barely noticing that it was still a little too hot to be comfortably drunk, and headed for the mini-sub bays with all possible speed short of running.

Starches was already suited up and ready to go. I have never seen a man look so alone, regardless of the half dozen crew men rushing around him, hustling one of the two remaining mini-subs into a mission-ready condition.

"Take a seat, son," I said to him. "It's going to take an hour at least to get a mini-sub ready for you."

I joined the bay crew in their work, while in C-Ops the Commander paced like a tiger caught in a matchbox. There was nothing, for dead minute after dead minute. Tests showed that our equipment was functional, but no signal from the mini-subs was received. A call came in from Sea Base Epsilon, who had felt a slight tremor, they said, and were concerned for our safety. The Commander told them as much as he was

able, which was not a great deal, and from his ability to communicate with the fellow base developed even more concern at the lack of communications with our divers, who were, after all, much, much closer to our position.

As the minutes went by, he struggled to maintain his composure, and began to snap and snarl at the C-Ops staff, much to his own annoyance. They assured him that everything was fully functional – there were just no signals for the equipment to pick up.

No hour has ever passed more slowly.

They say that time does pass more slowly at the bottom of the ocean, due to the effect of gravity, and I swear I could feel it in my bones at that moment.

Finally the mini-sub was ready, and I helped Starches into it. "Good luck, son," I said, believing that he would need it.

He nodded silently, and we closed the sub's hatch after him. He made a circle with his thumb and index finger, and I waved for the crane operator to lower him into the water.

At that very second the intercom buzzed, almost angrily. It was Commander Brigson. "Chief, get Lieutenant Commander Starches into the water and get yourself back to C-Ops immediately. We've got contact."

I gave Starches a thumbs-up and this time actually ran through the base, almost careless of what accidents I might cause. Luckily everyone kept well out of my way and I reached the Commander without crashing into anyone.

He welcomed me with a tip of the head. "Play the message back," he ordered Petty Officer Montell.

The room fell silent, as everyone stopped to listen.

At first there were just ten or twenty seconds of static, though I thought I could make out the trace of a human voice here and there, but nothing more than what you would imagine to hear in any white noise. Then the static cleared for a second, and I heard the scream of one of our men. It could have been Cooper or Nicks – the sound was so barely human that the voice became unrecognisable. Then the static returned, before there was another bout of unholy scream-

ing. The third time the static cleared, another voice was almost audible behind the screaming, but I couldn't make out a word of it. Montell switched off the message, and I looked in horror at the Commander.

"It carries on like that for a while," said Montell. "The screaming doesn't stop until the signal goes dead."

The Commander held my gaze, matching it fear for fear, then closed his eyes for a second and shook his head.

"Our men are still alive," he said firmly. "We're going to bring them home."

I clenched a fist. "Yes we are. Starches is on his way."

"Good." He raised both eyebrows for a second, a silent note between us to acknowledge the mess we had gotten into. "I take it you heard that voice on the tape?" I nodded. "It was impossible to hear what was being said, so I asked Petty Officer Montell to remove, as best she could, the sound of the screaming. She's suggested that we listen to what was said behind closed doors."

"Sure," I said. "Is there a danger of me hearing something I shouldn't, though? I'll do anything necessary to get our boys back, but I don't want to find myself in jail once we go topside."

Darie Montell turned her chair around, so that she could look me in the face. "Chief, no one should hear what is on that tape. No one." She was in tears, and not the small polite tears of an adult, but the fully-fledged floods of water that pour down the face of a toddler at an instant's provocation.

The Commander put a hand on her shoulder. "That was good work, Petty Officer Montell."

She tried to smile, wiped her face with a sleeve, and turned back to her workstation.

The Commander looked at me, and nodded his head in the direction of his office, at the back of C-Ops, directly opposite the main screens. He didn't spend a great deal of time in there, preferring to do his work in the main, open-plan room whenever possible, and so we had to clear quite a bit of junk from his desk to turn his computer on. Petty Officer Montell had already sent the file through, and he hovered the mouse pointer over it, ready to click.

"If this ends up getting you in hot water with the brass, or leaves you sobbing on the floor like a baby, I'm sorry, Chief. But if I'm going to listen to it you damn well are too. If you had been in on this properly from the start, maybe we wouldn't be in this mess now. Maybe you'd have been able to guess that you don't blow up unidentified objects with explosives till you know what's inside. Hell, I could have guessed that, but maybe you could have backed up my instincts with some science."

"So that's what it is?" I asked. "Something unidentified? That's all you know?"

"That's it," he answered. "Probably some new piece of weaponry, maybe from the Brits, or the Israelis, or the Chinese, or the Indians, I don't know. The orders were to destroy it, and not waste time about it. I think that whatever it was, there wasn't time to mount a proper recovery mission, but they didn't want to let anyone else know they'd seen it, or get the chance to recover it themselves. So they wanted it blasted to smithereens."

"Okay, I get the reason for secrecy, then. It makes sense. If it gets out that we destroyed this craft, whether it was made by an ally or an enemy, it'll be trouble."

"That's it. Anyway, now you're filled in and all set for your military tribunal, let's listen to this goddamn tape."

He clicked on the file, and it began to play.

"Hello... Hello... Sea Base Delta... Come in Sea Base Delta... Are you there? The devils... The mission is complete... the devils... my eyes... mission complete... I am the I am the I am the I am the I... am the I... mission... mission fleet... come and get us... don't cross the street in the middle of the block... come and get us... I can't scream... why can't I scream like Nicks... why is Nicks screaming... I didn't mean to hurt him... Delta, Sea Base Delta, are you there... incapacitated... I can't hear you any more... I can't hear you Mother... I can't see you Mother..."

The file came to a close, and the Commander powered down his computer.

We were silent for a moment while we took it in.

The Commander spoke first, as was his duty. "What do you make of that, Chief?"

"They're alive. I got that much out of it. Sounds like he's frightened out of his wits. It could be the bends, or radiation poisoning."

"Perhaps. Maybe he saw something out there. Or maybe there was some kind of weapon on board that craft, some kind of fear weapon. They were already halfway to terrified before they got there. Someone might have been testing it out on the fish as they approached. Maybe when they blew up the boat the weapon survived somehow, and is still running, maybe on overdrive. Do you think that's possible?"

"Anything is, I suppose. We'll have more to go on once they get back, I hope."

We shook hands firmly, and then I returned to the mini-sub bay. Twenty minutes later Starches was back, towing one powerless mini-sub behind his, with Nicks stowed inside and Cooper bound to the top of it.

A Fight to the Death!

"So what happened next?" asked Harriet, as we finished our evening meal in my room.

After Chief Banks had reached the end of his story, Harriet and I had grabbed a tray of food each and scarpered for my quarters, worn out by the moodiness and aggression rampant throughout the base, but notably evident in the mess hall, where the sailors were generally off-duty, and clearly felt less constrained in their behaviour. Even now, before I could reply to Harriet, some idiot was banging on my door, yelling for my attention.

"Phillips, you fraud, get out here and face me like a man!"

"Oh no," said Harriet, looking at me with sympathy. "Do you want me to deal with this one?"

He was only the latest member of the base's crew to accost me for my lack of progress in rid-

ding the base of its problems. Over the course of the day it had started to become a regular irritant, rearing its head whenever we were not accompanied by a senior officer, and even then, once, a particularly unruly swab had done his best to shout at me over the protestations of Chief Banks.

"It's okay," I replied. "Leave it to me. I haven't had a good punch-up in a while. I might be out of practice."

I threw open the door. Standing there was an unshaven young sailor, ruggedly handsome, but unwashed, unkempt and uneven on his feet. "Hi," I said to him. "I'm afraid I can't face you like a man today. I'm a woman today. Is that a problem?"

"Are you trying to be funny?" he growled, and I tensed for the inevitable blow. I am at ease in many different types of company, but drunken ruffians never seem to take well to me.

"Trying and failing, as ever." I danced my feet around a bit and put up my fists. "Are you here to fight Queensberry Rules? I have to warn you I'm quite a dab hand with the old left-hook right-hook."

He blinked hard, as if finding it hard to understand what was happening. As an alcoholic myself, though one who had drunk little of late, I knew how confusing it can be for a drunkard to encounter people or objects behaving in ways which one would usually put down to one's own drunkenness. As his eyes opened again, I could see him trying to work out what was real, and what was the product of his booze-addled mind.

I had been somewhat surprised to learn that alcohol was allowed down here, given the isolated nature of the place should any problems arise, but the Chief had assured me, the first time I had been buttonholed by a buffoon, that it was absolutely necessary for men and women living under such stress. Dependency on it of course would be a problem, but occasional use for the purposes of relaxation was positively encouraged. When your entire day's work consists of being wound as tightly as humanly possible, winding down becomes both essential and insanely difficult.

"Now," I said to my visitor, "would you like to

conga!” I threw my hands in the air and began to dance like a silly fool, causing Harriet to laugh like her own kind of silly fool.

Seeing her laughter made up the sailor’s mind. He realised that I was acting so strangely to confuse and ridicule him, and he was not having it any more.

“You fraud!” He swung a fist at my head, forcing me to drop to my knees. I didn’t get my hands down from above my head quickly enough, though, and so his blow caught them both across the fingers.

I put my fingers to my mouth and rubbed them gingerly together. “Ow! That really wasn’t necessary!”

Harriet was still laughing. “Are you sure you don’t need my help? I have feminine wiles in reserve, you know.”

“I think I can handle this yahoo,” I answered, now starting to become genuinely angry.

He was still trying to gather the energy for another punch, and finding it lacking he drew back a booted foot with the intention of letting me have it in the face. I rolled onto my back and slipped beneath the boot, reaching up to take hold of it in both hands, then twisting to force him over and onto the floor. I rolled out from under him as he fell, gave his fall a helping hand, and as he hit the floor face down I sat aside his shoulder blades and pressed his head with my knees. I pulled it up by the hair, then licked one finger and put it in his ear.

“Wet willy!” said Harriet with delight.

“That’s the one,” I replied. “But he isn’t responding. I think he’s out for the count.” I gently lowered his head back to the ground, rolled him over, and asked Harriet to pass me the blanket and pillow from my bed. In seconds he was snoring like a baby with a blocked nose.

“Who is he?”

I confessed I didn’t know. “They seem to be getting a bit annoyed with me.”

She shrugged. “Well, you haven’t done a great deal, other than sit around in the mess hall listening to the Chief’s stories.”

“Information on the situation is essential,” I admonished. “I can’t take action if I don’t know how to act.”

“I think a lot of them just assumed you would turn up, throw around some holy water, and everything would be fine.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you going to say that they are simple folk with simple ways next? These are highly trained Navy personnel, not scarecrow-worshipping hillbillies.”

She waited to swallow a mouthful of food before answering, making me wish I had extended my disdainful comments a little more. “They have been very frightened for a very long time, Howard. You know what we went through last night. They are desperate. They’re believing in things they know they have no reason to believe in, other than the evidence of their own eyes. They just want to see you taking some visible action, not just sitting around jawing all day with the officers. They’re probably already pretty suspicious of the higher-ups anyway, thinking that they know something they’re not talking about.”

“So why not tell them the truth? Tell them about the secret sub, the secret weapon? That would give them something to which they could ascribe the problems, at least.”

“First of all, Howard, ‘ascribe’. Great word. I’m not sure how much ascribing gets done down here, but maybe it should be encouraged. Secondly, you know why. It’s just what the Commander told the Chief. If the foreign power that built it gets wind of what happened, it could kick off a third world war.”

I thought about what she had said. Perhaps a bit of showmanship wouldn’t do anyone any harm, after all. I would finish my dinner, have a chat with my friend on the floor, to take the temperature of the crew, and then put on a little performance to set their minds at ease a bit!

Howard Needs Help!

The rest of dinner passed peacefully, and Harriet and I did not feel the need to speak very much, both probably just excited to finish the meal and get on with planning our little escapade, not to

mention finding out just why our unwelcome dinner guest had quite such a bee in his bonnet about me. I did stop eating for a moment to note that I could not yet answer her question as to what happened next. Presumably the two divers had come to some kind of sticky end, and the fear they had felt had either expanded its range of influence, if it was some kind of “fear weapon”, or been passed on to the crew, if it was in fact a biological agent, or even a case of collective hysteria. It was hard to see how Harriet and I could have been so quickly affected by hysteria, you might think. But consider this: such a hysteria would not necessarily be confined to the base. It could easily have spread to the surface along with reports to the Navy of the strange events taking place on the base, with the result that Harriet and I could well have been infected long before we even set foot on the base, our hysteria latent, primed, ready to explode on the first night we spent aboard the base.

I had not come to any conclusions about the source of the problem, and believed it would require my own investigation, but it would be no good if there was a mutiny before I had had a chance to do my thing!

Shortly our meals were finished, and, as if on cue, my assailant began to wake up. Harriet and I sat on the bed, staring at him, and as he opened his eyes and looked around he could not help but meet our stares.

He groaned. “Oh no. I didn’t start a fight, did I?”

My lips thinned, and I shrugged. “Sorry, I’m afraid you did.”

His hand reached up to touch his head, quickly finding the nasty bump he had earned himself.

Harriet winced. “We should really have gotten him checked out, Howard. He could have a concussion from that.”

“Yes,” I said, pursing my lips. “Sorry for not doing that... *after he tried to kill me!*”

The sailor looked up in surprise. “Did I really do that? My God, are you hurt or anything?”

Harriet smiled. “Well, you’re the one lying on the floor with a bump on your head. If you did

come as an assassin, you’re a pretty hopeless one. Don’t take Howard seriously. You just turned up at the door, yelling about him being a fraud, and tried to punch him out. I can’t believe how violent Howard got with you, though. Have you checked your knees yet?”

The man reached down in sudden panic, but quickly realised that it was Harriet’s turn to tease him. He sat up, and leant back against the door.

“I can’t believe it – I’m so sorry. I had a beer or two, and me and the guys were grumbling about the troubles we were having, but I would never... I wouldn’t have...” He was lost for words, given the evident fact that he had indeed done what he would never have done. “It’s the craziness, you see. When you sleep, it gets you, and you know to lock your quarters and hide the key, and then to stay in bed when it happens, but sometimes, when you’re tired, or a bit drunker than you thought, it can just creep up on you. That must be what happened.”

“I believe you.” Harriet used her most sincere tone of voice. “Look at him, Howard. There’s no way it was just the booze – he couldn’t have sobered up this quickly.”

“She’s right, you know,” I said, looking him in the eye. “You were acting like a man who’s been drinking bottles of whiskey, not bottles of beer.”

He struggled to his feet, and got into the chair. “I hope you don’t mind if I sit down a minute.” He looked down at his feet, shamefaced. “You’ll have to report this to the Commander, of course.”

Harriet and I looked at each other.

“I think we can let it slide this time,” I said. “You’ll have to help us out a bit, first, though. How does that sound?”

He brightened immediately. Clearly there were consequences for misconduct even when it was caused by the madness sweeping the base. It made sense – in such circumstances every man had to be his own warden, protecting others from the danger within at all times. “I’ll do anything,” he said, eagerly. “I really want to make things right.”

“Okay,” I said. “First things first. What’s your name, sailor?” There was a phrase my mother

had hoped she would never hear me say! (Though it was not for the first time, at that.)

“Petty Officer Geoff Grandin,” he replied. “I work in the north wing of the base, testing new gear for the Navy in extreme conditions.”

“Okay. Good start! So, Geoff, how about telling me why you wanted to lay one on me?”

He looked ashamed, but there was still a hint of the original aggression. We had him back on the leash, but he was no puppy dog. “I’m not sure...”

“Go ahead,” said Harriet. “It’ll be nothing Howard hasn’t heard before.”

“Well, okay then. Listen, Cooper was my bunkmate back in basic training, and last month I watched him die, and now you’re here doing nothing but stuff your face full of our food. It just seems stupid to send a writer down here to fix our problems. What do you know? What can you do? You’re just sitting around talking all day, when you should be sorting things out for us, putting things right.” The longer he spoke, the angrier he became again, until finally I interrupted what was becoming something of a rant.

“And how do you suppose I should do that, hmm?” I felt my own anger bubbling to the surface.

Harriet quickly put a hand on my arm. In the manner of a Buddhist monk, I emptied my brain of all thoughts, and somewhat unlike a Buddhist monk, I put all of my mind into my consciousness of the warm touch of her hand. I felt the anger draining away as rapidly as it had built up.

“Listen, Geoff, I don’t know what you expected us to do down here, but Howard’s doing everything the Navy asked of him. He isn’t a witch doctor, or a psychiatrist, or a scientist, or an exorcist. He is here as a poet, as a man who can make connections where others would not think to see them, as a musician, so that he can bang some sense into your heads, and as an adventurer, who has visited alien worlds, fought evil emperors, and climbed demon-haunted mountains, so that he can do whatever is necessary to fix things. In the short term, that means gathering information. It might seem boring to you, but it’s an essential first step, like waxing your board before going out to sea – or when-

ever you wax your board. So pay the man some respect. You wouldn’t have got TS Eliot, Philip Larkin or William Wordsworth to come down here and help you out.”

“Byron would probably have been up for it,” I pointed out, withdrawing my mind temporarily from my awareness of Harriet’s hand, though even as I did so, I noted with pleasure that she had not chosen to remove it, despite my anger having long since evaporated. “And Shelley. Maybe Coleridge if you kept him doped up. Benjamin Zephaniah would probably enjoy an adventure or two. I think Dreadlockalien would live up to his name and travel to other planets as his muse required. Birmingham breeds its poets tough.”

“What are you getting at?” asked Grandin.

“Beats me,” said Harriet. “He’s off on one of his reveries. We don’t necessarily have to listen to it all the way through. The point is, Howard’s doing a tough job down here with limited resources, and he doesn’t have time to convince each and every one of you that his way is the best way. We’re going to put on a little show for them, to make everyone happy and confident that Howard knows what he’s doing, and we want you involved.”

He nodded silently.

“Good,” she said. “But first, tell us what happened to Cooper. How did he die?”

I will let Grandin tell his story in his own words. However, for the sake of the reader’s enjoyment I have left out, in general, the various interjections, encouragements and questions Harriet and I used to draw him out, and paraphrased him in places, since he was not such a fluid narrator as Chief Banks.

The First Night of the Great Big Fear

From the moment Cooper and Nicks got back, we knew something was wrong. All of us felt it in our bones. Whatever they had been up to, no

good had come of it, and we could not shake that feeling, however stupid we knew it to be.

They were both unconscious when Starches got them back to the base. They were rushed to the infirmary, put on drips, and checked over by Dr Silverberg. She could find nothing wrong physically with Cooper, and in fact pretty soon he was on his feet. Nicks was in worse shape, and did not wake up that day.

Dr Silverberg knew I was an old pal of Cooper's, and so she asked me to come and see him, to help his recovery. My work is important, but wouldn't suffer from being put off for a day or two, so I cleared it with Dr Selena Brinks, who has overall responsibility for the north wing and all the scientific work on the base. Her speciality is marine biology.

Anyway, Dr Silverberg was worried about any mental problems that might result from whatever had happened. She said that he seemed fine, but that it was impossible to tell so soon whether he would suffer from any post-traumatic stress disorder – especially when she did not know to what manner of stress or trauma he had been exposed. He would not answer any of her questions about it, nor would he answer any of mine once I got there, simply telling us that it was classified, and his report could only be made to Commander Brigson.

The Commander was the only one to whom Cooper could talk about whatever had happened, so the CO was the only one who could really decide whether he had lost his marbles or not. The doctor was relieved when he finally got down to the infirmary. Of course, the Commander had been ready to go straight down to see him when he was first brought aboard, but there had not been much point, with him being unconscious.

I don't know what Cooper said to the Commander, but after a quiet word in private Dr Silverberg prescribed him some funny-coloured tablets and asked me to keep him company for the day.

I couldn't get a lot of sense out of him, and he kept saying everything was classified, so there was not a lot to talk about anyway. He didn't seem interested in talking about football, hockey

or any of the usual things we would shoot the breeze over.

I had my orders, though, so I helped him get cleaned up, took him to eat at the mess hall, sat with him for the afternoon in the rec room, watching daytime tv. He barely responded to it, just staring, not even registering the difference between the shows and the ads. You know how, normally, when the ads come on, it comes as a bit of a jolt, and you realise where you really are, and look around the room a bit? He didn't do that. He just kept staring at the screen as if one pretty picture was the same as another.

I tried to get him to play some cards or chess, but he wasn't interested, so I played patience for a while, before taking him for dinner in the mess. Everyone had a lot of questions for him – we could all feel something was up, both with him and the base – but I kept him as clear of them as I could without causing trouble. He didn't eat much food, and didn't have much to drink, and he didn't talk much, offering only terse answers to my questions, or asking people to pass the butter or milk; but that kind of reserve was only to be expected after the tough day he had lived through. He was worried about Nicks, too, I guess, and so was everyone else. Nobody blamed him for Nicks being in the infirmary, out of action for God knew how long, but there was intense curiosity as to what happened.

Round about six in the evening I got the call to take him to see the Commander. I don't know why he didn't drag him into the office for debriefing as soon as he woke up, but I guess Dr Silverberg had suggested Cooper might not have been up to it. Given what happened at the interview, she was probably right to suggest a delay, to give Cooper a chance to get his head together, to let him make sense to himself of what had happened, before he tried to explain it to someone else. On the other hand, I guess the CO didn't want to wait too long – when they give you medicine to calm you down, it tends to make you forget things, and the CO wanted to talk before he went to sleep. He might wake up in the morning with no recollection of the previous day's events at all.

So I got the call at about six, and I walked him

from the rec room over to C-Ops, and then into the CO's office. I saw Cooper into a chair, then saluted Commander Brigson. "Will that be all, sir?" I asked.

"For now, Petty Officer. Please occupy yourself for an hour or so, and then I'll be in touch to ask you to take Lieutenant Commander Cooper back to his quarters."

"Yes, sir."

Throughout the exchange Lieutenant Cooper was almost blank, if anything registering less interest than he had in the television shows during the afternoon. I looked at him, then at the Commander, and shrugged, very slightly. He nodded in acknowledgment and I left the room.

I was barely out of C-Ops, heading up towards the north wing to check on a couple of my ongoing experiments in the weapons research lab, when an outbreak of shouts and screams called me back. I ran through the C-Ops doors to see most of the staff pointing and staring in horror at the CO's glass-walled office, while a few of them were beginning to make a move in that direction. I turned to my right to see for myself. Cooper was holding a knife to the CO's neck, his back to the door.

There was no time to think, and I burst in through the door, wresting the knife from Cooper's grasp, twisting his hand and forcing him to the ground.

I called over my shoulder to the CO, to ask how he was.

"I'm fine," he said, straightening up his uniform.

"I don't know how he got the knife, sir. I'm sorry, sir, this is all my fault."

The CO walked over to the knife and picked it up. "Looks like he got it from the kitchen. You weren't to know he would be planning anything like this. You weren't on a security detail, you were there as a pal, to help him through a tough time." He turned the knife around in his hand. "This is just a butter knife. I was only ever in danger of being spread very thin, I believe, Petty Officer, which is something I have come to expect in this job."

Once a couple of officers on MP duty arrived

to take control of Cooper, I allowed myself the time to laugh.

After that Cooper was kept in the infirmary too for a couple of weeks, while they got him sorted out. I guess the CO spoke to him during that time, but I've no idea what he said, and there was no scuttlebutt about it, what with it all being top secret and everything. I went in to see Cooper as often as I could, but those were a bad couple of weeks. People were on edge, touchy, and arguments were going on left, right and centre. A number of people were sent topside on emergency leave, and weren't immediately replaced, leaving us short-handed. Not so much that we couldn't do our work, but just enough to ensure that we were under constant pressure to get everything right.

Nicks stayed in the infirmary too. Every so often a rumour went around that he had shown some sign of consciousness, but every time it turned out to be a case of wishful thinking on the part of some visitor or another. I don't know why they didn't send Nicks and Cooper to the surface. No, wait, I think I do. They must have been waiting to get the information they needed. If the CO had sent them up there, he might well have been cut out of the loop when it came to their debriefing. If there was something dangerous out there – more dangerous than the creature, that is! – he would want to know about it. So he probably just said that they weren't fit to travel, or suggested that whatever ailed them might be transmissible, and kept them for observation.

After a couple of weeks Cooper seemed to be pretty much back to his old self, and was allowed back into his quarters. No charges were pressed over his assault of the CO. I guess it must have been put down to post-traumatic stress disorder. Whatever had happened to him that day, at that point he had probably still been locked in some kind of fight-or-flee mode.

He had dinner in the mess with the rest of us, and was laughing and joking just like the old days. For an hour or two it felt like the cloud over the base was finally going to clear – if it makes sense to say that about an installation so deep under the water that the only clouds we saw first-hand for months on end were clouds of fish!

I went to my bunk that night, not happy, but at least looking forward to being happy again some day. I dropped off to sleep easily, fatigue having drained every drop of energy from my body.

A tap on the door woke me in the night. My bedside CD player showed the time: 0200 hours. I sighed, and assumed it was some problem with one of my experiments, either that or they needed me to fill in for some other guy. I got out of bed, pulled on a tee and opened the door.

Cooper stood there, soaking wet, as if he had taken a bath in his clothes.

"Cooper," I said. "What the hell?"

He lifted a finger to his lips. "Shh." Once he was sure that I had complied, he nodded. "Listen. Can you hear that?"

"Hear what?" I couldn't hear a thing, other than the usual background noise of the air conditioning, the heating, and the sound of distant chatter from the Center of Operations.

He shook his head. "Listen carefully!"

I stepped out into the corridor, and listened as carefully as I could. "Sorry, Chris, I can't hear a thing."

"The dripping! Can't you hear the dripping?"

"You should get some sleep," I said, as softly as I could manage, putting a hand on his shoulder, only to pull it away in instinctive revulsion. The water that soaked him wasn't from a bath. It was his sweat. He was sweating so profusely that a pool was forming at his feet. This was serious – apart from anything else, if he continued to lose fluid at this rate he would collapse in minutes. "Are you okay, Chris? You should see Dr Silverberg. She won't mind if you wake her. I think you're having a bad reaction to the medication, maybe?"

He lost his temper for a moment. "Will you just LISTEN! I can hear dripping! There is a leak somewhere in the base. We have to find it, or we'll all die."

He set off at a run, evidently losing patience with me, and I quickly followed. It would be a mistake to leave him on his own in this condition, even for a moment, and as soon as we ran into someone I would get them to raise the alarm, or do it myself, if I got a spare minute.

He ran through corridor after corridor like

Wee Willie Winkie, looking through the windows and listening at the locks, and corridor after corridor passed by without us meeting another soul.

"Can you hear it?" he kept saying. "Can you hear the dripping?"

And eventually I did hear it. I stopped following him, and stood up straight, twisting my head here and there to try and get a bead on it. It was unmistakable, a slow, steady drip, drip, drip of water hitting the tiled floor.

Cooper looked back at me, conscious that I had stopped following. "You can hear it now, can't you?"

I could, and I nodded. He smiled, a huge leer that seemed to distort before my eyes, shifting and crunching to become something horrific. I stumbled back, and tripped to the ground, which seemed to knock some sense back into me. Looking at Cooper, his face was back to normal, and if there was a dripping noise, it was clearly the drip of the sweat falling from his robe, leaving a salty wet trail wherever he went. I remembered the danger of dehydration that threatened him, and tried to get him to stop and wait for help, but it was no good – he was off again, and this time I slipped on the wet floor when I tried to follow, and he got away from me. Getting up again, I went straight to the intercom, thumbing the switch that put me straight through to C-Ops, and the officer in charge of the night shift, on that occasion Lieutenant Commander Ruddleton, an Englishman by birth like yourself, who had served in the US Navy since his teenage years.

"Ruddleton here. What's the problem, sailor?"

"Lieutenant Christopher Cooper is at large in the base and dangerous," I said, trying to gasp for breath between the words. The chase after Cooper had taken a lot out of me.

"Okay, sailor. We'll rouse the troops right away. Who am I talking to?"

"Sorry, sir. Petty Officer Geoff Grandin reporting, sir. Cooper woke me and said he was looking for a leak. He seem deranged, and I think he's hallucinating. He's sweating like a pig in a sauna, too. He's going to collapse if we don't get to him soon." I paused for a moment,

but resolved to say more. "He could be dangerous, sir."

There was a second of silence on the other end of the line, and then Ruddleton's reply crackled through. "Say no more, Petty Officer. We all remember what happened last time he went on the rampage. Stay where you are for now, and we'll send someone to your position. We don't want anyone mistaking you for Cooper, okay?"

I acknowledged the order and sank to the floor, letting exhaustion have its way with me.

The men they sent after Cooper would be armed.

What else could I have done? I already felt responsible for Cooper's attempt on the CO's life. I couldn't put anyone else at risk, no matter how I felt about Cooper personally. In his current state he could have put us all at risk.

Drip.

Drip.

DRIP.

Each time the sound grew louder, more insistent, as if offended that I was ignoring it. I closed my eyes, and tried to drop off to sleep, accepting the dream rather than fighting it, but it was to no avail. It grew louder and louder.

"Geoff."

It was Cooper's voice. I didn't open my eyes. I didn't want to see him.

"Geoff, it's okay. I've stopped the dripping. The base is safe again."

"I can still hear it," I said with a bitter laugh. "You've taken a hammer to my brains this month, Cooper, you know that?"

He laughed too, a horribly high screech that forced my eyes open despite themselves.

Then I began to scream.

Drip.

Drip.

DRIP.

"It's okay," he said, holding out a hand. From the neck dripped blood. Drip. Drip. DRIP. It was Nicks. "It's okay. The drip was coming from his brain. He was leaking! I've saved us all!"

His own wrists were slashed, haphazardly but thoroughly, and blood poured down to the ground from them, sliding over the severed

head, creating a ghoulish, clownish image, almost too dreadful to be real.

I didn't stop screaming until Dr Silverberg arrived and administered a sedative to me.

She gave herself one soon after, I reckon.

The deaths of Hicks and Cooper were where it began. Within the week the hallucinations, ghosts, visions, whatever you want to call them, were affecting everyone, and we all needed sedatives, every single night.

Howard's Grand Performance

Once Grandin had finished telling us his story, we gave him his instructions for the night's performance and let him go on his way.

"What do you make of that?" asked Harriet.

"Very exciting stuff," I replied. "Very frightening, didn't you think?"

"Very frightening, Howard. I really think they should have given us the full story before sending us down here, though."

"Maybe, maybe. But this whole business is a matter of atmosphere. If I had been told the same story last week, up on the surface with the sun shining down on me, I would have simply put it down to some kind of everyday psychosis, but hearing it here, everything is different. You get a sense of what it is really about."

"So what now?"

I mused for a second before replying, and she drummed her fingers on the bed impatiently until I did. "The first order of business must be to calm these men and women down. We must make sure that they get through tonight with their minds and their bodies in one piece."

"And then?"

"And then I think I should go and investigate whatever it was that they blew up. Like the Chief, I have a feeling that something is left behind. He told us that they haven't sent another mission out there, for fear of them falling prey to whatever killed Cooper and Nicks, but there's no

other option. I think the CO and the Chief would have seen that for themselves, were it not that the fear is affecting everyone so deeply, even them, in ways that they are unwilling to admit.”

She nodded. “As long as you are the one to tell them, not me...”

“Oh, I don’t think we need to be quite so blunt as all that with them. We’ll just say that I want to go and check it out. My clearance level for this mission should override any security concerns.”

“And what about me? You don’t want to take me along with you?”

“No, I’m sorry. It isn’t because I don’t trust you, or that I think you’re weak because you’re a woman or anything. Oh no. There are two good reasons. One is that they only have three mini-submersibles left. I’ll take one, I’ll need a guide in the other, and it would be unfair to leave the base without any transportation at all by taking the third as well.”

“That seems reasonable enough,” she agreed.

“The other reason is actually more important to this particular mission. I know we haven’t known each other a long time, Harriet...”

“Oh, Howard,” she said, laughing. “You’re making me blush. You aren’t going to propose, are you?” She laughed again, as if to emphasise how ridiculous the very idea was.

“You don’t have to make your feelings about the idea quite so plain! Anyway, it isn’t that – and never will be now, given your reaction! No, it’s this: although I haven’t known you for very long, just a matter of weeks, I know you better than anyone else on the base. If something should start to go wrong on the base, if there’s any intensification of the problems, I’ll be able to tell more quickly by talking to you. You’re an extremely sensible and level-headed girl...”

“Why, Howard, you’re making me blush again!”

“Stop that right now! You’re a sensible girl, and if you start going a bit doolally I think I will be able to tell.”

She put on a serious face. “I understand, Howard. Sorry for giving you a hard time.”

“Now it’s my turn to blush,” I laughed, and this time her face really did go red.

We had all available hands gather in the rec

room at 2100 hours. It would be a bit of a squash, but I considered that to be a good thing, since a hint of claustrophobia might make them all a bit more suggestible. I waited in my quarters, getting into character. It was a shame that I had no clothes with which to dress myself appropriately, but I had to make do. A hat, especially, would have done much to help establish the credentials I required, but it was not to be. I had acquired a little grease and oil from an engineer’s toolbox, though. I rubbed some of the grease into my face. I would have a terrible number of spots in the morning, but for now it would give me a slightly unearthly, clammy and strange look. The oil I rubbed under and over my eyes, in tiny quantities, and that darkened my sockets, giving me something of a spectral appearance.

In her own quarters, I knew that Harriet was similarly preparing herself. Of course, she too was from the world of showbiz, though not previously as a performer. She had said she would see what she could do with her coveralls and a fistful of safety pins. I had every confidence the results would be stunning, just as they would have been if she had done nothing at all and just worn the overalls themselves! She was a beautiful woman, and in that quiet moment I wondered that I had taken such little interest in that regard in the course of our adventure. Yes, we had been very busy, but where there’s a will there’s a way, and my will had definitely been lacking. Perhaps I was, unknown to myself, still suffering something of a hangover from my dalliance with Mallda, the Princess of Envia. She had been an intoxicating woman, but if I had become addicted, I had not realised it at the time. Perhaps, on the other hand, I still had unresolved feelings for the lovely Arelline, companion during my adventures on Envia, who had ended up marrying my cameraman, Johnny Quondam. She too had been an unparalleled example of the female human, and though, almost uniquely among my palanquinettes, she had been resistant to my charms, I had not been resistant to hers.

Perhaps, in spending so much time in the company of such lovely women, I was becoming



desensitised to them? It was a possibility that deserved serious consideration – at a later date!

I left my quarters and went to knock on the door to Harriet's.

"Hello," I called, intoning the word as deeply and sententiously as possible. "Assistant, come forth!"

The door slowly opened, revealing a vision from Dracula's harem, a bewitching whirl of unleashed raven-black hair, pallid white flesh, and ribbons of shredded cloth, rent, doubtless, by the claws of a nightmare's she-devils!

"Wow," I said, in the same slow, low tone.

She laughed. "I was beginning to think you hadn't noticed, Howard."

"An hour ago you thought I was proposing! Woman, you are ever volatile!"

She held her nails up to my face. Somehow

she had fashioned long claws from them – looking more closely, I saw that she had used thin card to create them, before painting the card with nail polish, but the effect was remarkable. "Watch out, Howard. The claws may be false but the knuckles beneath them are totally real."

I smiled, and we headed to the rec room.

The doors were closed when we arrived, and I could hear the hubbub of sixty voices, every sailor offering his or her ideas about what they expected to happen. Overall, I thought, the tone was happy, expectant, and so, I decided, things were off to a good start.

We opened the doors and strode in. We made our way to the front of the room, or at least the part of the room which they were all facing.

"Hello, everyone," I said, in the same stentorian tones. "My name is Howard Phillips. Now,

you may know of my escapades on other worlds. You may be aware of my adventures in music. You may even, and this is probably pushing it a bit, be aware of my novels. However, you probably do not know of my background in the occult arts." I waited long enough for a few of them to shake their heads politely, then nodded. "It is true. My initial forays into writing only came about as a result of a wish to document the discoveries I had made in the course of my dealings with the supernatural. Of course, I would cloak my accounts in a disguise of fiction, the better to sneak them into the public consciousness, but the source was always my real, terribly real, encounters with what I call THE OTHER WORLD!"

Harriet backed up my sudden shout with a flounce that distracted any of the more sensible sailors who might otherwise have been inclined to either laugh or leave.

"It is true! I have seen the dark places of the world! I have seen the doom that comes to men! I have seen the things that live on after we die! And so I have been sent here to help you, in any way that I could. So far, that has meant gathering information, and I know that that has been frustrating for some of you, who hoped for a quicker resolution to this crisis." There was a general mutter of agreement. I acknowledged it by holding up a hand. "I am grateful for your patience. You have shown the tenacity and steeliness that your country, brother to my own, expects, nay, demands of its fighting men and women. You have held firm where others would have faltered. You have done your duty where others would have, as I'm told they say in your country, done a doody." The laughter was relaxed and approving. "I hope I have used the correct vernacular. And my spirit guide told me that watching Adam Sandler movies was a waste of my time..." They laughed again, and then smiled again as Harriet delivered another flourish. Even the ladies in the audience were impressed. "Now, I have almost completed my researches on the base. There are just a few final tests to be done, and that is why you are here. Whatever is plaguing Sea Base Delta is drawing its energy from your minds." This was probably

true, in a way, I supposed, since whatever *was* happening would probably *not* be happening if the base were empty. "And so, we are here to hold a séance, to draw out, by the power of our combined minds, whatever it is that haunts us." No one was laughing now, though I made eye contact with the CO at the back of the room, and he rolled his eyes for me. I let him have a sly wink before continuing. The other sailors were now quiet, looking at each other with a degree of apprehension. "My assistant" – she looked at me sharply – "or partner, I should say, is extremely sympathetic to psychic emanations, despite having little psychic power of her own. She is going to walk among you now, and pick out those of you in whom the gift is strongest."

Harriet walked through the crowd, picking out half a dozen men and three or four women, sending them to the front of the room, and giving the rest of the audience an opportunity to admire her in slightly more detail. That was all part of the plan – when men think about sex they don't waste time thinking about anything else. For both sexes, desire can be all-consuming, and in our current situation that was a very useful quality. I wanted them all to have good dreams tonight.

"These are the nine most powerful, Mr Phillips," said Harriet with a wave at them.

"Thank you, dear," I replied.

In fact, we had chosen the nine of them earlier that night, in consultation with the Commander and Dr Silverberg. These were the individuals who had been most susceptible to the hauntings over the last month, the ones who had had it the worst. As they stood there at the front of the room, I could already see a visible lessening in their tension. They finally had an explanation for what was happening to them – they weren't insane – they were psychic! What had been a failing now turned out to be something of which they could be proud. As I saw one or two of them smile at each other, probably the first time they had smiled in a month, I chided the part of me that had decried this charade as a violation of my most cherished principles. The only principle at stake here was that it is bad to let your fellow humans die unnecessarily (if indeed it can ever

be said to be necessary). I was letting myself down in some ways, but being the best that I could be in others. In any case, they would probably end up reading my novelisation of these events, I reasoned, which would dispel any notion that I supported their gullible belief in the supernatural.

“You nine,” I intoned, “are the most psychically sensitive crew members. I imagine you have seen visions this month beyond anything you could ever have believed enduring. Am I right?” They nodded, not enthusiastically, but affirmatively. “In the world above, you would have gone through your lives happily, probably never suffering more from your gifts than to encounter the occasional feeling that someone was standing behind you. But down here things are different. I think that somehow, down here on Sea Base Delta, perhaps because we are so deep under the water, so much closer to the Earth’s core, and so much farther from the sun, where time passes that little bit out of step with the rest of the world, the barrier between our plane and that of the spirits has been damaged or broken. Perhaps even now, we stand within the spirit realm itself. Who is to say?” Some of the audience were looking a bit alarmed now, and that was perfectly in line with my plan. “Now, I want all of you in this room, and particularly you nine in the front, to join hands. Harriet, you will take the hand of this gentleman at the front of the audience, and focus their energies for me. Can you do that?”

She assured me that she could, and the gentleman whose hand she was to be holding looked quite happy about the prospect. I had had him tagged as a troublemaker from the beginning – I have often been known to frequent such gatherings, and I do tend to sit at the front of them, in order to let my laughter carry more clearly to the foolish spiritualist at the front, and I immediately knew him to be one of my kind. By giving him the chance to hold Harriet’s hand, I knew I was reducing enormously the likelihood that he would be disruptive of the proceedings.

I went to take the hand of one of the nine at the front, and I pulled the lady around to grasp the hand of the man at the other end of the line,

so that the nine of them formed a circle around me.

“Now,” I called, waving a hand into the air and raising my voice. “Let us talk to the spirits! Everyone CONCENTRATE! Clear your minds of everything but the need to commune with the DEAD!”

Gonna Roll the Bones!

The rest of the séance had gone very well. Grandin had dipped the power to the rec room when necessary to represent the messages from the other side. Every time the lights dimmed, I took it as a sign that the spirits agreed with me, and reinforced the message with a few choice and spooky words of my own. Everyone went to bed having had a good, clean scare, but with the confidence that everything would be fixed soon.

“So this is what the spirits want?” asked the Commander ironically the next day.

“That’s right, sir,” I said. “There are spirits that need to be laid to rest, supposedly, and I need to go out there to do the job.”

“Do you feel good, lying to my men and women? Because it sure doesn’t look good.”

I winced. He had hit upon my sore spot. “If only you knew how much I hated it. I was doing precisely the opposite of what I would normally want to do. It reminded me of a story about my former boss at Silver Age Books. When he was a teenager, he and another writer who went on to be published by that company, Steven Gilligan, set up an astrology service, going so far as to set up a stall at a parents’ evening at the school. They pretended to be thinking about it all very seriously, considering the stars and all, but in fact were just feeding the details into Stargazer Secrets on the ZX Spectrum and then giving the suckers the print-out. Even as they laughed at the gullible idiots giving them money, they must have felt guilty for encouraging the fools to continue in their foolishness, validating it, with

whatever ironic intent, instead of disabusing them of such silly ideas.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you calling my crew silly, foolish idiots, then?”

I checked the room, despite myself: the door to his office was closed and we were alone. “Not at all. The circumstances are entirely different. I just did what I had to do to keep everyone happy.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “No one killed themselves, or anyone else last night, so I’m not going to complain too much, and everyone seems to be behind your mission. I hope you aren’t going to let me down.”

“Sir, I’m going to do my best. If I could just go through a few details. I want Harriet to stay here in C-Ops with you, to keep me appraised of the mood here in the station. I am a bit worried that the situation here might deteriorate during my investigation.”

“That seems a reasonable supposition, given that it only began the first time we went out there.”

“I want to take Lieutenant Commander Starches with me on the mission, if you approve. He’s level-headed, and he seems to know his way around a mini-sub.”

“Certainly,” agreed the Commander. “He’s the very man I would have suggested for the job myself.”

“Great. That’s about it, then.”

“We’ve pencilled you in to set off at about 1300 hours. Chief Banks will have everything ready by that point. Does that suit you, Mr Phillips?”

“That will be perfect. Do you recommend eating so soon before a mission, or would you recommend waiting until I return?”

He thought for a moment, and gave the minutest of shrugs. “Don’t eat anything too heavy, but make sure you eat something. You’ll need the energy. You might be riding on something very much like a motorcycle, but you’re not traveling on a long, straight road. You’re going to be wrestling the mini-sub around, fighting against some pretty strong currents to keep it going the way you want. It can be very tiring. What’s more, we know that accidents can happen. If you

get stuck out there, you don’t want to contend with hunger along with any other problems you have.”

“Thanks, Commander. A light lunch it is. Care to join me?”

“Thanks, Mr Phillips, but not this time. I’m hoping you succeed, but I have to be prepared for you to fail. The Navy has asked me to prepare an evacuation plan, to be implemented during the next submarine supply visit, the one that will be taking you home. I wasn’t expecting to hit the surface again just yet, but things can’t go on like this. We’ve stuck it out for a while, but if it can’t be fixed we’ll all be going home, and the base will be destroyed.”

“Can’t they just leave it, until someone can work out what’s going on?”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid not. What if a Chinese sub wandered down here and took possession of the place? We’d have a hell of a time getting them out of an abandoned installation in international waters without starting a war.”

“I see. Well, I’ll do my best. That’s all there is for it.”

“It’s all we can ever do, Howard. Good luck.”

We shook hands and I went to get some lunch.

I was pleased to note that the atmosphere in the mess hall was much better than it had been during my previous visits.

An hour later and I was in a hypersuit, being helped into a mini-sub, having received a kiss goodbye from Harriet and a firm handshake from Chief Banks.

I had asked Dr Silverberg to provide me with a sedative, but I would not take it unless it proved absolutely necessary. The suits were designed to receive injections when necessary, having a special valve for that purpose on the thigh. If things got too bad out there, I would be glad to have a way to calm myself down.

With all those things in my possession, I was ready for adventure. The crane lowered the subs of Starches and I into the waterlock, and as the thing slid shut above us I felt a moment or two of panic, but it was quickly fought down by my excitement at going into the water.

As the water bubbled up to fill the waterlock, I reflected on my history with it. I had only

learnt to swim at the age of eleven, in school classes, and I had never particularly liked to be immersed in the stuff, but that was not where my strongest feelings about it lay. What always struck me about water was its implacability, its unstoppable. There's little I fear more than a leaking tap, or a broken pipe, or a joint that isn't properly sealed. A tidal wave is a thing of terrible power, but how terrible is it to see that same force at work in your own home, pushing its way through the smallest of gaps to run through your walls, destroying electrical appliances, weakening wooden floors, and destroying carpets? Each individual drop is as ineffective as a single locust, but in large numbers the two are equally destructive. The funny thing was, however, that although the sound of a dripping tap fills me with horror, I was not afraid of the ocean. It was no longer the intruder in my domain – I was its guest! Or an intruder in my own right! If anyone should be afraid it was the ocean itself!

Then the waterlock opened up in front of us and we gunned the engines and drove out into the open sea. The mini-sub responded like a dream, and I felt like Aquaman as we swept through the water.

"Everything okay, Howard?" said Starches, over the helmet-to-helmet radio.

I did not need any time to think about my reply. "I'm fine, Lieutenant Commander. Do you think we could buzz around the base a bit before we set off? You never know, there might be something around here that is relevant."

"No problem, Howard." His mini-sub made an arc to the left, and I followed it around.

Sea Base Delta, if it had not been apparent enough from within, was a masterpiece of engineering, but more than that, it was a structure of extraordinary beauty. It was utilitarian, yes, but in the way that the Eiffel Tower's construction is utilitarian. It does precisely what it is designed to do, and does it with an efficiency and an elegance all of its own. Complexity can be beautiful, but so can simplicity, and with its graceful curved ceilings, the hard lines of its walls, and the dome at its centre, as magnificent in its way as that of St Paul's Cathedral, Sea Base Delta was a building to be appreciated. What a shame,

then, that its exterior would be seen by so few, both for reasons of security and practicality.

"We had a good search over the surface after the first reported hallucinations," said Starches. "We thought perhaps there was a transmitter or something out here, but we found nothing."

"Yes, the Chief told me about that. Don't worry, I don't think you've missed anything. I'm really thinking about any other unusual properties of the base. Whether its location might be odd, or its shape, or its surroundings."

"Are you seeing anything?"

We had completed a full circuit of the base now, and so I swung low over the dome, flipped the mini-sub and waved for the benefit of Harriet. Of course I could not see her reaction, the dome being opaque, but the voice of Commander Brigson soon came through on the radio.

"Howard Phillips, you hotdog my C-Ops again and next time you're in the waterlock it'll be without a wetsuit!"

"Sorry, sir," I replied. "I'm still trying to get the hang of this thing."

"Looks like you've got the hang of it to me. Get on your way before I change my mind."

"Oops," I said over the helmet-to-helmet radio. "Sorry about that, Starches. I hope I didn't get you into trouble."

"No worries, sir. So did you see anything unusual about the base? Any reverse crucifixes or pentacles built into its design?"

"I'm afraid not, but you wouldn't have expected that anyway, would you, Starches? You didn't buy that hocus pocus last night for a minute, did you?"

"Of course not, sir, but Harriet sure does have soft hands."

"I thought as much. Well, seeing as it's just the two of us out here, you might as well know that I thought it was all bunkum as well, but I needed to calm the crew down. Someone tried to do me some damage for being a bit slow to act earlier in the evening, and I didn't want anyone having another go during the night, especially if their natural concerns were amplified by the force which is haunting the base."

"I see, sir. So, now that you've established you're just a liar and a fraud, but not an idiot,

shall we get on with our mission, or do you have any more practical jokes you'd like to play?"

"Let's get going," I said, without further reply. I deserved the sarcasm.

He turned his mini-sub to what my dashboard compass told me, once I turned to follow him, was the northeast.

Sea Base Delta had been illuminated, but as we moved away from it the sea became utterly dark. We switched on the twin lamps of our mini-sub, but bright as they were, they could do nothing but illuminate four thin beams ahead of us. All else remained black. We were reliant on our sonar for guidance, it providing a warning beep whenever we strayed too close to the sea bed, or when the remnant of some failed island reared up in front of us.

We travelled quickly, but each minute seemed to take longer to pass, as trepidation began to take hold of me.

"Can you feel that, Starches?"

"Yes, sir. I'm beginning to feel frightened. It isn't too bad just yet."

"Is this round about where Cooper and Nicks reported the same phenomenon?"

"No, sir. They were much closer."

"That can't be good."

"No, sir, it can't. I think we should report in now."

The undertone in his voice made his thoughts clear. We should report in now, in case we did not get the chance to do it later. I agreed, and he contacted Sea Base Delta.

As he spoke to base, we hovered there in the water. I felt the blackness pressing in. Without the sensations created by movement, I had no consciousness of our surroundings as water. We were not immersed in water, we were engulfed by darkness, by the oblivion of death itself, waiting to claim us should we make the slightest mistake. My thoughts raced in this bleak direction, as if eager to escape the rationality which I had enforced upon them in the course of this adventure. I tried to reign them in, but it was as useless as trying to tame a wild tiger, my efforts doing nothing but redouble the determination of my thoughts to break free.

Then I was saved! A fish of some bizarre vari-

ety swam through the light of my lamps, at the extremity of their range. I breathed a sigh of relief – this was not oblivion, or death, it was water, and there were living things all around me.

But wait!

It passed through my beam again, this time much closer.

AND IT WAS NOT A FISH!

The Creature Attacks

"No one ever told me what the hell this creature was!" I almost shattered the helmet with the force of my yell, as we swerved our mini-sub to the left and down as quickly as possible.

Starches' reply was rapid and shouted. "Sorry, sir, what do you need to know?"

I laughed as his mini-sub roared away to the north, hoping to avoid the creature's path.

The thing I had seen was huge, at least 40 metres long, if I had gauged it correctly, and two or three metres high. It swam belly down, making its face the first part of it that I got a really good look at, after its initial flash through my headlights.

It had an enormous snout, something like that of a dog, and an immensely mournful look to it, as if it had lost its owner, perhaps centuries ago, but had never quite given up hope of finding her once again. Its eyes were doleful, almost hidden beneath rolls of thick, fatty flesh. It had two gigantic paddles, pushing it powerfully through the ocean like a man would walk through jelly. At its rear swung its gargantuan tail, fully four metres across at its widest point, beating a rhythm that surely sang death for us. All of this I saw in the brief seconds when it crossed my lamps a second time. Once it had gone back into the darkness it was utterly invisible to me again, but its presence was palpable – I felt the pressure of its approach pulse through the water within my mini-sub, and as we turned to escape its



onslaught I marvelled at the luck that must have been involved in the previous escape of Harriet and myself. This beast could have crushed us without a moment's thought – perhaps what had saved us was that the creature was *capable* of more than a moment's thought.

“We think it's probably a dinosaur, maybe a plesiosaur,” said Starches over the helmet-to-helmet radio, once our courses were set and there was nothing else to be done but drive into the darkness and hope it had other plans. “Maybe it was frozen or something, like Godzilla, and woke up when the base was built. Or maybe it's always been down here.”

I could not help looking behind me, even though I knew there would be nothing there but darkness. I felt an almost supernatural dread of this creature that, I knew from the sonar readings of my bike, was now in pursuit of us. It was like the ocean personified, a massive and uncaring force that would sweep us aside at its whim, or else bear us to an undeserving safety.

“I don't think it's a dinosaur,” I told him, doing my best to quell my raging fear. “Did you see its face? That was the face of a mammal. It

had a mile-wide bristly moustache, for heaven's sake, and only mammals have hair, as far as I know.”

“You could be right,” he replied. “We've never managed to catch it on any photographs, and Commander Brigson won't hear of sending Dr Brinks out here to look at it. There was talk of blowing it out of the water, but in the end the brass decided otherwise, in case there was something to be done with it, later, once everything else was straightened out.”

I dipped the mini-sub under an outcropping of rock that had threatened to rip off my head before speaking again. “It looked to me like nothing so much as a manatee.”

“A sea cow? But they don't get that big, do they?”

“I don't think so, generally, but who can really say? Perhaps this is one that had some kind of faulty gene and just kept growing. Once it reached a certain size, what could have killed it? Maybe it's found some kind of cave down here where it can breathe without going right to the surface. Or it could be the remnant of some age-old species – manatees are usually only found

along the *eastern* coast of America. Maybe this species survived unnoticed for all these years. Do you think there is any chance it could have caused the visions on the base?"

"I don't think so," he replied. "It would have been easy to tell – we've have seen it coming up on the sonar each time, and we'd have noticed if every time that happened people started to go crazy. But who knows?"

Suddenly I felt a bump, my mini-sub veering off to the right, despite my best efforts to control it. I turned to see a grey nose the size of a small family car nuzzling my back end. Even as I turned back to my steering I lost all control, the mini-sub flipping about every axis in turn.

"Starches! It's got me!"

"Hang on, Howard. I'll be back to help."

There was nothing for me to do but turn back to look my aggressor in the eye – but that proved impossible, as its mouth gaped wide, ready to make me its supper. I closed my eyes and prepared to die.

Starches' voice woke me from my last-minute thoughts. "Howard, get out of here now. This is going to be a big one!"

I realised that control of the mini-sub was back in my hands, and therefore gunned the throttle, making my ride leap off into the ocean like a gazelle from a tiger. There was no further word from Starches, and I saw no twin lamps dashing through the water to match my own.

I had a bad feeling, and swung my mini-sub about, just in time to see that of Starches explode in the mighty manatee's mouth.

Attack from Beneath the Waves!

Eventually, Harriet told me what had been happening at Sea Base Delta while I was off in the sea. Up until the point where I radioed in, she said, everything had been hunky dory, but shortly after that things started to get a bit strange.

At first it was small, just little things that seemed out of whack, like a technician drawing over and over the same circle on a piece of paper, or a sailor walking through C-Ops with a glazed look on his face, failing to salute the Commander.

"Is something starting to happen?" she asked Commander Brigson.

"Yes, Miss Harton," he said, in a much softer tone than usual. "I think it is."

She nodded. "Howard thought this might happen, that disturbing whatever it was might increase its effects."

He took a key from his pocket and gave it to her. "Howard talked to me, and made sure we were ready for it. If things get too bad, that's the key to my office. Get in there and lock the door behind you. There's a radio in there set up for Howard's frequency."

She gave him smile. "Thanks. Don't you want to hide in there with me?"

He answered her very quietly. "If it comes to it, maybe I will."

Harriet tucked the key into her pocket, making sure it was secure. She was a brave woman, but also a sensible one, and if military personnel were going to go crazy, she did not want to be around them when it happened.

Soon came word of my encounter with the manatee, but not directly. Radio contact was lost with both mini-sub, and they only deduced what had happened from the damage that had been done to Starches' bike, and the few bits of data it fired off before firing up.

"It's been utterly destroyed," said a crewman, handing a report to the Commander. "Unless it was a rockslide or something equally geological, it must have been the creature. Nothing else we've encountered down here has that kind of strength."

"What about Howard?" asked Harriet.

The crewman shrugged. "Sorry – we aren't getting any readings. I think they might both be gone."

Harriet held a hand to her mouth in aghast upset. She had known that I led a dangerous life, that such things as death were only ever a metre or so from my door, but she had not expected it

to come so suddenly, for me to die like this, distant, still relatively young, and uselessly.

“Hang on a minute, son,” said the Commander. “Let’s not give up hope yet. There’s one sub left. Get on the line to Chief Banks and get that third sub ready for a rescue mission.”

The crewman returned to his post and picked up his telephone to call through to the Chief. Harriet presumed he was still down in the mini-sub bay.

“Are you sure, sir?” asked Harriet, holding back the tears that threatened to break her composure at any moment. “I know we don’t want to leave Howard to die, but he might already be gone, and the creature is still out there. I don’t want another man to die needlessly.”

The Commander turned to face out into C-Ops. “There are two men in the ocean, Ms Harton. Not just Howard, but also Lieutenant Commander Starches. Is it worth gambling one man to save those other two? Maybe, maybe not, but it’s what we’re going to do. And if no one else volunteers for the job, I’ll do it myself.”

The radio crackled. “Commander Brigson? Chief Banks here. I’ve heard about what’s happened to Phillips and Starches. The last mini-sub is already ready to go. We didn’t stop working once the other two were ready, just on the off-chance we’d be needing this one.”

“Good work, Chief. Any recommendations for the man who should take it out there?”

“Just one, sir. They’re already putting my wet-suit on.”

“Good man. Has Doctor Silverberg checked you out?”

“She’s here right now, sir. I’ll put her on.”

“Commander, Silverberg here. The Chief is a bit out of condition, and he’s showing signs of over-excitement. He has an elevated pulse, and his temperature is a bit too high for my liking.”

“Thank you, doctor,” said the Commander. “I hear what you’re saying, but I think everyone’s going to be in that state pretty soon. The Chief’s been as resistant as anyone to the visions, and he knows those mini-subbs so well he could handle them perfectly even if he *was* dreaming.”

“Yes, sir,” said the doctor. She had the power to override the Commander in certain circum-

stances, but she knew also that being in charge sometimes meant taking a gamble.

The Chief’s voice returned to the radio. “Sir, I’m going to switch to my helmet radio now, and get into the mini-sub.”

“Good luck, Chief,” said the Commander, scratching behind his ear.

The radio went silent, and for a second all was quiet.

Harriet felt the ground shift under her feet, a movement accompanied by the loudest, most belligerent thunder she had ever heard, as if a tornado had materialised in C-Ops itself. She fell to the floor hard, letting out an involuntary cry.

Then things were quiet once more, quiet with a lower case q. (My editor queried this phrase on the proofs of this novel, and I had to admit that I could not satisfactorily explain its meaning. However, I asked him to leave it unchanged, in the hope that day its meaning will reveal itself.)

Harriet got to her feet, rubbing her bottom gently to check it was not broken. Looking around the room, she saw the other occupants of C-Ops doing very much the same thing. Some then moved on to picking up the shards of broken coffee cups and glasses that had fallen and smashed.

“Tell me that was a vision,” said Harriet, “and that I’m just imagining the rest of you reacting to it.”

“That was no vision,” came the terse answer from the Commander. He yelled a series of commands at the C-Ops staff, beginning with: “Someone tell me what the hell that was!”

The Dusty Waters

For a second or two the explosion of the bike blinded me, both by way of its brightness and because of the dust it blew up from the ocean floor, surrounding me for an instant with a million swirling snowglobes, dancing in the light of my lamps. My vision clearing up, the dust slowly started to follow suit, dissipating through the endless movements of the waters.

Then the ocean turned red, and through it I saw, perhaps two dozen metres away, the manatee-creature, its maw a ragged mess of flesh and bone. Over half of its lower jaw was utterly destroyed, and its upper jaw, while intact, was horrifically mangled. A few scraps of metal and plastic, the last remains of Starches, his mini-sub, and the heroism that had saved my life, was embedded in its palette, its cheeks, and stood in place of teeth in more than one place along its upper jaw. One of its eyes was gone, a wound already washed clean in doubtless agonising fashion by the ocean's salt water. It twisted its head this way and that, struggling ineffectively to escape the pain.

I saw it halt its movements, pause for a moment, and then head off with great determination, almost as if it had come to some final decision. Perhaps it *would* be its final decision – I did not think it would be able to feed very easily, with its mouth in such a condition. From what I knew of the three types of manatee, and of the Indian dugong, they were grazers, eating the plants along the sea floor – hence the name sea-cow. This beast, assuming that this variety of manatee was also vegetarian, would no longer be able to grind the plants before swallowing them, which would lead in the short term to indigestion, and in the medium term to starvation. And that was if it did not succumb to the immediate effects of the injuries inflicted upon it by Starches – blood loss and shock being prime among them.

Was my life really worth that? I hung my head in shame, to think that this amazing life-form, this creature so out of the ordinary, should pay the price for my adventures. I thought back to the mighty Denizen of the Deep Blue Sea, back on Envia, probably fried to a crisp by its evil master for allowing my escape, and wondered at this unpleasant trend in my aquatic endeavours.

Shaking it off, and thinking of the people on the base who were relying on me, I tried to activate the radio, but there was nothing – no answer, no call signs, not even any static. The rest of the bike seemed to be working, thank goodness, so I presumed that the radio equipment must have been at the back of the sub,

picking up a knock when the great manatee had nuzzled up to me.

In that the design of the mini-sub proved its worth – if I had been sealed within an airtight bubble of breathable air, the great manatee's attack would surely have ruptured it, and I would have been dead long before Starches' daring rescue. As it was, I had hardly noticed the damage.

What was there to do now? I could return to the base, to give them the bad news, perhaps to get reinforcements, or I could go on. Considering the matter for even a second gave me my answer – if I went back, it might take another day or half-day at least to get the mini-sub ready for another excursion. Setting off again we might meet the same danger. At present, I was beyond the great manatee. Unless it circled around to attack me again, the route between my present position and that of my goal was clear of giant sea-beasts, unless others came to light. I had to press on.

The worst of the physical danger was probably behind me – ahead lay only (I hoped) the terrors of the mind, and those I am quite capable of facing with equanimity.

I had been hovering in the water all this time, still facing in the direction which the great manatee had taken – I realised now with a pang that it was heading for Sea Base Delta! – but my ruminations were over and it was time to continue on my mission. As I reached to gun the engines of the mini-sub, to begin another exhilarating dash into the darkness, there was a knock on the window.

I turned, astonished, to see Lieutenant Commander Starches waving to me. His face was bruised, but his suit appeared to be in one piece, and he was *alive!*

I unlocked the hatch and put my helmet to his, so that we could talk, the sound being conducted from one helmet to the other. Clearly his helmet-to-helmet radio must be gone, since he had had a good few minutes to get my attention.

"Howard! Thank God you're still here! I couldn't see you, because of all the dust thrown up by the explosion."

I clapped him on the shoulder. "I think I owe

you my life – it would be remiss of me not to give you a hand saving your own! I thought you were dead – the explosion...”

“It was a tight thing,” he replied. “I drove it for the creature’s mouth, and bailed out at the last minute, after setting the sub to explode. Wasted a lot of good technology to save your ass, Howard!”

“Don’t worry, Starches. It’s not a well-known fact, but I am a millionaire, at least, I should think by now. I’ll buy you a new one as soon as we get home.”

“That’s very gentlemanly of you, Howard! Now, we should get on with the mission, I guess. Is the radio out?” I confirmed that it was. “I thought as much – something about the explosion must have affected them all. Maybe it’s the dust, creating interference.” I had not considered that possibility. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the mini-sub has a handle on each side. I can hang onto that, strapping my suit to it, while you take us to the mission target. It’ll be a bit slower than usual, but we should get there in the end. Does that sound good?”

I said that it did, with one small change to the plan.

Thus it was that I found myself flying through the ocean, like Superman on his way to see Lori Lemaris!

In minutes we were there, and I did not need the signal from Starches to tell me so. The sea up ahead was a frothing mass, a whirlpool turned inside out and twisted into itself a dozen times over.

And at the middle of that whirlpool was a *spaceship*.

Things Get Worse

Meanwhile, not that I knew it at the time, of course, things back at the base were going from bad to worse. They had established that it was the creature itself attacking the base, and that it had rammed with force enough to actually push the base along the seabed a number of centime-

tres. There was nowhere to push it, no abyss into which it could fall. The base simply rested upon the ocean floor, tethered by a hundred heavy steel hawsers, rather than being built into it. Nevertheless the impact of the creature had put immense strain on the structure. Just as the Commander told Harriet that they would be lucky to survive another such attack, one came.

It was not quite as forceful, but still they felt it in their bones, and, after all, any damage to the base would be cumulative. Like the Challengers of the Unknown, they were living on borrowed time. Unlike the Challengers, they didn’t have Jack Kirby to draw them out of trouble!

“Do you have any defences?” asked Harriet.

“Have you heard me give any orders regarding them?” replied the Commander, frowning.

“No, but this is a military installation. You must have something?”

He shook his head. “If we were being attacked by Chinese submarines, there’s half a dozen things I could do, from firing an EMP missile at them, to jamming their radio, to putting out chaff to confuse their radar, or just blasting them out of the water with a heat-seeking missile, but none of that is useful against a big angry sea-monster.”

“It’s hot, isn’t it? Why not use a heat-seeking missile against it?”

“It *is* hot, but *too* hot. That’s the problem: the missiles are calibrated to detect too low a degree of heat. Think of a moth – it heads for a table lamp, but ignores the sun completely.”

“Could you recalibrate it or something, like they always do in Star Trek?”

He thought for a moment. “I suppose it might be worth a try. Who knows, we *might* survive long enough.” He ordered a technician to look into it, and watched dolefully as he sped out of the room.

Harriet thought again. “What about the experimental weapons research lab? Might they have anything useful?”

“I don’t know,” he said, becoming a bit impatient. He turned to look her in the eye. “Look, why don’t you go down there and ask yourself. I’m rather busy right now.”

“You mean, you want me out of your hair.”

The base rocked as the great monster hit it again. Harriet saw a flash of fear across the Commander's eyes.

"Exactly," he said. "But if anyone starts to get really crazy, get back here right away and lock yourself in my office. The glass is reinforced, so you should be pretty safe in there, unless the whole base is destroyed. If you can't make it back here, get to your quarters and bolt the door. Understood?"

Harriet nodded. "Yes, sir."

She left as quickly as it was safe to move. It took her only a matter of minutes to reach the weapons lab, but even over the course of that time the level of damage being done to the base became apparent. Water trickled down the walls, throwing out sparks wherever it hit an electric circuit, and crew ran hither and thither, trying to save what they could.

As she banged on the door of the research lab, Harriet noted an increasing number of crew who were running hither and thither without apparent purpose, running up to their colleagues and doing nothing but pat or slap them. The sailors on MP duty were doing their best to round them up, but without effect, the numbers of those affected by the craziness growing by the second.

Harriet shook her head, to shake loose any insanity. She did not feel it coming up on her just yet, but she knew it would not take long.

She wondered why the effect was so strong. Normally, from what she had heard, it only had such a strong effect at night. Presumably that was why so many crew were at large in such a state. If this had happened at night they would have been safely locked up in their rooms. During the day it had probably caught them unawares. Was the attack of the creature exacerbating it? Or – she hoped against hope – was Howard approaching the source of the problem, and bringing it to a head?

The door Harriet was pounding on – she had not realised she was pounding, or for how long she had been doing it, so perhaps the madness was starting to affect her! – finally opened, letting her inside, into a small antechamber. Another thick door led into the main lab. Dr Brinks locked the main door behind Harriet, tak-

ing great care and making sure that every seal was complete.

"You're okay," said the scientist as she worked on the door. "Commander Brigson told me you'd be coming. He told me you had clearance. Do you have clearance?"

"Yes I do," replied Harriet, though she was less sure than she sounded. "Howard and I have top level clearance. We can go anywhere, do anything, as long as it gets this mess sorted out."

Dr Brinks continued to work on the door, her back hunched as she did something at its lower edge. "We have to be sure," she explained. "We have to be careful."

"Oh, we do, we do." Harriet became curious about what Dr Brinks was doing, and wondered whether it would be rude to continue into the main lab without her. "Can I help you with that, at all?"

Dr Brinks turned to smile at her. "No, thank you, dear." Harriet saw for the first time the blood smeared over her face. "We're all done here."

With growing horror, Harriet looked down at the work Dr Brinks had been doing. A red sticky substance was pressed along the airtight lining of the door. She kneeled down to examine it, trying to betray no reaction. Probably, she told herself, it's just a vision coming on. If I react, she'll think I'm mad.

"Good work," said Harriet. "Looks like you've done a good job."

"Oh, I have," replied the scientist. "I've been doing a good job all along. I thought they hadn't noticed, but then the Commander said you were coming, and I thought, yes, I've been doing a good job and my work is going to be recognised."

It looked like blood, thought Harriet, and scraps of human flesh. Ridiculous, of course. She stood up and smiled at Dr Brinks. "It looks excellent. No one will be getting in there. I'm actually feeling a bit funny, Dr Brinks..."

"Oh, call me Selena, please do. I'm not really military either. There's no need to be so formal. Shall we go into the lab. You can have a nice sit-down in there."

The world shook again, and their eyes met in

instinctive fear. “Don’t worry,” said Brinks. “This lab is a separate module from the rest. Even if the whole of the base fills with seawater, we should be fine in here. As long as we don’t take a direct hit, of course.”

“That’s very reassuring,” said Harriet, trying to smile. “Do you think I could sit down now?”

Dr Brinks threw her hands up in the air. “What am I thinking? Let’s get you inside. I expect I could get some coffee made for you too, as long as you don’t mind it being boiled on a Bunsen burner.”

She opened the inner door, and Harriet stepped inside, looking back over her shoulder to say, “Thanks, that would be lovely.”

Then she turned to look at the lab.

She counted six bodies – four men and two women. Each of them was gutted, a blade having been used to slit their bellies and spill out their intestines.

Harriet blinked, again and again, trying to make the vision go away, but it wouldn’t. In fact new details were adding themselves to the scene: among the dead men was Petty Officer Geoff Grandin, who had helped her and Howard with their little show. She turned back to Dr Brinks, but no words emerged. If it was a vision, what did it matter? If it was not a vision, well, that was too horrible to even contemplate.

“It’s a bit of a mess, isn’t it? I’m sorry about that, I wasn’t expecting visitors!”

The Doom of Howard Phillips

A spaceship!

Howard had been expecting a lot of things, and while it would be inaccurate to say that a spaceship was not on the list, it would be fair to say it was not very close to the top.

“What do you make of that, Mr Phillips?” asked Starches, after pushing his helmet to the window of my mini-sub and indicating for me to

do the same. It was quite a heave to pull myself up, but I got there in time to hear his words.

“Looks like a spaceship to me,” I said, smiling lopsidedly. “Do you have any experience in this area?”

“I tried out for NASA once, but that’s about it.”

“Sorry you didn’t get in. You might have been able to fly this thing out of here!”

“Oh, I got in, but it was my second choice. My father and grandfather were both in the Navy. My mom was an astronaut, so she asked me to try out, but I’ve always preferred the ocean to space.”

“I’ve been in both now, and let me tell you, there isn’t a great deal of difference! Both are implacable enemies to the humans who penetrate their domains with such awe, both can be seen as either empty expanses between places, or places in their own right, full of life, depending on your point of view, and both save their greatest secrets for those who delve most deeply.”

He looked at me with a raised eyebrow. “Have you got a lot of spare time on your hands today, sir? Anything you ought to be doing?”

“A good disquisition always gets me in the mood for a good adventure. Plus it’s taking my mind off the crippling fear that’s assailing me at the moment. Just be glad I didn’t follow my train of thought through to its natural conclusion and begin to compare the both of them to women, for they have a lot in common, at least to the eyes of a poet.”

“Maybe another time! So what do we do about this spaceship. Because I agree, that isn’t a Chinese submarine. Nothing on this planet could have survived the charges that were put on that baby last month. And whatever it is, I am absolutely terrified of it. I can feel myself starting to lose it, Howard. I’ve already taken a sedative, but I’m not going to be able to hold out much longer.”

I thought a little while, letting him straighten his neck out, it having grown stiff from tipping his helmet in my direction to talk. I looked around, paying particular attention to the spaceship’s surroundings.

Even as I did, I felt the madness insistently gnawing at my brain. It made it hard to concentrate. Eerie shapes began to swirl in the water around me, obscuring my vision, face-rotted sirens dragging at my fingers and toes.

I took one of my own sedatives, to stop things getting worse.

Finally I waved for Starches to touch his helmet to mine again. "I do have an idea," I said. "Are there any explosives packed aboard my mini-sub?"

He shook his head, something odd to see, since the helmet did not move, creating an odd juxtaposition of movement and stillness. It made me imagine what it would be like to see inside a man, to see his very soul. How often would you see the outer self motionless, while inside the soul raged and twisted? "I'm sorry, Howard, there isn't. It was thought that what I had would be enough, and with you being a novice on the mini-sub, we didn't want you blowing yourself up if you banged into something."

"Very wise," I said, with a frown. "Or at least it probably seemed so, back at Sea Base Delta. It leaves us in a sticky situation, though. Listen: I think that the problems at Sea Base Delta, the visions, and perhaps even the increased agitation of the great manatee, are down to this ship right here."

"I guessed as much. It looks like the explosives didn't destroy it, so much as send it into a tailspin."

"That's it. I don't know if there is anyone left on board – perhaps not, perhaps the percussive impact of the explosion was enough to kill them. But if, before being killed, they tried to escape, their deaths might just have left the engines running, causing all this frothing about that we can see."

"That would be enough to annoy the great manatee, I can see that, but how would it cause the visions?"

I smiled, like a magician about to perform his favourite trick. "Infrasonic sound. It's a well-established fact that infrasonic sound creates in humans the feeling that they are being haunted. For example, some theories suggest that infrasonic sound waves can physically distort human

eyeballs, causing us to see illusory dark shapes at the periphery of our vision. They also create, almost out of nothing, feelings of ill-omen, fear, and so on."

"And you think that the engines still running have caused that back at the base?"

"I do. I think that in some way the base is acting like a huge tuning fork, vibrating in tune with the infrasonic sound and thus amplifying it. Hence we're able to (just about) survive it out here, despite the effects on the base being so powerful. It was always something I thought possible – the issue was to find the source of the infrasonic sound – but I didn't want to say anything back there. When people believe so furiously in the supernatural, and especially when they encounter it for the first time, turning their whole mindsets upside down, they are often reluctant, having made the leap across the abyss of irrationality, to make the leap back again. Once the rug has been pulled out from under them, they won't trust it not to happen a second time. So I waited for my chance to come here, my chance to sort it all out."

"But how do you explain the blood that was found after so many of the visions? That was real enough, as far as we could tell."

"I have to confess that I don't have an explanation for that," I replied. "But perhaps if we put a stop to this part of it, other answers will become apparent later."

He looked downcast. "But we have no explosives. It's going to keep getting worse, isn't it? I'm already on the edge of losing it. If we have to go back to base, I don't know if we'll make it out here again, especially with the great manatee on the warpath."

I gave him a thumb's up. "Don't fret. We would have used explosives to bring down that down over the ship." I pointed at the miniature mountain against which the ship lay. "I think the curvature of that thing is amplifying the infrasonics, so just destroying it would have helped a lot anyway, but if we could have brought it down right on top of the ship, even if the engines were still running, it would have blocked out the worst of the sound. Since we can't do that, we're going to have to go on board."

“And turn the engines off?”

“Either that or smash the ship into that wall, and bring it down on top of us.”

The Ultimate Fate of Sea Base Delta

I awoke, very groggily, trying to remember what had happened. At first, all I could recall was that last conversation with Starches, before we went aboard the ship, but then it all began to come back to me.

I remembered how we had forced our way in through an airlock. Lighting a match gave us a good idea of the oxygen content in the atmosphere on board, and we removed our helmets, enjoying the relatively fresh air. The ship might have been down here a month, but the engines were still going, so perhaps any air-processing equipment was too – or perhaps it was just that nobody had been alive in here for that month to do any breathing.

We had found the bodies of the spaceship’s crew, crumpled and broken, at every turn, in every corridor, in every room. They must have been killed when the shockwave hit them. They were odd-looking types, with at least three noses that I counted, and a number of extra limbs that might have been vestigial, or might in fact have been specialised and adapted for particular uses. It was impossible to tell, in their broken, smashed condition. Their hides were light blue, rough and lightly hairy, like those of an elephant. They wore few clothes, and those that they had seemed to be simply decorative, since there seemed to be no pattern to which parts were concealed and which were revealed (though it’s possible that there was such a pattern – for example, if their species had had more sexes than our two, there might have been more variety in the locations of the areas about which they were modest). Most of them simply wore a thick, functional belt, upon which would hang tools, electronic devices and keys. Their bodies were

everywhere, and I felt sick for what my species had done.

In one room, however, a bizarre place with a long, thin table – perhaps some kind of state room? – we found twenty more bodies, laid out in rows, covered with tarpaulins. The aliens had not all died at the same time. Some had already been dead when Cooper and Nicks did their part for their country. I had then revised my hypothesis: this ship had been blasted out of the sky, it seemed; and then, of course, the aggressors had called for their allies in the ocean to finish the job.

I remembered how Starches and I had finally found our way to the bridge, and how we had tried to stop the engines, but without success. Then I remembered how I had told Starches to go, sending him back to Sea Base Delta on the mini-sub, while I would wait here – it was dry, there was air, and I was safe, despite the terror that attacked in waves at every second. I was only in danger of hurting myself, and so I had relied on my natural sense of self-preservation to keep me alive. Readers of my other novels might wonder where that instinct had been from time to time in my previous adventures, and to them I can only say that it comes and goes, probably in relation to my proximity to a woman who loves me. When I am near such a woman I would risk everything for her, and put my life in danger willy-nilly, but when I am alone, far from anyone, I will do anything to stay alive, for the chance of seeing such a woman again.

And so Starches had left me alone, and I had sat on the bridge, continuing to tinker, trying to bring the engines to a halt. Eventually I found how to get them going, which was promising, but it only seemed to work in one direction. Presumably the ship had indeed been damaged by the attacks upon it, or the aliens would probably not have chosen to hang around down here in the depths of the ocean.

Then I found the means to activate their communications equipment. A glowing frequency indicator seemed to show it scanning the airwaves for messages. Nothing happened at first – how many signals could there be for it to pick up down here? – but then, to my astonishment, I

heard Harriet's voice echoing through the room, terrified for her life.

"Howard, Howard – are you out there? They've all gone mad – everyone's killing each other! Please, Howard! Help us!"

I remembered how there had been nothing else for it – a woman's life was at risk, and so my own became meaningless. I set the engines to full throttle, and rammed the ship into the small mountain that lay in its path. I watched on the monitors as the rock face cracked, and listened to the sound of one boulder after another falling upon the spaceship. Soon the situation was clear – I had been buried alive, and there was no hope of rescue. The radio was dead, but hopefully, thanks to what I had done, Harriet would survive. With that in mind, I had wandered over to what I assumed to be the Captain's chair, given its comfortable padding compared to the other chairs thereabouts, and settled down for a nap. An odd time to sleep? Perhaps, but remember that I was quite heavily sedated.

And that was all I remembered, until waking.

I looked around the room in which I found myself. This must have been the reason for my initial bafflement upon waking: I was no longer on the bridge of the alien spaceship. I was in a lilac-coloured room, bare, save for the bed on which I was lying. There was an echo, to my mind, of the beginning of this adventure, when I had woken up to find myself in the reasonably gentle clutches of IBIS.

Soon I learnt the truth. The ship, sensing the danger in its situation, had put its captain, or at least the person occupying his chair, into hibernation, and I had now been awoken, far, far into a distant future. My world was long gone, everyone I knew or cared for was dead, and my dream of forming the greatest band the universe had ever known was over.

And so, despite my efforts, doom had come to Sea Base Delta. It had been destroyed, one way or another. If not by the attacking manatee, if not by its crazed crew, then by the passage of time itself, along with the entire world I had known.

In a way, in trying to save Harriet, I had destroyed the Earth.

A New Note or Two

They tried to look after me in the future, and tried to make me happy, but in the end I was little more than a pet to them, or a temporary novelty, like an American Indian brought to Victorian England.

They were called the Parang, and they had built their undersea city long millennia ago upon the location of my buried submarine, using it as an energy source, ignorant, initially, of its true nature. Eventually their technology had surpassed the need for reliance on what they had previously taken on trust. Curious scientists and archaeologists had investigated, and, upon discovering me in my padded chair, managed to bring me out of my unplanned nap without disturbing the ship.

They were an interesting species, totally unlike the humans of our time, being crystalline, silicon-based lifeforms. As to whether they had originated on Earth or were colonists: they were unsure. Each was made of a thousand different angles, a mass at the centre – all that existed of them at birth – being cultivated and fed to develop spidery legs and appendages, each of them providing the being with new abilities and thought processes.

I became particularly friendly with one individual who went by the name of J,J,T,L.M. I transliterate here for you – their language was a set of chimes played at particular pitches and durations, using notes the like of which I had never heard before – hence the unfamiliar letters used to represent them – though I have since tried to incorporate their likenesses in my music. Another individual might have been called A,C,D,E,G–A, for example, though such a limited range would probably indicate quite a youngster. As their range of notes grew, it was not unusual for a Parang to choose a new name.

I have room here to give barely a taste of that strange civilisation and the difficulties I encountered. To sum it up in a few simple words: if I had not already been a musician, it would have been impossible to live among them. Even as a musician, I had to work my socks off every day. Nev-

ertheless, in every chime of their language I found a wonderful novelty that quickly became a source of inspiration, leading me to develop astonishing new music of my own.

J,J,T,L.M took a real interest in my stories of the long-dead past, and was thrilled to hear of my exploits in the course of forming my band. He marvelled that beings so unsuited to the natural production of music would go to such lengths to perfect their efforts. I tried to show him how to play the various instruments I had tried to build for my entertainment, but he simply did not have the physical apparatus necessary to operate any of them, other than my primitive xylophone, which alone among the instruments he found abhorrent anyway, its sound akin to the bawling of a Parang infant.

Eventually, I began to grow bored among them, and they grew sad and offered to help. As they worked on it over the course of the following decades, a project that galvanised their rather stagnant civilisation as little else had for millennia, I lived a long span among them. From time to time I would produce romantic overtures for the more feminine-seeming of their race, and sometimes my feelings were engaged, but it always ended up feeling like a cruel joke that my mind was playing upon my body. Though my music sustained me, a universe that lacked the curve of a woman's breast was no universe in which I could ever be truly happy.

When I reached my sixties, I had a pleasant surprise. J,J,T,L.M turned up at my apartment, a covering over his body.

"What's this?" I asked him.

Chiming with delight, he threw off the covering to reveal a new collection of appendages, and moved over to my instruments, beginning to play them, one after the other, first the bass, in which he had always taken an interest, then the drums, then the guitar, and finally the triangle, an instrument which was always guaranteed to reduce the Parang to peals of uncontrollable laughter.

He played all of them beautifully from the first. None sounded quite the way they did when played by human virtuosos, but were made to sound beautiful in other ways. He intuitively

understood the properties of sound in ways that were beyond human capability.

Eventually, the efforts of the Parang scientists were complete: a new universe, a bottle universe, a replica of my own, set to continue from the point at which I had left it. I was of course astonished. Was it some kind of virtual reality? Was it a trick of some kind? They laughed, and explained that their technology had long since surpassed such fripperies. It was an actual universe, one in which I could live out my life as it should have been, and which they claimed would persist after my death.

I was not sure whether to believe them, and held off on my decision as long as I could. But as I neared my eightieth birthday, I thanked them for all their help, said farewell to J,J,T,L.M, and went to sleep, ready to be sent back, even if it *was* an illusion, to my own time.

Return to Danger!

"I wasn't expecting visitors!" said Dr Brinks, waving an arm to indicate the bloodied corpses that littered her laboratory.

Dr Brinks revealed that she had been the one to spread blood around those who had succumbed to the visions. She had been the first affected, after being exposed to the ultrasonic sounds from the downed ship long before the others, due to her studies of the ocean. She had wanted the others to join her in madness, and coating them with blood had seemed a good way to go about it.

Harriet quickly ran for the door to the lab, and managed to escape, locking Dr Brinks inside. Knowing what she now did, Harriet found it much easier to fight down the madness, just as she had in the elevator back in New York. She knew beyond doubt that there was no supernatural element, that it was just sound waves acting on her imagination, and that she could deal with.

Eventually she made it to C-Ops, where she did after all lock herself into the CO's office, and begin to try the radio, begging Howard for help

even as the men and women outside the door began to claw at each other's eyes. The Commander had finally succumbed, and was hiding underneath a table, trying to scratch his nipples from his chest.

Suddenly, it all stopped.

Everyone stopped being frightened.

I was standing beside her in the office.

"How did you get in here, Howard? It was locked."

"No time for that now," I said brusquely, which I instantly regretted and tried to remedy by kissing her on the cheek – another thing I instantly regretted, since it earned my own cheek a light slap. Still, I laughed, just happy beyond words to be back in my own time, not to mention restored to relative youthfulness.

I asked her to unlock the door, and stepped out into C-Ops, calling immediately to Commander Brigson. "Sir, are you in a fit state to go to work?"

"How did you get back here so quickly?" he asked, ignoring my question as an impertinence and buttoning up his shirt as if we had just met in the changing rooms of a gym, as if nothing unusual had been going on whatsoever. "Starches only got back on board a few minutes ago."

"I'd like to tell you everything, sir, but there isn't time right now. That thing out there, attacking the base, is some kind of giant manatee. Turbulence and vibrations from the crashed spaceship have been slowly sending it crazy, just as they have all of you. It's badly wounded, thanks to Starches' heroics, and madder than ever. I have an idea, though." After all, I'd had about fifty years to think about what could have been done to save the base, though I didn't mention that to the CO! "You need to play back to it the sounds of a baby manatee – do you think you can find it on your system?"

"I'm certain we can," he said. "We don't have direct access to the internet, but we have a massive reference library on marine life."

He shouted orders, and in seconds a file had been found and was being played.

We held our breath.

There was another crash as the great manatee

smashed into the base once again. Was it all for nothing? Had this entire universe been created for my benefit, only for me to die seconds later?

"Try slowing the recording down," suggested Harriet. "If it's a giant manatee of some kind, its babies are going to be bigger too. They might have deeper voices than normal ones."

"It's worth a try," I agreed.

The Commander gave the order.

We held our breath once again.

This time there was nothing, no impact, and no sound other than the trickling of water through a hundred tiny cracks in the structure of the base.

The Commander thanked us for our help, and then had all inessential personnel evacuated to the research lab while repairs were undertaken. It was still watertight, and it felt good to feel safe, despite the horrors that greeted us there. Harriet had warned us what to expect, and the first men through the door had been heavily armed and well-armoured, but they had found Dr Brinks a broken woman, crying her eyes out in a store cupboard, refusing to look at what she had done.

My Greatest American Adventures

Upon our return to the surface, we were summoned to the White House for an interview with the President himself. After we had waited a few hours for him to finish his afternoon nap we were shown into the Oval Office. I was, despite myself, impressed. It is not as if I am a stranger to throne rooms, but this was the scene for so much of *The West Wing*, not to mention all those amazing moments in *Superman II*.

After listening to a potted version of our story (I omitted my adventures in the far future, of course, though I suppose he will be able to read

about them once this novel is published), the President thanked me for everything that I had done, and in particular for alerting them to the potential for conflict with other worlds.

“If it wasn’t for what you told us about Envia, we might have hung around a bit before shooting that ship down. Thanks be to Jesus Christ that you woke us up to the danger!”

“You mean they didn’t attack first, or anything like that?” I asked.

“No, sir. We didn’t give them the chance, thanks to you.”

I left the Oval Office ashamed of myself, that in so many ways I had brought nothing but fear to my home planet. I had done so little to tell them of the joys to be found out there, the new friends to be made, the new spectacles to be seen, the new species to be studied. I had simply taught them to prepare for war, and in so doing I had probably taught them to start one.

Good for you, Howard.

I said goodbye to Harriet for the time being. Her work on the Letterman show would not wait forever, and she promised to stay in touch. It felt strange to complete an adventure without a single romantic tryst (leaving aside, again, my adventures in the future), but sometimes those are just the breaks.

I neglected to explain to anyone that our entire world is a fraud, a replica. Why bother? It wouldn’t have made any difference to anyone. For all I know, perhaps it was always so. Perhaps I was not the first time-lost traveller to have a world made for me! Who can guess how many times removed we might be from some unknowably distant reality?

You might be interested to learn that my far-future friends left their signature upon our world: I can guarantee to my readers that the word “parang” did not exist in our dictionaries before the year 2007. I am certain of this fact, because I have always, ironically, found it very difficult to spell the word “paranoia”, and have thus referred to that very spot in many a dictionary. Now, apparently, a parang is a type of Malayan machete, and also a form of Trinida-

dian folk music. If that wasn’t a nod to me – explorer on the one hand, and musician on the other – I don’t know what else could be!

In parting, I should say this to my readers: although I originally was going to title this part of my Saturation Point Saga *My Three Greatest American Adventures*, I in the event only managed to deal with one of them, that of Sea Base Delta – hence the title change. There was one great American adventure in particular that was yet to come, a few years hence, but the telling of my involvement with Ain’t Wastin’, the multi-platinum, controversy-baiting rap group from Los Angeles, will now have to wait for another day. Apart from anything else, I have to consider the difficulties I might encounter in finding anyone willing to publish their unbelievably obscene lyrics. I can hardly believe how obscene they were myself, and more than half of them were my own work.

But that’s a story for another day. I hope you have enjoyed this first tale of my adventures in the Americas.

Ah, wait: there’s one thing I forgot to mention. Upon my return to Birmingham I went up to our rooms in the Novotel on Broad Street. Imagine my surprise to discover, not two band mates waiting for me (that is, the Mountain Drummer and the Prince of Envia), but three. The three of them were jamming away on one of my earlier compositions, and continued to play as I entered, obviously keen for me to hear their work.

“So you came too,” I said to the newest member of Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point.

“Yes, I did,” said J,J,T,L.M, slapping the bass for emphasis. “There’s something going on here, something bigger than any of us, and I want to be a part of it.”

I did not say a word, for fear of crying out with emotion. Our band now had four members.

Harriet, meanwhile, returned to IBIS headquarters to give her report.

But that, too, is another story.

The Speed of Darke

Diane
Andrews

Indigo eyes unblinkingly penetrated simultaneous stories looping through my gentle dream where I swam in turquoise waters. That idyll soon rode the back of a raging nightmare, galloping towards a cliff, plunging into an abyss. Under their intense scrutiny I saw a boy – nay, a young man – arms rotating like a gale-driven windmill, plunging a knife into my blood-soaked body. I'd only felt the pain of hate and power when the first blow had plunged into

my heart. I extracted myself from that inert mass of meat, a fly freeing itself from a web before the spider appears. I hid in the corner of the room, above the young man, so he could no longer find me. A beautiful light rippling from aquamarine to gold and silver with flashes of white, accompanied by the falsetto of child sopranos, took me in a glissando towards another place. Those penetrating eyes were not the needle sharp blue of an endless void of the soul but the canvas on

which only the room is reflected. It was as if a river had flowed towards the horizon and lifted into the sky, somehow the right colour but its presence blotted out the sun.

Startled awake, I saw the eldest of my five children, Darke, standing at the foot of my bed looking bedraggled. His purplish eyes, the entrance to his beingness a mouldy wall of bricks and mortar punctuated only by a crawl space masquerading as a portal. It was the place I hoped to penetrate so as to prise his inner being out into the light. He was silently still – hollow – though I knew myriad black, grey and green demons roamed his thoughtbytes, tearing at the leather encasing his emotions. Soon my mind morphed into happiness and relief. His body incarnate signalled he'd be living with me once more. He'd been gone almost his whole life on duties Jared, his father, had given him. Now his existence could be acknowledged and he'd be able to meet his siblings, those from the same nest. He hadn't been cast out as the puny weakling but had been gouged from my breast like a verruca carved from the ball of the foot. But I'd allowed his subsumption to the knives of darkness. Jared's intents travelled with my own so I'd no need to wear worry on my wrists like a red rag. My legs needn't part in an effort to draw my husband into another agreement.

I bundled him into the shower, dressed his body in clean pyjamas and tucked him into the bed that once belonged to Henry, the man he'd gone to destroy. I was now the owner of this homestead while Jared stayed in his own. Thus it was as we'd been used to when the Monckes had ruled us. There was an independence of man and maiden. Neither of us, after all, really wanted to know all the other was doing. It's the secret which creates space, not the understanding and sound particles voiced. The children always had the freedom to go wherever they pleased, except Darke. They did their lessons though, inculcated with the mantra of the Monckes – though they'd long since departed. They were happily free of care – except Darke, who'd been kept in a secret place, his existence concealed. Few knew his outer shape. None but Jared knew his inner; his mission in life was

forced upon him by an accident of birth. Perhaps it had been forced upon him when Jared and Henry had been born, split by the differences between their mothers and the sameness of their father.

All the time I administered to him he was so tired. He sagged in my arms trying to nod off, but I finally laid him in the bed, clean and with food in front of him. A pull at my sleeve was the signal I should listen.

"Tell me, Darke," I quietly encouraged, smiling, kissing and cuddling, erasing the layers to uncover the photograph beneath, words a silver pen nib glistening in the inkwell.

He continued to frown, as he'd done all his life, for he was a serious child and already carried a great weight on his shoulders; a huge demand had been put on the first-born of Venus and Jared; it was a demand he tried to fulfil with an inhuman ferocity.

"Well, mother, the first baby's so beautiful. His purple eyes follow you when you're in the room and I feel as if he knows so many things – as if he could talk to me, so I talked to him through my mind. I ran away the first time he gazed into my eyes because I was afraid he'd find out what I'd done and inform Clarisse. After that I trained myself to confront him, to shield my deeds and thoughts. Henry's dull to such things of the mind! The baby's so golden – hair so gently red, like his wonderful mother's. It frames his face. It's just like a heavenly halo around his head. I believe he's a born Wizard."

"So it's done, what you were sent to do?" I asked, my mind struggling with the set of my mouth – slow the words down so as to allay his suspicions.

It was as if he hadn't heard my question, or didn't want to, "I do love Henry and Clarisse, so I'm glad they now have a child to keep; mother, it's the first. So, how come I've got four brothers and sisters when the Monckes have been gone for so long, couldn't they've had more? I don't understand."

I gasped, sprung off the bed. I put my back to him. There are fewer nerves in that expanse of skin. I strode to the window washing the dishes, wringing out handwashed clothes, pulling thread

through fabric, trying to defuse the overloaded circuits in my head. I gazed at the full moon shining in the black night sky. If an adult had seen me they'd have detected the shrinking of my girth, the hardness of my frame, the rigidity of hate cladding the fluidity of content.

I wanted so much to hear him say Henry was dead but he hadn't, seemed to be indicating just the opposite – but I was ambivalent about that deed being done as Clarisse would be then free and Jared still had deep feelings for her. That mental image he'd displayed in the physical universe, to me, many times. I, however, more desperately, wanted Henry out of the way as he stood in Jared's – nay in *our* – path to power.

It appeared Henry was still alive. Darke professed love for him. He wasn't showing any remorse for having just murdered his protector of the last year, but indicating rather that he loved the man. I refused to push him for more details, though, as he might get disturbed. Obviously he'd blocked it out – but surely it must be a done deed. Darke had been trained to kill Henry, had shown skill and a relish for it, which had made his father swell with pride. Suddenly there was a wailing and screaming coming from the bed. I knew the truth had hit him and I'd soon hear it, so I rushed to his side.

"I... a man... mother! I killed the father of the golden child. Animals aren't men and it's not the same! Jared showed me how to kill them, but a man..."

"You've been trained! Men – well, pretty boys?" I queried, in order to make him feel he'd done no wrong.

His words caused my back to prickle, like the ice cubes Jared ran over my unknowing skin. His syllables impressed the shards into my lungs and I felt the pain of hate and love of my lover.

"No! They're not human! Gods! They're but pretty boys, not man or maiden, not man or maiden, man, maiden."

He wasn't going to be quieted now so I interrupted: "I'll get Delphi to see you in the morning. You'll go to the Temple – after, you will recall none of it. I'll ask for the whole year to be erased from your memory. You've slain the man you love..." – I offered the words, hoping for a

nod or gasp of agreement – "and so it's best for the... memory..."

A nightowl suddenly flew towards me, expertly avoiding the barriers I put up, screeching. I cuddled it tightly, squeezing the breath that fed the cries, strangling them at birth like a mother might slay a deformed child before it can be given a name. My son slowly stopped screaming – started to snivel. Somehow I saw it as a sign of humanity, that there was yet visceral fluids coursing through his cells. It pleased me that his love for Henry and Clarisse would be gone then, so he'd know only his mother and father. Suddenly he sat bolt upright.

"No way! I wouldn't do that. I wanted to kill the father of the baby because of what the man did to my friends. They are so wonderful, mother. You should get to know them. You'd love them too. But it was horrible!" He sobbed hysterically. "I've drunk the blood of wolf, bathed in unborn mare's blood, done all I was told to do – but it stinks. Human blood stinks... stinks, it's so foul..." His mouth enfolded the rancid tastes and ejected them into the close air of the room.

Now I knew the truth! I didn't fully understand everything he'd said. But who was dead? What had that person done to Henry and Clarisse? Who had Darke killed? Henry was supposed to be the target. Darke had been trained by hypnosis to do one thing: slay the father of the first-born to Clarisse.

I hurried to the phone in my office, locking the door after me, just in case my son followed. I wasn't willing to allow him the knowledge of those things close to my heart, the ulterior motive which can only be detected by the interpretation of action. The ear can hear lies but the eyes watch truth pass by. My body pulsed as I thought of Delphi – of having a reason to summon her to visit my dwelling.

Darke wouldn't want me to instruct Delphi to erase the whole year. She didn't, however, have to let him know. It was up to the Correction Officer to say what was needed. The sooner my son was free of the insidious memories he harboured in his mind, of Clarisse, Henry and their first naturalborn, the better.

It wouldn't do for Jared to hear a word of what he said about loving the enemy. It would be hard for Jared and me to control him if he decided to return to Camelot. He was a trained assassin now, could turn on us. Ice burned needle sharp in my back as a vision of my son bathing in his own mare's blood danced like a karmic rune to the tune of a jangling gamelan.

What I was about to do... It was for the good of society. Jared must prevail over Henry and Clarisse. I wasn't thinking straight or I'd have considered the consequences of what I was about to do.

After the phone call I cuddled Darke. My child could no longer fall asleep in the comfort of his thoughtbytes. He had been trained to do but one task. He'd operated the circuits my husband had instilled in him – to perpetrate a pernicious deed. His knowledge was that he'd perverted it to his own desires. He was, however, exhausted enough to quickly drop into a place where the ravelled sleeve of care could be knitted up, or that ravelled knot of wool was relived, where sleep invited gargoyles from on high and trolls from below to become his acquaintances. He eventually left the company of sentient beings, and then I went to my own bedroom and stood watching the night sky from the glass doors which opened onto the veranda. I heard no noises in the house, so no one else had been disturbed by the furtive entrance of the ghost of my husband's love for me and mine for him.

A dark shape fluttered above me and hot longings burned in my loins. My heart thumped. I cowered as beating wings tugged my head, blowing my hair, separating each strand like cornsilk husked from the cob. Did I feel a claw scratch my cheek? I touched it but felt no wetness of blood. Delphi had left her mark on me before. Jared had been enraged. It caused the tribulations she'd invited. I wanted only to have her mark inside me. Just as well my cheek was dry, I mused, or Jared would know.

I tried to keep my flittering eyes on the huge bat as it swooped behind me but wasn't quick enough. Strobe light trapped the images in the downbeat of the second; they cloaked themselves in the semiconscious section of my mind.

I turned and Delphi stood fully formed in front of me in all her ethereal beauty.

I ran, draped my arms around her and began to sob as the pent-up emotions of the last few hours flowed from me. She kissed me gently on the neck, cheeks and arms. At first it was as if an angel had wafted from the western hills, a lady zephyr, light and loving. Soon I was caught up in the burning passion of her caress; a hot urgency tore at me. The angel donned black gossamer, red leather, sucking teeth, probing instruments of pleasure and pain. The angel became a devil, donning the mantle of man sacrificing maiden to the earthgod. Delphi grew a horn and skewered me with it, relentlessly turned me on a spit over the fire of love. We fused into a molten mass to become a single chemical composition. Heat and power burst forth as atoms released, combining in a new manner. As the molecules melded into new minerals, like acid and alkali making salt plus water we lost present time. Crystals of salt slowing leached from the water – settled. We drew apart.

I moaned as we lay on the bed after satisfying each other in a way that was unique to our relationship. Each time Delphi chose how she manifested herself. In other forms the experience was just as intense and all-consuming. Delphi was a breeze blowing hot off the eventide hills, moist and fresh, laced with the drugs of elderberry, wattle and myrtle. When Delphi shapechanged she became a he – a whirlwind of devastation, imploding walls, scattering the contents of my soul, laying waste the tangible things I held near, which I used to define myself. Never, however, had she made my spine shiver. Never had she penetrated my soul with hot poker or frozen volcanoes. No bruises purpled my thighs afterwards.

Time passed quickly as we lay talking. Delphi had shifted her mantle and become a man. I believed I'd opened my legs to elicit agreement. We made love again – for it might be many months before we had cause to meet once more. Delphi left the Temple only when she had an urgent task to do. Before dawn we went to wake Darke.

He'd be rested enough and it was important to

cleanse his mind as soon as possible so he'd finally be able to live a normal life, perhaps. A deal had been struck; Delphi agreed to erase all his memories though he might resist. I knew he'd want to retain images of Henry, Clarisse and the baby but couldn't allow it, for it'd enrage his father. There was no guarantee Jared wouldn't dispose of someone no longer on his side or of any use.

I heard yelling, sobbing and foul swearing as Delphi did her job, which saddened and anguished me. It was with pick and shovel this task would be done. She wasn't plucking chicory from between the cracks in concrete but tracing oxalis onions to their source, in order to rid the garden of the weed. Each leafy stem, standing tall and proud for all to see, had to be plucked in such a way that the nine tenths of it buried in the protection of the earth came wrenching out with one pull. It was up to the Correction Officer to position the electric current in the exact right place so the thoughtbytes that had to be shrunk to a microdot, were.

I hid on the veranda, behind closed doors, outside my own bedroom. Twice I wanted to rush to his room, burst in and stop the process but I'd posted a guard at his door – in case I changed my mind and went to help my son escape, so wasn't able to. Then all was silent in Darke's room. It was done, the silence told me.

Half an hour of complete quiet passed, then I heard stirrings as the house awoke. I still didn't move. My other children were showering then eating breakfast, the pretty boy maids doing their work. When I thought the other children were occupied, their heads down, doing their lessons, I entered my son's room, after the guard had checked it out – while I peered over his shoulder. We immediately knew that it was finished as Darke slept, a peaceful look on his face, and no one else was there. Earlier I'd seen the black form of Delphi winging her way to the Temple.

My first task was to go to Jared – tell him Darke was back, talk to him over a late breakfast. Jared wasn't an early riser.

Though Darke's life had been spent with his father, apart from the year he'd lived with my

brother-in-law, Henry, he was now to be given over to me. It was as we'd agreed when we'd first sentenced my son to the nonexistence of an assassin's death.

It was a pity Henry didn't know his first born nephew. To him Darke was an orphan – a foundling he'd named Heathcliffe. It was a well laid trap. Darke had expertly inveigled himself into his uncle's homestead. It had been meant to lead Henry to his death. Instead it had led to the death of the father of Clarisse's first naturalborn. I had only a small moment in the endless aeons of time walking forward to create a suitable tale to explain the twists and turns I'd learnt of the story from my son. The facts nestled only in my head – between the wings of my lady zephyr and the sound of electronic needles frying flesh.

My household would go on as it always did. When Darke awoke he'd be kept in his room till I got back and was able to introduce him to the rest of my children. He knew of them but they were ignorant of his existence. He wouldn't recall the time at Camelot but would remember the life he'd led before being sent there, and would enjoy this new, different life he'd now be allowed to live, but would have to learn to exist in my household. No one would be allowed to make him feel as if he were a stranger. I'd make sure of that – and ensure he was treated as if he'd been amongst us always. It was necessary for his recovery. He didn't need to be reminded, in any way, of what had happened to him in the previous year. There was no need for his past to relive itself. Given a decent amount of space between him and his father, he'd be but a teenage boy.

Jared wasn't awake. I had a shower then went to check my email. When I heard his bellowing I went to join him in the dining room. He was naked, sitting at a table and about to take the first mouthful of a huge cooked breakfast.

"Darke has arrived," I announced, trying to import finality into my speech, to become someone who brooks no dissent.

"Come here, my darling!" I walked over to him, allowed my silk bathrobe to hang slightly open.

He caressed my breasts, scooping a handful of cream from a bowl. He didn't have to ask. I sat

on his lap. When he was eager and ready he climaxed rapidly. Jared picked ice up, crushing it down my back. He pushed harder and deeper inside me as I jerked, trying to find a place where there was no pain. Each thrust hurt. I wondered what damage he must've done to Clarisse. Yes, it was supposed to be a secret, had been hushed up, but we all knew. I laughed – but only with the pleasure of being able to weaken him. It was over before his meal was cold. He sat eating while I made myself toast and jam – pouring coffees, putting slow dollops of cream on it, then a swirl of honey. Jared shrugged then wriggled uncomfortably, glanced surreptitiously at what I was doing – understanding the teasing nature of my hands.

“So, it’s done?” he grunted and I nodded, shrugged, said in a noncommittal way, “I believe so...” like someone who doesn’t care for the details so isn’t consumed by the subject

My eyes slid away, flickering at more than twenty frames per second. I jerked my head to hide confusion, doubts and my guilt as I realised in that moment I’d erased all Darke’s memories, so the truth might never be known.

Jared had spies at Camelot but it would still be hard to find out the truth, as there was so much double-crossing and false information to pick through. The truth and lie can sit in the same chair, twins with golden curls framing sweet smiles. I’d pretend ignorance when he found out Darke was no longer able to give him any information. It would be Delphi’s fault. I’d been upset and hadn’t given her clear instructions. He wouldn’t be able to find out anything from the Temple. The records were under the highest security and no Seeress or Wizard ever spoke of what they’d done when Correcting someone. They disliked Jared, too – that was another strike against him.

Well, he’d brought their displeasure upon himself as he had impregnated Clarisse, when she wasn’t destined to bear his child. It was a prophecy and he’d interfered with it. She hadn’t been a virgin when he entered her, though, as he’d said once, when I’d questioned him about whether his love for her remained – he had got violently angry so I hadn’t probed too deeply.

Henry must have been there first; but her womb hadn’t quickened with the brother’s seed, even though he’d taken her virginity. So Henry was not destined to be the one to fulfil it either. Who was to be the father of the Princess’s child, then? Who had she been given to? Darke was the key. He knew, but I’d silenced him! It was ironic that he professed to love them and so had refused to cause them any hurt. It was beyond the control of a mere thirteen year old boy. The harm had been done all those years ago when the brothers had both lusted after her.

He interrupted my attempts at explanation. “Delphi has been? And not with permission from me! What?” His head jerked as I sucked in an eyedropper of sour air. “I knew... I suspect to your bedroom, no doubt! Fucking stupid! You!”

As he shouted I put a finger on my cheek, which still burned from the touch of her wing, while knives and forks clattered across the table and dishes smashed on the floor.

“I had to... because... he was so... agitated! He’d become a dribbling idiot...”

“Did you debrief him?” he shouted. “Did you have a witness? Did you write it down... for me... huh?”

“Yes! Of course! You should trust me!” I scrambled, buying time with a golden-tressed lie, but my eyes did not peer into his as his face invaded my space.

“Okay, yeah, I do,” he said, fingers tying themselves into a rope and securing themselves with a reef knot, rigid nakedness, nostrils flaring like a rutting stallion’s, worms invading his arms – animating intricate kohlmarks.

“He said...” I grated self-righteously, “it’s been done so far as I can tell – he was gabbling and difficult to understand. It was too much to ask of him, Jared!”

His attitude continued bloating his size and belied his words of trust. His lie sat beside mine like the evil twin, sneering at my golden-haired child. I threw guilt into his face so he’d back off from questioning me. He thrust back with a shout, piercing my armour like pen on parchment

“Go! Get my son – now! He’s to live with me. I’m afraid you would try to seduce him!”

"No! You fucking liar! You're the seducer – Salome, she'll never recover." I stabbed my finger at him, secrets rising to the surface on foaming waves, like kelp ripped from the seabed by summer storms.

"What?" His face went red – the muscles in his neck bulged at mention of our daughter.

I knew when to back down. He'd grown used to striking me, disguising it with the trappings of love. He was the best friend of mental torture. They grew up together, were soulmates, fed each other by hand. What did I expect anyway – the truth? Jared wasn't likely to allow anything so pure to spill out of his mouth. It was a comfort to me that, or so I believed, she'd never want to return to her father's house, despite his protestations about her part in the seduction.

"Yes, I'll return him to your side, but... you must leave him for a month... to settle... first. Let him be close to you when his training cloaks itself around his shoulders – best to hide all of the knives and forks – even plastic ones. Who knows what thoughts Delphi put in his mind? It's to me she comes for the physical joys..."

"Stupid woman!" He stabbed a finger towards my eyes. "Someone will watch him. We'll listen night and day. Your Delphi might've slipped up – so I may find out a small amount of information. He should be with me only as your son could be dangerous to you now, as he can kill!" Suddenly he stroked my cheek, looked at me tenderly – a look that always melted my heart. "You know she'll have far more data about us, now, than we ever wanted her to have and will no doubt use it to control. What if she's in league with Merlin?"

"Merlin's unimportant, for the gods' sake. You were able to easily poison him, tie him up and leave him to die. Get your mind off him! It's obsessed! Henry rules his Realm by love. You'll never do that!" I needled him as the veiled threat about his evil use for Darke rattled me.

Was he only going to watch and listen to my son or would he continue to train him for more sinister deeds? I'd ask Delphi to come, once more, before Jared claimed his soul. "Yes, but Merlin lived. Despite the fact I got what I wanted somehow we ended up losing every-

thing. Stupid bitch! Don't you see that? He managed to turn my triumph into defeat. He's my biggest danger! It was as if the world had turned against me. I ran out of luck. He cast spells on me and I'll not forget it. I'm sure he even threw you across my path so I'd be distracted."

He'd stumbled, almost blurting out things that might later be cause for regret, about his love for Clarisse, and the fact he didn't love me but only saw me as a temptress who somehow was in collusion with his enemies. I was glad I'd not told him my suspicion that Darke had killed the father of his sister-in-law's first child, but that man wasn't his hated brother, Henry.

So I rode away from the homestead – content I'd not allowed Jared to find out that Henry's heart still counted each moment of the day and the throb of the night – perhaps. My tongue had slipped up – used the present tense when speaking of him but he might just think that was because I was used to Henry being alive. It might take him a while to realise that if I'd known for sure Henry was dead I'd be excited about it; I would be crowing.

I thought of Clarisse. Henry had taken her maidenhood and Jared had destroyed it. Her husband had been kind, tender, patient and gentle when they'd returned to Camelot, the place that had once been a Monckastery; we all needed our spies. Mine was close to the room she slept in by herself. That's how I'd found out about the damage Jared had done. It wasn't difficult for me to learn that Jared still felt deeply for her. So there'd been no children for a decade. Now there was one. Someone had finally seduced her.

Darke had been dispatched to kill its father! But something strange had happened. Thoughts jostled with emotions in my head and I felt a headache coming on. When I got home I told Darke's pretty boy guard, Marion, that my son was to be secretly taken to his father's – not made part of our family – then went to bed with a pretty pill – this mother was in need of a helper. I didn't intend to be the one to tell Darke he was never to return, watch his distress, try to stop him from throwing a belligerent tantrum.

Thus Salome retained her place as my first naturalborn child. Though she hadn't yet

reached maidenhood her father had blooded her. When grown to the proper age she'd be engraved with her own kohlmarks. I'd search for a suitable husband and teach her to prick her finger, to colour the sheets so her secret would stay within her childhood homestead.

★★★

Twelve years it has been since Henry and I, Clarisse, left the cave to return to the Monckastery, claim our estate and begin to rule our people – those in the sector that had once been ruled by the Moncke who lived in this very place. Twelve years – so at last a child has been born to us; though he was not fathered by Henry he's the heir to the realm and proof that I'm genetically pure. I cannot say that about Henry, as yet, but hope to soon find out when our second child is born. I hope that it is, right now, quickening in my womb. Twelve years, it was, between the times I let him inside me. Now I'm never satisfied; Benje, his once unknown brother is to thank for that.

This morning when I awoke my child had disappeared but with the agreement of Henry and myself, taken by Merlin and Tanith to be secreted in a safe place – given his proper training, untainted by the unholy emotions of blood, which is thicker than water. Benje went to places unknown, without warning, a week before. He'd been with us for such a short time and I feel it's my fault he fled. This has made me sad but at least I know my son, Tor, is protected and will become a powerful Wizard, as he's born to be.

Benje, however: I've no idea what happened to him; strange that Heathcliffe also disappeared on the same day. Perhaps Henry's younger brother is ridden with guilt, but he shouldn't be. When Jared forced himself into me and impregnated me I was made unable to let a man near me. Since I was given to Benje, in a physical way, I've been freed from those painful memories. Now I can give myself to Henry, who's always had me spiritually, in a physical way too.

"Have you seen Benje and Heathcliffe?" asked Henry as he came into the dining room to eat breakfast.

"No! They said nothing to you before they went away? I don't believe they've left together as I saw nothing to suggest they were close friends. Benje's your brother – Heathcliffe, your adopted son. Though they've been here for only a short time I thought they would've told you! Perhaps Heathcliffe remembered where he came from; he's not an orphan after all. Maybe when Tor arrived they both felt jealous or displaced, as he's a very powerful being, though still only a baby; they both may've felt a little overwhelmed, or their secrets became a problem to them."

"They're your son and brother too. You love them as much as I do and I've never seen you behave in any way towards them that's made me think you feel any other way! How come you're suddenly distancing yourself from them – speaking as if I've a relationship to them and you don't? You're as much a confidante as I am."

"It's not that at all!" I banged a ladle angrily on the top of a steel bowl making it ring out like the bells at the brass gate that were used once a year to call our subjects to the annual gathering to celebrate the Monckes' leaving. "It's just that when it comes to secrets – I thought they might go to one who's very close to them. Benje hasn't told... you things, has he?" Feelings of discomfort drained colour from my thoughtbytes, parentheses and ellipses hiding the secrets shared only with the third brother.

It was disconcerting to hear Henry referring to him as my brother as well. It was bad enough that I loved them both, but in different ways, and had borne Benje's child. I thought suddenly, with horror, that the middle brother had been the first. The oldest had been the second. The youngest had been the third. The child of the first had died by my own hand and the child of the second lived on. Was that an omen? All three brothers loved me but one I hated, so had killed his seed inside me. The child of the second, Tor, had been taken from me; so had the father. The one brother, Henry, who truly loved only me was still by my side and would remain so forever. I'd bear his children and stay with him. It was then I knew, for sure, that Henry was the brother that must survive for peace to be restored to the land.

If Benje had gone for good Henry would never discover the truth. It wasn't something evil but was for the greater good of the whole planet – but it would hurt him deeply. That's the only reason it was a secret, as I wasn't guilty about it.

"It's only two years since Merlin and Tanith returned from wherever they wandered. Now they've gone too – but I know it's for our son's safety, that he has to be taken and hidden from Jared," Henry griped.

"Don't you know where they went after your journey through our Realm, and why?" I wondered if they'd told him of their sojourn at Planetary Control.

"Look, Merlin'll string you all kinds of fantastical stories about his deeds but he's really just a weaver of webs! You haven't actually fallen for it have you? The only thing I believe is that my first naturalborn son's a threat to Jared, so is in danger. I only let Merlin take him at all because I believed it."

I sighed deeply and loudly but didn't answer him, turned to hide my frustration. Henry's an earth-bound creature and doesn't see what has been demonstrated to him all his life. He refuses to acknowledge those things that occur through the power of the mind. Sometimes I think he puts too much faith in the things of flesh and blood. Suddenly tears welled in my eyes and though I tried to hold them back was unable to – I felt Henry's arms close around me as I sobbed convulsively.

"I'll go and get him, if you're so upset! I will search to the ends of the earth, find him – kill any one who gets in my way. If they won't return Tor – well – I'll kidnap him! Hmm, to kidnap my own son... is a strange idea. I just thought you could bear it, to have him safe..."

"No! It's not that! They must have him – for more than just his safety! I was thinking – all these years we thought we were unhappy because we didn't have a child! Now we have one and we've lost everyone who's loved by us. In a few weeks our world has emptied out! These twelve years I've feared the touch of a man and so no child was conceived, but we had friends around us. These twelve years we've pined for something to fill the emptiness in our

hearts and when we attain it we lose everything. It's just so completely unfair!"

"There's still Joey, your pretty boy maid who's been looking after you since you attained maidenhood, Gaeve, the spy who helped me best Jared, Gareth and his people."

"Oh, you know no one can really get close to Gareth and the others! I know they're friendly and jolly but – when it comes to the crunch – their ranks close. Gaeve and Joey – well – yes, they're my friends. Tanith, Benje, Tor, Merlin, the mysterious brooding Heathcliffe – I'll miss them all. It's like I've been reduced to nothing!"

"Clarisse, Clarisse, Clarisse, Echo will come if you call her, in fact I insist she comes and stays with you. You can go to the village, visit Venus at my old homestead. I trust her. She's the mother of the other four children in my family. You know that she is estranged from Jared – now – knows too well what he's like, that's why I gave her my homestead."

"Venus? Do you think... could I be a friend to her even though she happily lets Jared... inside her?"

"Yes, I do! Go to her. You'll see she's a... very nice, good person – warm and caring."

"Alright... Gods, I wish Tanith were here! She'd know if I should or not."

"Would you rather stay in the cottage to be near Echo, instead of her coming here? You'd be near the cave and waterfall, close to the back way to the village and those things that are most dear to you... to us?"

I was suddenly alarmed. Why did Henry want me so far away from him? He must know that of all things in my life he was the most precious. I didn't want to go there now, because the cottage was a reminder of time spent with Benje. It was my second prophecy and so it had to be done. Cassandra was there as well – also a constant reminder because she'd seen the father of my first child in a vision and tried to warn me of it but I'd taken no notice, dismissed it as insane ranting, long ago before Henry and I left the Monckastery and were freed from the Monckes' rule.

"Henry, I don't want to be away from you..."

He interrupted me: "I didn't want to tell you – because of everyone going away – but, well..."

"What?"

"I have to go away. Merlin left me instructions. There are a few incursion problems I'll have to sort out in several villages near the northern mainland."

"Gods! Merlin! He always comes along – disrupts us. What's happening there?"

"Apparently King Genghis, in the sector north of us, has ordered his troops to leave the mainland he controls and invade my islands. He wants to take from me this kingdom of Pacifica, as well as my lands in the north and west. According to King Raj he's pushing further east into his territory as well."

"So I'm to lose you, am about to lose you – as well! It could be forever, Henry, couldn't it? What can you do?"

"Well, King Raj and I are going to meet with the villagers on our borders which are being infiltrated by Genghis' people and thus being used to stir up trouble. If we can't sort it out – for it's only the inhabitants who can repel an invasion – then we've already formed an alliance with King Peter, north of Genghis. All three of us will invade his territory on the border he's not protecting; if needs be we'll kill him and replace him. There is someone we already have in mind."

"So, it's that dangerous – you already know because you've got contingency plans!"

"Unfortunately, yes," he sighed. I saw his victory depended on my support, and so I urged him on. "You must go, I know – but I may not yet have a child inside me. I want us to have many more! You'll be away a long time. It's more than just a small problem in a border village."

"I've visited the laboratory many times over the twelve years I've been waiting for you..." he trailed off, embarrassed as I winced and turned away. "There are many thousands of possible children there."

"Then we are back to doing it the old way – the Monckes' way? Babies in tanks..."

"Oh, I suppose, yes, you're right. It's ironic! I never thought I would. We rose up against them because..."

"But, then... I can't be sure I have your child inside me as the... men's seed is mixed, isn't it?"

I secretly thought it ironic that I should so care that the child be fathered by Henry. The first was different, though – the first was born to a prophecy.

"I haven't allowed mine to be mixed. It's common, you know, for maidens to go to the laboratory. We must grow in numbers quickly – this method is more certain, actually."

Then why, I thought angrily, had this not been done to make me pregnant with Tor? I wouldn't have had to keep secret from Henry that I sacrificed myself to the earthgod with his brother before laying, completely, with him and now had Benje's child. Our best friend, Henry's brother, wouldn't have felt he had to flee from us in shame.

I begged Henry to stay until I'd been tested to see if I was pregnant with his child but he insisted he couldn't, as his business was urgent. He'd already delayed for a week to be with me and be comforted himself; he was upset about the disappearance of Benje, Heathcliffe, Tanith, Tor and Merlin. We were both desolate, mystified – while each knew where they themselves were, why they'd gone and when they'd be back. None had tendered a reason for their sudden departure. Where once the air had been parted, conveying their visage to me by a disturbance in the ether, now there was nothing but the incessant thrum of nothingness in my mind. I guess it happened that way was because we were used to mysterious disappearances and separations accompanied by no emotion. It was the way of the Monckes. It was our culture. It was how we expected things to be.

Perhaps someone had systematically slain them all, I thought. Perhaps, in peace, we'd let our guard down and an assassin had invaded our castle. Our hearts and lives had been full when our friends and family were close. Now they'd all gone within a week of each other. My heart was now as empty as the space inside the mirror ball in the Temple. I could glitter in the light of day, for others to see but inside trapped, musty air festered.

Henry dressed for a conflict, collected the

wolves from the kennels and sat astride his horse. I thought his protective clothes made him seem cold. His armour glistened with blood of the dead and dispossessed. Crimson confetti sprinkled on the driveway as the sun disappeared over the rounded horizon.

We rode towards the main entrance to Camelot. I wanted to accompany him as far as I could, as soon he and his wolves would be gone far away into a very dangerous environment for an amount of time I did not know. So, my life would be empty.

I wasn't comfortable, though, as two of his men stayed close and peered around nervously. I wasn't used to him being surrounded by men with kohlmarks writhing, so felt unsettled. Once Jared had held me with them, so close they'd disappeared from view. Brown designs were buried with pain and unconsciousness, in my mind. The horse's reins became manacles, slowly strangling my wrists, holding me back. As I receded Henry grew larger. It was as if he was the sky, the earth, the water, the wind.

So we were not able to say passionate good-byes as we had done the night before, in front of a fire, nestled on fine fur rugs and sipping mellow wine. Love stirred inside me as I thought of it. He glanced back at me and smiled wanly as if reading my mind. I knew he felt as empty as I did. I watched him plaintively as he rode through the brass gates, his head turning to take a last look at me. When I started to turn to go back inside the grounds of Camelot he spurred his horse and the small band galloped away. It was the moment of cleaving – one becomes two, two become none.

I saw other men already gathering in the distance, heading along the road below, where they would join their king. I didn't see Jared. The bells were peeling out in a particular way. Men would recognise the rings and leave their homesteads, fully armed, to join Henry as he rode towards the north. One of Gareth's men tolled the bells – as it was their domain. They also kept the doors polished as they had done for many generations. Gareth's men would ride into battle with Henry. The bell-ringer would stay to herald their return. In a way it was the exact opposite to

the journey he'd made towards the Monckastery from the cave. The bells had rung out in times past to call the men to battle and I'd watched the procession as it went afield but this time it was to be the final battle, I could feel it in my bones. I shuddered as I thought about my three prophecies. I'd been given to one, been taken by one and given myself to the other. I had grown the new king inside. What, I wondered, did the third one mean? Whom was I destined to kill twice?

Jared would ride with Henry. He'd have to. It was his duty. I had no idea then, as I watched him go, what plots and plans the older brother was already embroiled in. I didn't know that he was about to find out his most recent one had failed.

Henry no longer carried the sword Jared had forged for him, with Merlin's design and materials. It was no longer needed. The Monckes had fled before its force, without even seeing it. Henry and Excalibur had a reputation that strode before them.

It'd been discarded long ago. Merlin took Henry to a place beside the sea where there was a cliff that jutted out over raging angry waters. He flung it far out, to be swallowed up by the briny waters, where it would lie until it rusted away. No one would be able to climb down or go by boat to retrieve it as the sea was always churning and crashing over the cliffs below, however calm the winds were. Henry told me that as it curved over the waves he suddenly felt he wanted it back so reached out his hand as if to grasp it. The sword hung for a moment, suspended, but Merlin cried out, saying it would fly back and slay him so reluctantly forced himself to stop desiring it, which was a great effort. As it sunk beneath the sea, blade first, as if trying to pierce the very earth, red droplets glinted in the sun. He knew it was not the jewels as they'd been removed. He turned and gasped. Merlin opened his hand and he saw that the gems lay there glowing. He knew the power of goodness lay in the jewels. Merlin told him he'd seen the blood of those with broken hearts who, in centuries past, had leapt off the spuming cliff and dashed themselves upon the rocks. The scabbard was buried elsewhere, its leather destined to

become the lifeforce sucked up into a blade of grass, to be eaten by an animal – food for man, thus to become a vehicle of good – so the two couldn't magically come together.

Would the sword rise through the water and strike one of the brothers down, guided by my hand? Which one was destined to die by my hand? I knew in my heart I'd have to kill Jared one day. I'd murdered him once by aborting his child. How else could I kill twice but by slaying both the man and his seed? I'm sure he didn't truly love me. Henry did. So it would be Henry who'd be the only one left, and peace would reign in the land.

Benje had to die too. I didn't want that to happen but felt it had already come to pass. If the three prophecies meant for Henry had come true exactly as said then why wouldn't mine? Only the one brother, who truly loved the princess, must remain for peace to be restored to the land. I thought we had been fairly free of war in these past twelve years and had hoped it would remain so, though all three brothers, as far as I knew, still lived. A shudder went up my spine, like the rungs of a ladder, as I thought of Benje. What was I feeling? Did I see him dead? If so, how had I been the cause of it?

I went to my bedroom – the one I'd slept in alone for so many years, until Benje had melted the ice inside me and I'd been able to let Henry lie in me. I was restless, and soon began wandering from room to room. Then I realised I wanted to go to the cottages, so I packed a few things, called Joey and we set off. Echo could take my mind off my loneliness and fear.

"Come with me, to the laboratory, Echo?" I wanted to find a way to get her to leave the cottages – she said she was afraid but thought I could talk her into going and facing the world. "I'm being tested and need someone with me. In more normal times I'd have Henry there."

"Clarisse, I'm not going. If I'm not here when 'you know who' arrives I'll miss him. He'll go looking for me somewhere else and we'll never find each other."

Echo had only started to be like this since Benje had rejected her but she pretended she'd

been waiting for her true love since the Moncke left.

"But you've been waiting for twelve years!" I went along with her delusions. "Believe me, it's much better to take the plunge and grasp what you want than wait forever for something that may..." My guilt welled to the surface. "I held myself in a frozen state for a long time because of what Jared did and wished now I hadn't. When I first saw my son, Tor, I wanted to give myself to Henry lots of times and have many more children. You must not wait. Find someone else... he's not worth it. Perhaps Benje doesn't even love you."

I knew Benje didn't love her. She'd waste away while he never gave her a second thought. It was me he loved. When Merlin brought him to Camelot Echo thought his heart was free so she told me she would try to lasso it.

"Well, I'm going and you should be there to find out if I'm having another child."

"Why do you think I, who has no one to love, should want to go with you to find out if you're having another baby!" She glared, her face close into mine.

I was shocked and realised I was no longer close to Echo. Perhaps I hadn't ever really seen her as she truly was, an introverted pessimist. It wasn't my fault Benje rejected her. She wasn't the one who was to give birth to his child. Benje's child, conceived inside me, was the prophecy. Only to him was my body to be given and none other could take it first.



As I walked to the laboratory I remembered those past days. I could've ridden and been there in the time it takes for the sun to add an inch to my shadow but decided I wanted solitude to sort a few things out. The long silent space could be filled with a strip of thoughtbytes, cut and pasted to make a sensible whole. I didn't even let Joey accompany me. Tears streamed down my face. Henry had been so overjoyed when Benje, his childhood friend at the Monckastery, was discovered. It had been just before he'd returned from the journey around the realm, shortly after

Merlin and Tanith came back from their two years at Planetary Control.

What a bitter irony that they were sprung from the same mare. Thus Benje was to become my destiny. I'd not conceived to Henry, though he'd been the first. It had been a brief interrupted moment of pleasure. I'd murdered Jared's spawn – tried to kill myself just to match the moment that he'd created by raping me. Benje was left. He had to be the one. I knew it with a fatalistic knowledge as soon as I learnt his true identity. So, the lamb was led to the slaughter. It was the love between us, like the love I had for Henry – the matriarchal line – but also my distance from him, that enabled me to sacrifice myself to the earthgod. Benje had been sent by the Moncke, after he'd reached manhood, to live in a remote village on an island across the northern sea, close to the mainland, now ruled by King Genghis. Merlin found him. I knew for a long time he was Henry's brother but Henry didn't find out till Benje told him. Then they became even closer than they'd been as children. I was thrilled too and we soon became a close trio going everywhere together. Echo seemed to be a perfect companion for him. Merlin planted the idea in her mind and I encouraged them to spend time in each other's company. Then we were four and Benje happily spent all of his nights in Echo's bed. All was well till one day Henry went away to settle some minor war between two of the villages of which he was in charge.

I was lonely as usual and went to my cottage. Echo and Benje were at the castle – knowing when to leave me alone. Then I didn't ask why he hadn't gone with Henry. Perhaps, I thought, few men were needed on the mission so Benje had opted to stay with Echo. Two days later I saw him walking towards my veranda. I quickly got dressed – when I stayed at the cottage I never wore clothes – as, mostly, no men came there. His solitude made my eyes dart about, as I expected Echo to be with him, if it was a social call. I peeked at him through a window and he seemed edgy. Several times, before he knocked at the door, he clenched fists, breathing deeply, arching his head backwards. My first feeling was of alarm. Was he here because some harm

had befallen Henry and he was sent to call me back to the Camelot? Why wasn't Echo with him, if it was merely a social visit?

I opened the door. He shuffled his feet, a boy teasing a rhino beetle, which strayed haplessly into his path as he walked along, looking for the treasures that only his eyes can discern. I felt hot – in a way I hadn't since the first time Henry had touched me. Ambrosia welled through my loins and tingled in my breasts.

“Clarisse...”

The spell was suddenly broken and I felt normal again. “Where's Echo?” I peered across my front yard. I went outside, sat on a chair, for the first time not feeling safe alone in a room with him.

“She's not coming.”

“Why not? We can go to the pool together – have fun!” I tried to lighten the mood.

“Ah... no, we're not having fun, Clarisse.”

“What is it? Can I help? I'll phone, she can be here in just a short time.” It was clear Henry wasn't in trouble or he would have blurted it out straight away so I prattled nervously on.

“She's taken some liquid – it's foul. I took her to the laboratory. There was a child. I'm sorry, but when I told her, she didn't want it.”

“Didn't want it! Gods! I'd take it! What did you tell her?” I suddenly jumped up as I wanted to go to her and comfort her, tell her to keep the child within her and give it to me but couldn't.

I felt a small hand on my shoulder pushing me down into the chair. Tanith came up to me unnoticed because I'd been so upset. She walked around in front of me, knelt down, clasped my hands in hers and looked me in the eye. Benje hovered awkwardly.

“Listen to me, Clarisse!” she ordered.

Benje suddenly came over, bent towards me, said, “You and Henry haven't... as far as I know. You'll never have a child like that. I love you!”

I was shocked – some wraith jerked my hands away from Tanith. “What are you doing to me now? You planned this – you and him!” My index finger jabbed at Benje's face, seeking to make the enemy flee in fear or be impaled on the point of my displeasure. “Henry will be back soon. I'll tell him. I don't care how I feel – that

I can't. I see Jared's face when he tries to – that he was around then, and reminds me of Jared. I'm not going to!"

"You're the Princess and you must be given, not taken," intoned Tanith.

"Jared took me! Yes, I figured it out. I've given myself to Henry though, you see!"

"No, you haven't," said Benje.

I stood up and slapped him on the face. "Oh, so you think I'll give myself to you, do you? I won't!"

"Then how will the Prince be born, huh?"

"When I want to give myself... gods – it's nothing to do with you and I'm not sure it has got anything to do with you either!" That was for Tanith.

"It's not up to you!"

"What?"

"The prophecy is 'given not taken' but you're not the one to be doing the giving."

I was horrified as it sunk in. I was to be given to someone and it was Tanith who was to decide. I blanched, swallowed and sagged in the chair as the truth hit me. Tanith was going to give me to the third brother!

"Why do you think you haven't given yourself to Henry yet?"

Benje groaned. "Clarisse, I love you."

I stared at them both as they spoke; knowing I had no choice. I had to do what was right. Echo would never forgive me. Henry would stop loving me. But it had to be done. It was my destiny.

"Shall we do it now, then, so I can go to Echo? I want to be by her side and wipe our dealings out of my mind as soon as possible. Come on!" I yanked Benje's hand and walked to the door, unbuttoning my shirt.

Benje lay with me on the bed. Tanith had left. Yes, I thought to myself, he does fit the description of Cassandra. That day I wasn't given to Benje. He said he couldn't betray his brother and friend from birth. Inside I was relieved and smugly thought to myself I'd beaten Tanith and Merlin as they weren't there to ensure the deed was done.

Soon I was freely walking naked around the cottage again and so too was Benje. I went to see Echo but felt uncomfortable. She returned to her

cottage and at first wouldn't speak to me but I won her over when she saw Benje wasn't my lover; we were just uninhibited friends. The three of us had a lot of fun. But Benje wouldn't move into Echo's bed again, as he said it was over since he'd realised he loved me. It amused me, for his organ never hardened when he was with me though he said he loved me and wanted badly to lie inside me. I didn't want it and didn't care so didn't try. If Tanith came back and I wasn't carrying Benje's child I'd suggest it be done by the Moncke's method at the laboratory. If he had to father a child of mine for a prince to be born then I'd go along with it. Henry sent a letter to say he wouldn't be home for some time but it didn't concern me.

One day Benje confided, "Clarisse, I think I cannot do this any longer. I'll leave. It's too hard to be near you whom I love when you don't love me and to see Echo so sad because I no longer care for her."

"Benje, don't. You're such a good friend. I love to be with you. If Henry must be away, then it's only your company I want. And you do still care for Echo!"

However Benje left that night while I slept. In the morning I discovered him gone and went after him. I did not want to fail in my duty.

By his tracks I could tell he seemed to be heading toward the cave. I took my time – let him get settled in, I thought, then surprise him by walking in. When I entered the cave he was sitting, gazing into the fire. There were several empty mead bottles on the floor. I watched, unseen, as he raised his head and took a deep drink from the stein I recognised as the one Jared had made for Henry before the sword had been bestowed on him. I was surprised to see Benje choosing to drink out of it. Henry often had used it in the cave. It wasn't something he'd grown to distrust like the sword. I smiled as I remembered the mellow feeling when we'd drank mead in the cave and recalled the first time I'd met the wolves.

I think it was the way Benje's face resembled Henry's in the firelight, or perhaps it was the stirring of good memories when I'd been in the cave with only Henry, that made me do what I

did next. A warm glow radiated through me and my whole body pulsed with desire for a man. I no longer cared if it was Henry or not. I only felt the throbbing waves pushing me to Benje's side.

I draped myself over his back and he purred with delight. At first he was startled but soon realised who it was. In one fluid movement we were lying on the ground and kissing each other hungrily. As each piece of clothing came off, in a slow sensuous motion, Benje brushed his mouth over my skin. I pushed my hands under his clothes and arched towards him. The intensity became too much and I cried out as hot rushes rippled through me. I tensed my muscles as he swelled then erupted with a moaning cry.

Afterwards we lay on the furs near the fire in silence. Benje filled the stein with mead, and we took turns to hold it up to each other's mouths and sip from it. Some of it spilt as we laughed and had fun. After we'd drained the stein dry I held it up to the light from the fire so that Benje could see the way the thread twisted around to spell out Henry's name.

Benje looked at me. "Does it bother you that we...?"

"I... yes, Henry would be saddened, but... we must do what's required of us."

"You enjoyed it, though?"

"Well, you're not Jared!"

"I think – don't be too hard on Jared – he... is, I, Henry, well, I don't... did Henry ever tell... the Moncke probably did it to everyone when we reached manhood... did it from behind... to us all."

"What? Do you think it's affected Henry...? You know he doesn't... He was very young... I'm told!" I was shocked and could hardly look at him.

He picked at a piece of silver thread on the stein. "Ooh, wow! Look!" I saw he'd ripped the seam joining the ends of the silver thread apart and it was peeling off.

"Don't!" I felt it was an ominous premonition, somehow he was unravelling Henry, but it was no use. Silver twine was falling off the stein as if it were unwinding itself. Benje squealed. Underneath, the stein was marked. There were

scratches on its surface. I leant close and fingered it, as he read what they spelt out.

"Whoever drinks from this stein shall be given eternal life."

"Then... Henry, you and I are now immortal?"

"Oh, that could be. Has anyone else...?"

"No!"

"So, it's just us three, then? I'll live in eternal torment, seeing you and him!"

"But... it doesn't make... sense..."

"I know the prophecy!"

"Then, it cannot be...!"

"Wait!" I cried. "'Will be given' isn't necessarily something we have inherent in us. It could be something existing outside of us but we receive it... If you can see what I mean."

"Hmm, yes. Like the 'princess is given' but she doesn't do the giving, right?"

"Yes – exactly, it is tricky wording!"

I didn't leave the cave that day, or the next, as I wanted to be sure that his child was inside me. We made love many times as we stayed there a full month – only because we needed to make sure a child would be quickening in my womb. I took the opportunity to show Benje the underground lake.

"I'm afraid here. Henry pretended he was dead when we first came and I was a gibbering mess... It's a place of pilgrimage, Benje, everyone tries to visit once in their lifetimes. Of course when the Monckes ruled that it was forbidden."

"I know that... Of course... We all do... it's like so many things, Clarisse. Fears and prejudices lie where they're formed, deep in our minds, and though they're buried our actions and thoughts are coloured by them still, unbeknownst to us."

"I don't understand," I mused. "It's a place of great beauty. Is it because of the smooth black walls that feel as if they might close in on you at any time, or the sound of the flowing water? As we don't know where it comes from or goes to, so it seems to start and end as a mystery. Is it the sight of great crystal caverns suddenly appearing as you walk along?"

"Imagine this. The lake and crystalline caves are a revered and sacred place because they are

so peaceful and clean; when you are here! Look!” He swung his arm in a wide arc. “All the world’s cares can be put aside and those things which perturb you can be thought about clearly. The Moncke wanted to destroy what he saw as a threat, contrived to eradicate it, charging some naive maiden with the job and disposing of her afterwards! Perhaps several men did it to cast aspersions on all maidens, as the Moncke and they would be happy to do, by creating a myth around one who had evilly desecrated a sacred place! It was in their interests to perpetuate fear and anger towards maidens. How else to make themselves omnipotent! Not to worry, the cave and lake obviously still hold their mystique otherwise they wouldn’t be visited as a kind of pilgrimage and it’s a maiden... You,” his voice quivered as he hesitated and quickly looked away, “who put the god of the cave back where it belongs. You,” he turned to me and held me by the shoulders and embraced me, “are the maiden who has restored the ability of men to love!”

I felt he was speaking of our personal relationship. Thoughts of Henry, away at the war, crossed my mind but I wasn’t guilty or uncomfortable. I was supposed to bear this man’s child. Ancient bloodlines flowed in our veins and needed to come together and be strengthened. If that was the case then why should I not be happy and at ease? I felt the love that Benje was expressing for me spill over and engulf me and knew at that moment I loved him as deeply as I loved his brother. I shuddered as I thought it could only end in the death of one of them.

“I’m chilled. Let us go back to the surface and get our bodies heated up in the warm sun.”

“My body’s raging,” Benje began but trailed off as I strode away.

As we ascended to the surface I told Benje a story of an earlier time when a maiden innocent of wrongdoing had been unfairly misrepresented.

“Eve fell in love with Adam and she controlled him, being the stronger personality, but the people in the kingdom began to make fun of him, as they saw how a maiden ruled his life, and so thought him weak. Because he was the heir to the throne of Eden and his father didn’t

like it they were exiled. Some story about a snake and an apple was concocted. In Eden the snake once used to be the symbol of male strength and the apple represented the nurturing of the female. Then males and females were kept apart as the snake and apple were said to have brought about the downfall of Adam and Eve. After that they were reviled and Eden disappeared as these things, the very basic elements which are necessary for the continuance of life were shunned!”

“That’s it! Clarisse! That is eternal life! The three of us will be given eternal life – a child!” said Benje excitedly as we got to the surface.

I said nothing. I was confused and fearful about how things would unfold. We didn’t talk much for the rest of the day. I didn’t sleep well – nor did Benje, as I heard him tossing, turning and sighing all night.

Benje went back to the castle first to await Henry’s return. It wasn’t till after he’d gone I realised he should actually have been with the war party. Why hadn’t he accompanied them? Did that mean Henry knew what he was staying behind to do?

For the first time in twelve years I felt uncertainty about Henry’s feelings for me. Had he been finding comfort with someone else? Is that why he was conspiring to give me to his brother? I thought these things as I went towards the cottage we had built beside the pool that dropped into the waterfall – that we’d bathed in on our way to the cave after we’d escaped from the Monckastery. So I wept and my mind was in turmoil when I got there. I’d wait for Henry to arrive. We always spent time there after he returned from a campaign. I watched the path constantly.

Finally my love came sauntering down the road and the sight of him walking towards the door calmed me down. If he knew about Benje and me... and that I was complicit in it, I thought, he wouldn’t mind. If he didn’t know he need not find out because none of us would tell him! My whole body ached for him and heat rose through me. I didn’t know how I’d be able to restrain myself – for I’d a new found freedom and wanted to share it with the only man I loved.

He stepped inside. I'd seated myself behind a table. He said hello in the same formal manner we'd grown used to. He sat down opposite me and we smiled and drank coffee. He told me about the campaign but I could hardly take in what he said. My mind was churning. I had to let him inside me before the day ended so that the child would appear to be his. But, also, my body was raging for his touch.

"Henry, let's go to the pool."

"It's nearly dark!"

"But it's a full moon – a summer full moon and it will be a huge silver orb! The water will be warm and you can relax there!" I tried to appear nonchalant while inside I wanted to force myself onto him where he sat.

We walked to the pool and the cool water soothed the heat of my skin. Henry sagged in the water as it washed away his aches and pains. In twelve years we had barely touched, apart from a few kisses as he and I parted company. I knew what would happen, however, if my breasts accidentally brushed against him. I let the current push me onto him as he was turned the other way. He stood and turned. I saw he was hard and ready so before he could shy away, afraid of alarming me, I pulled him down into the water, laughing as if I was merely playing. He plunged after me as I swam away then lay on my back. I was under the water in a moment as he bore down on me, now unable to stop. He tried to pull away when he realised what he was doing, no doubt guilty his actions served to remind me of the vile deed Jared had done, but I dug my fingers into his buttocks, arched towards him and we rolled in the pool as we fully consummated our love for the very first time.

In the weeks to come we satisfied ourselves many times. As the child began to swell in my belly we stopped, but there was a new carefree feeling between us. Then Tor was born and our lives changed forever.

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"Now just what on earth is Clarisse doing here?" Joey cried out as he saw me approaching the laboratory, my reverie over. "You've never been

here to get help before. You didn't need our help the last time!"

No, but I did need help from others. "That's true – but Henry will be away for a while."

I told Richard what I wanted – to be made pregnant if my test was negative.

"There's no problem – he's been here many times these last years. We don't mean to pry – but, well, some time after he came back from that last campaign – he stopped coming altogether."

"Well, then, don't pry!"

Richard glanced at Joey and smirked, nodding imperceptibly. Richard looked back at me and smiled saying, "Come with us – we'll show you something."

I was amazed at what I saw. Deep beneath the laboratory, after we travelled in a lift for two minutes, I saw many rooms off a corridor – each marked with numbers. I read each one as I passed but they made no sense to me.

"What's this?"

"Here it is!" Joey gestured as he unlocked a door.

"What?" I gasped, as I saw a small icy-cold room billowing with cold vapour.

"In here are your specimens – the Moncke took samples from your body when you were born and during the tests to see if you were genetically pure eggs were extracted from your ovaries. They've been fertilised."

"Why wasn't I told – Henry doesn't know – he'd have said. We could have lots of children."

"Merlin... is a wizard, you know – and Tanith."

"That explains it! They're meddling...! So, if I'm not with child then I soon can become so?"

"This is simple. The embryos are ready!"

"Are they... Henry's?" I enquired.

Joey and Richard squirmed and their eyes slid away from me so it was obvious they were hiding something. I jabbed my finger at Richard. "Then destroy them!"

My test was negative.

I went with Joey and Richard as they found an unfertilised egg and watched as they fertilised it with Henry's sperm. I remained conscious while

they implanted it. They encouraged and hurried its development within me with an array of bizarre instruments, and I waited till my body was ready for a test to be done.

It was again negative.

“The eggs may be too old.”

“No!” Richard retorted. “I think it’s Henry. There’s something strange with his... sperm.”

“But I’ve had his child!”

“Well then. It must be alright.”

I wasn’t about to let something happen that would cause any difficult questions to be asked so I shouted at them till Richard sighed and said, “There’s a technique, it’s one of the Moncke’s methods – we’ve read about it but haven’t done it before.”

“Does it work? Is it going to be Henry’s? He’ll be suspicious if the second child doesn’t resemble him!”

“The first one didn’t – so why should that be a problem?”

Joey grovelled and apologised profusely when I icily glared at him. I wondered why I was insisting on watching every part of the process. Now it was obvious. Richard was capable of sleight-of-hand.

“Why should things be more complex than they already are?” I immediately wished I hadn’t said it as their minds would start racing and their tongues would wag.

Fresh eggs were extracted from my ovaries and put into a large fluid-filled bubble sitting in a tank of fluid. A sample of Henry’s sperm was added. We watched as the fluid was sucked out of the bubble and it shrank. Joey pointed out the filter that would stop the eggs and sperm from coming out. I sat and watched enthralled as I was seeing the miracle of conception taking place – my own child being created! Richard swung a magnifying glass into place in front of the tank and we watched as the tiny fish-like creatures spurted around in the shrinking bubble, getting ever more frantic as the space inside became smaller. Several tried to burrow into the eggs but were unable to.

“Why is that?” I asked, “How are his... what makes the sperm so different?”

“His are rigid and have a rounded head, more

so than usual. It’ll take a great effort – for one to succeed.”

Knowing what I did about Henry’s parentage I asked, worried, “What else?”

“Oh, we’ve found nothing.”

“Then it’s just because he’s the ‘Golden Boy’!”

“Oh, gosh, yes, of course!” Richard answered.

“Our children have to be much tougher than any others! Even before birth they struggle against their lot in life!” I cried in glee, knowing this would silence their gossip.

“I just wish we could have taken samples of Tor. It’d be wonderful to know what he was made of,” Richard sighed.

“Oh, you wouldn’t question Merlin’s edicts. He said no tests!” Joseph answered.

“Never! Shush...” he held up his hand and our attention went back to the bubble in the tank.

It was squashed very small now. Many sperm lay motionless in the bottom of the bag. Two were thrashing against one egg. One went still as the other suddenly burst into the centre of the egg. If it hadn’t done so it would’ve died as the bubble was now empty of fluid. Richard immediately pressed a button on the edge of the tank and the bubble opened. The egg floated, as if it had a mind of its own and was already celebrating its new existence. We all peered through the magnifier and saw minute changes occurring in the centre of it.

“I want my child within me, Richard,” My eyes followed its journey. All I heard was a sniffling sound. I realised they were both sobbing! Then their arms were around me and I cried with relief, no longer having to bury my secret because Henry couldn’t suspect now that we weren’t able to create a baby together. My greater tears, however, were for the child of ours that was growing in its watery home.

“It can stay in the tank, Clarisse, if you want.”

“Oh, yes, okay. I can watch it. I hope Henry returns before it has to be brought out. If not – we must do this again. We’ll have to, I think, if we are to have more children. I want him to see it! Strange that I conceived Tor under water!” This I said to completely allay their suspicions

about my first son's parentage. Would they believe it? Had I said enough?

★★★

"It's not my fault, sir. I blame it on my mother. She sent me to live with my father. He taught me to do it. I had to! Once Benje was gone... the thirst was there..." Darke's voice slowly ascended the scales, changing key, his mouldy soul free of the brick walls that should've contained it, becoming a shrieking succubus. "What can I do..." moaned the writhing puddle of carbon and water on the floor.

The man he addressed had entered the room like a ghost. The only clue that he walked at all was the sight of the hem of his grey cassock flicking up in a rhythmic pulse – a manta ray gliding through coral reef coloured water. He was ancient and willowy. As he walked it seemed as if mould spores whispered from his body, like pheromones – dust off butterflies' wings. He sat behind a high polished teak desk. It was a piece of furniture that knew its purpose was to intimidate its prey into submission. He brought his hands under his mouth, digits interlocking. His beard dribbled onto the wood, like a holy man, rosary of marble shavings from the chisel of Michelangelo cascading from his palms.

"Is this all you can say in your defence, Darke? It's weak indeed. I hope these august men" – his hands waved to the right, a flicker of white confetti flying across his mouth – "think very carefully about..." He sputtered to a stop.

The august men slowly filed into the room. All but one sat. Darke was no longer compos mentis, his body made noises like a pig trussed up in a gunny sack, knowing his fate was to rotate on a spit till dead, dark pink and succulent.

He screamed, "It's the slut, my mother's..." Suddenly he was a sane logical being. The man behind the desk and the august men must have thought two young boys were in the room, awaiting their judgment – when one appeared the other disappeared like a trick done with mirrors and smoke. "I'm sorry," he continued, "I didn't mean to be disrespectful. I should not

speak ill of the dead. It's just that..." his voice spiralled up to the top of a volcano and the evil child stepped into view, "she... gods... told my stupid pretty boy..." he flicked into the good child. "Sorry, my maid Marion was told to take me to my father."

The boy, Darke, stood snivelling, pleading, asking for just an iota of understanding. He took a breath, reached down to a thong around his trousers, pulled a knife out of a scabbard, spoke with a sound that was as cold, straight and hard as the metal girders holding the ceiling in place. His voice was an unmodulated chant. It prickled the hairs on the backs of all who were present.

"My father taught me to do this, do this, do this..." and his arm rose in the air, came down with a precise stab, raised, ran through the arc again, raised. "When I think of him I do this. I did this to Benje. I did this to my mother because she wanted me to live with my father. I kept doing it sir. My father said it takes thousands of years for light to travel to earth but only a nanosecond for the speed of Darke."

The boy raised his eyes and peered separately into the points of light in each person's face. It was as if he were forging a bond with each one.

"What is your verdict," the man behind the desk finally spoke.

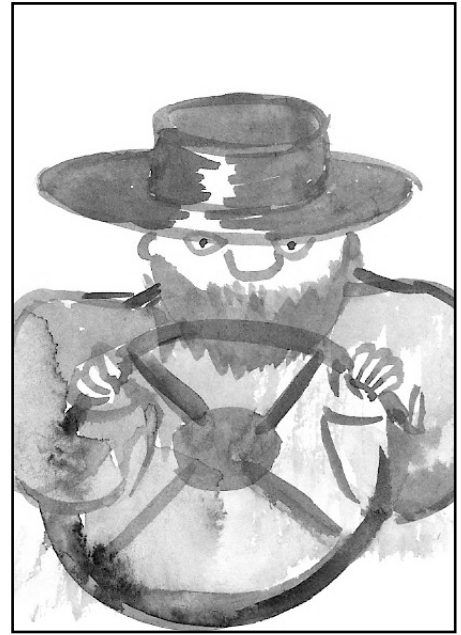
"Your honour, we find the defendant not guilty of killing his mother. It is unanimous."

Darke sprung from the floor like a cobra receiving his master's call, as notes from a flute spilled over the edge of the basket, which was his domain. He'd nothing to lose. Three fingers between his thumb and small finger raised in a jerk. The august men and the cowed man behind the desk felt the jab of a blunt stick twisted in their gut. Before any of them had a chance to react and chastise the boy he was gone.

His rapid and complete disappearance became known as the "Speed of Darke". Mothers told their daughters to behave or Darke would get them, stealing in under the guise of darkness. Fathers told their sons to be good or Darke would steal their presents on "Moncke-Free Day".

Gone English

Dan Kopcow



The yellow top pulled over to the sidewalk in front of the Irish pub to pick up the fare. It was raining hard in Center City and the Philadelphia air felt thicker than a slaughterhouse. The fare, a woman, squinted, trying to get a good look at the taxi driver. She saw he had a beard, a plain black felt hat and a plain black wool coat. All in all, he looked like nobody special. He let her in.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Are you Samuel Lapp?” she asked.

“Aye.”

“Elder Stoltzfus sent me,” she said, handing him a note from her purse. The note was already wet from its brief moment in the rain. “Reading Terminal Market,” said the woman, hopping into the back of the yellow-top buggy. “We haven’t much time before they close.”

“Then settle in, woman. Weather’s picking up,” said Lapp. The horse was giddy-yapped and they were off.

The rain suddenly turned to hail. The woman, pretty and in her mid-thirties, poked her head out the window. “Are you alright in this hailstorm?” she asked, then pulled her head back into the buggy with the alarm of an agitated turtle.

Lapp, sitting outside with the horse reigns in his hands, just nodded stoically. He tilted his hat

down tighter over his head and rode on. He opened the note, leaning over to shield it from the hail.

“*Fischer has gone English.*”

Lapp crumbled the note and stuffed it up his sleeve. Fischer, thought Lapp. Of course. His keen eyes scoped the city for clues. His nostrils, precise instruments of which any crime lab would be envious, took in tiny snorts of air, filtering and analysing for any fragments of improperly cured meat. The meat would lead him to Fischer. And to the boy.

Lapp tapped on the buggy window. “Why did The Elders send you?” he said.

“My name is Rebecca King. Of the Lancaster County Kings. Well, formerly. I’m a reporter now investigating the disappearance of Amos Beiler. The Amish boy.”

Lapp hurried his horse. “So you are English now, yes? You cannot help me find the boy.”

“Elder Stoltzfus told me about you,” she said.

Lapp’s eyed narrowed. “What did he tell you?”

“That you have a gift. ‘Special powers’ was the term he used. That you drive this taxi-buggy by day but by night, you’re...”

“I’m what?” said Lapp coldly.

“The Bearded Avenger,” she whispered.

Lapp took in a slow breath, trying to detect if she meant him any harm. Her heartbeat was normal and her blink rate was accelerated only due to her excitement of the chase.

"Aye," he said finally. "I am the Bearded Avenger."

She stared at him reverentially. She couldn't believe the city's superhero was driving her to the market. "I'd never guess it was you. I've always wanted to know. When you're in your Bearded Avenger get-up, why don't you wear a mask or cape or something?"

"You've read too many of the English comics. It's too fancy. Plain is better."

"And how did you..."

"My powers?" he interrupted, anticipating the question. "I am Ordnung, the source of the Amish blueprint for discipline," he said. Then, looking distantly, added, "It is who I am."

The yellow top pulled over at the market. "Now show me what you must show me," he demanded. She led him into the market. It was near closing and most of the stalls were putting away their goods.

"Elder Stoltzfus told me he heard of a pork vendor who could help us," she said, turning a busy corner. Suddenly, Lapp stopped. His nostrils flared and his ears twitched.

"Amos, the boy, has been here," announced Lapp. "Follow me." He grabbed Rebecca's elbow and led her to one of the Amish butcher stalls. The display case was empty and there was a young girl sweeping up behind the counter. For a moment, Lapp just stood in front of the stall, scanning with his eyes, taking in the whole scene. Rebecca watched him closely, taking notes in a small journal.

"They eviscerate pigs here in an unclean way. Not the English way, not our way," he said. "Something in-between." He charged through to the back of the stall and opened the freezers. "This is Fischer's work. I recognise his technique for filleting pork shoulder."

"You think Fischer kidnapped Amos?" Rebecca asked.

"Aye."

"Why would he do that?"

"Can I help you, Elder Lapp?" asked the girl with the broom.

"Yes, I'll need some bacon," said Lapp.

"What's the bacon for?" asked Rebecca, furiously writing it all down for her article.

"It's complicated," he said mysteriously.

Outside, Lapp held the bacon strips under his horse's nose. Rebecca watched in amazement as the horse nodded and shifted its feet, ready to lead Lapp to his quarry.

"Your horse will take us to Fischer?" asked Rebecca.

"Aye. But first to an alley."

The yellow top pulled into a deserted alleyway.

"You stay in the buggy," said Lapp. He hopped off and took off his hat. He said a small prayer then put the hat back on over his head. The hat grew in size and he pulled it over his entire body until it completely covered him. Suddenly, the giant hat popped up in the air and, having shrunk to human scale again, landed on his head.

The man in the alleyway stood arms akimbo. His felt hat was wider, his black suit was blacker, and his beard was longer. He was no longer Samuel Lapp.

"The Bearded Avenger!" cried Rebecca.

"Aye, we go," he said, his voice the deep, rich baritone familiar to everyone in the city.

The horse reared up majestically and they took off. Rebecca couldn't believe what she had just seen. The Bearded Avenger sat back and let the horse navigate. He turned to Rebecca.

"So what made you turn English?"

"You've heard of the Mennonite super-villain Barn-Razer? Years ago, when he was starting out, he converted me. I used to be his girlfriend. He has very persuasive powers," she said, ashamed. "I know my family can't take me back but..."

"You are right. They cannot. You have made your choice."

The horse galloped valiantly through the hail. It stopped in the parking lot of a Best Buy store. The giant blue and yellow sign shined in the darkness. The Bearded Avenger jumped out and

whispered to the horse. The horse whinnied back.

“Great God,” said the Bearded Avenger. Rebecca noted fear in his voice and it chilled her. “That fiend. He has Amos locked up in there... in that store... the store of the electronics monger!”

“Why would Fischer do that?” asked Rebecca, trying to calm down the Bearded Avenger.

“Because he has found out my one weakness.”

“Electronics?” she asked.

“I cannot get in there to save him,” said the Bearded Avenger, defeated.

“The boy means a lot to you, doesn’t he?”

The Bearded Avenger looked away. “He is my sidekick. I was training him to take over from me one day. Fischer must have found out somehow. But what is the use of discussing it? I’m totally powerless in that store.”

“I’m not,” said Rebecca. “Come on.”

The store was closed. They peered into the window but everything was shrouded in darkness. Rebecca pointed to a cinder block near the dumpster. The Bearded Avenger picked up the heavy block as if it were a paperclip and hurled it across the parking lot and through the glass door. Security alarms went off and all the lights came on. Rebecca grabbed the Bearded Avenger and led him inside. They made their way to personal electronics. Suddenly, the Bearded Avenger, already in a weakened state, dropped to one knee, his mouth agape at what he saw.

Amos was tied to a large, industrial refrigerator with his mouth bound with stereo wire. An iPod transmitted techno-funk into his ears while a large-screen plasma TV auto-played the latest video game.

It was the worst Amish torture imaginable.

“Bacon Boy!” cried the Bearded Avenger.

“Bacon Boy?” asked Rebecca.

But the Bearded Avenger was too weak to respond. Rebecca quickly started turning off all the electronic devices around the Bearded Avenger and Bacon Boy. Suddenly, there was a terrifying robotic voice behind them.

“Well, if it isn’t Cap’n Scrapple,” said the robotic voice. A man in electric blue leotards and night vision goggles stood on a pyramid of

microwave ovens, holding a microphone that distorted his voice.

Rebecca, trying to hold up the Bearded Avenger and Bacon Boy, turned to face him.

“Fischer,” said the Bearded Avenger.

“Barn-Razer,” said Rebecca.

“Yes, that’s right, I’m one and the same,” said Barn-Razer. “And now my trap has caught the big Amish fly.” He cackled an electronic laugh.

The Bearded Avenger, in great pain, turned to Rebecca. “You must save yourself.” The Bearded Avenger and Bacon Boy fell to the ground.

“Well,” said Barn-Razer, “that was easier than I thought!” His tights glowed an electronic blue as he leaped off the stack of small appliances.

“You bastard,” said Rebecca.

“Oh Becky, how disappointed I am in you. But once I dispose of these two do-gooders, I shall rule the city! And nothing shall get in my way!”

Rebecca opened her purse, pulled out a gun, and shot Barn-Razer clean through the head.

“Fucker,” she said.

She found the main circuit breaker for the store and turned it off. Instantly, the Bearded Avenger and Bacon Boy were back on their feet. They saw the dead, bleeding body of Barn-Razer on the floor and smiled.

“Holy crazy ex-Amish, BA!” cried Bacon Boy.

“Aye, lad. Aye. ‘Tis gratitude I owe you, Rebecca. Perhaps I will talk to the Elders about letting you back in,” said the Bearded Avenger, stroking his mighty beard.

“Oh, thank you,” she said, putting away her smoking gun.

The Bearded Avenger turned to Bacon Boy. “Now, lad, ‘tis time I brought you back to the village for the ritualistic purging ceremony. We must detoxify you of the English ways.”

“Can I bring back this iPod, BA? It has a great Amish play list,” asked Bacon Boy sheepishly.

“No, old chum. It’s evil.”

“But why?” asked Bacon Boy.

“It’s complicated,” said Rebecca.

And they all burst into a hearty laughter. TOF

The Christmas Present War

Richard K Lyon

My friend Max and I have been fighting a Christmas present war for some years now. The goal in this war is to blow the other guy's mind with a present you got without spending any money.

I started it by giving Max some paper clips I'd gold plated. This turned out to be a mistake because my very limited internet access puts me at a disadvantage. Max and I both collect pulp magazines. Two Christmases ago the best I could do was a batch of sugar-free, fat-free, zero calorie, homemade cookies. The chief ingredient is sawdust but if you're on a starvation diet – as Max and I often are – they're not that bad. Max sent me a single CD onto which he had burned hundreds of copies of vintage pulp magazines: *The Shadow*, *Doc Savage*, *Operator 5*, *The Spider*, and so on. The market price for real copies of all those magazines is at least \$300,000, if you can find them, which you can't!

This past Christmas we both escalated. Max always starts the new year by going on a starvation diet. I sent him a batch of my new improved zero calorie cookies. I soak the sawdust in very hot water under high pressure and then put it through explosive decompression. This puffs it up so it crunches like rice crispies. Again he sent me a single CD, but on it he put a copy of the June 1938 issue of *Action Comics*. That's the

issue with the first Superman story! He also included the CIA World Factbook, an enormously useful world atlas that provides detailed information on all manner of strange little places, and a large series of DoD technical reports. I got detailed reports of research projects aimed at developing gamma ray lasers, methods of antimatter storage, and ghost planes that show up on the enemy's radar but aren't really there. There was also a complete inventory of DoD's chemical weapons with maps showing exactly where they were stored! He also included a list of "Militarily Critical Technologies", a 378-page highly detailed list of all the technologies DoD regards as military secrets. You might think that such stuff would be highly classified but they aren't. Max got them from DoD simply by asking.

The way Max – who's a sociologist by profession – explained it, there are simple secrets and complex secrets. Simple secrets are things like the fact that you keep a house key hidden under the front door mat. To keep secrets like that you don't do anything. You have to avoid doing anything that gives the secret away. The situation is different for complex secrets such as the technologies of the DoD. These things are large secrets made up of an enormous number of small pieces. Many people inevitably know different



parts of these secrets. Keeping this kind of secret requires an active organised effort to restrict the flow of information. Steps such as a publicly available list of the secrets being kept can be a necessary part of this organised effort.

When I met Max at Philcon the following year, we spent several hours in the bar, drinking beer and talking. Any long conversation with Max, a three-pack a day man, always includes his complaining about the way smokers are being treated.

The other topic of conversation that night was the sociology of open secrets, a topic which Max has been studying. During our first two beers Max explained that open secrets are secrets that are kept by avoiding the appearance of secrecy. Take, for example, the US Army's M55 chemical rockets. Everybody who deals with explosives knows that either you dispose of aging ordinance or it disposes of you. Despite this, the Army made several hundred thousand M55 rockets during the 1960s, each with a non-removable warhead of VX nerve gas. This horrible mistake was compounded by storing these rockets at sites scattered all over the US. With the propellant in these rockets ticking toward inevitable detonation, the Army faced intense opposition to any possible method of disposing of the nerve gas. This affair had all the ingredients for a major scandal except for a cover-up. Every detail of this horrible affair was documented in reports available to anyone for the

asking. Lacking the appearance of secrecy the M55s never got any public attention.

At this point a lady three tables away glared at Max as he started to light another cigarette. Defiantly Max lighted up. After quietly cursing everyone he regarded as a "Health Nazi", he said, "It's all well and good for the gays to come out of the closet, but why are smokers being forced into it instead?"

Without thinking I replied, "It's another method of secret keeping. By shoving something into the closet every time something is taken out, they make it impossible for anyone to see what's at the back of the closet."

After giving me the annoyed look he uses when I make a bad joke, Max's gaze moved to the ceiling. He took a long thoughtful pull on his cigarette and said, "That's... an interesting thought. Keeping the front of the closet full protects whatever's at the back. Yes, it bears looking into."

My friend Max has a singular talent for unearthing strange facts, but he sometimes acts without thinking about the consequences. Recently a rather strange man has been asking our mutual friends about Max and me. Photos of this man show him standing on the street on a sunny day without a shadow. I'm a little afraid of what Max might send me this Christmas. Publishing this story seemed like a good way to reassure whoever – or whatever – is at the back of the closet that I can be very discreet. TQF

GLURP

JEFF CROUCH

The baby was with the babysitter, or so I imagined. I was sincerely hoping that the baby hadn't been ejected from the truck when it crashed.

People were looking around intently. The hustle and bustle of getting straight to work had ceased.

It was as though someone were dropping \$100 bills into the crowd.

The crowd would have found the baby by now – it wasn't dead in the street anyway. It wasn't in a storm drain or behind a car tyre. People were looking everywhere.

I'm not sure what the baby seat was there for. I didn't think a family pet would fit in it.

In the street, people were actually walking off with cantaloupes and strawberries, anything that remained unharmed. They might have escaped with the baby too.

No, there were now people trying to scrape up the syrupy glurp.

"Was it the baby or the family pet?" I asked the receptionist.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

But the mother was not screaming about her baby; she had lost the family dog.

A firefighter, injured when the firetruck slid

up over the curb, managed to hobble to the pick-up to extract the baby.

"That's not a car seat!" I heard him yell.

He too was concerned about the baby, but there was no baby.

"Do we get to use the Jaws of Life?" I heard one rather burly fireman yell.

"Don't need them," was the answer back.

In the distance, I thought I heard dogs howling.

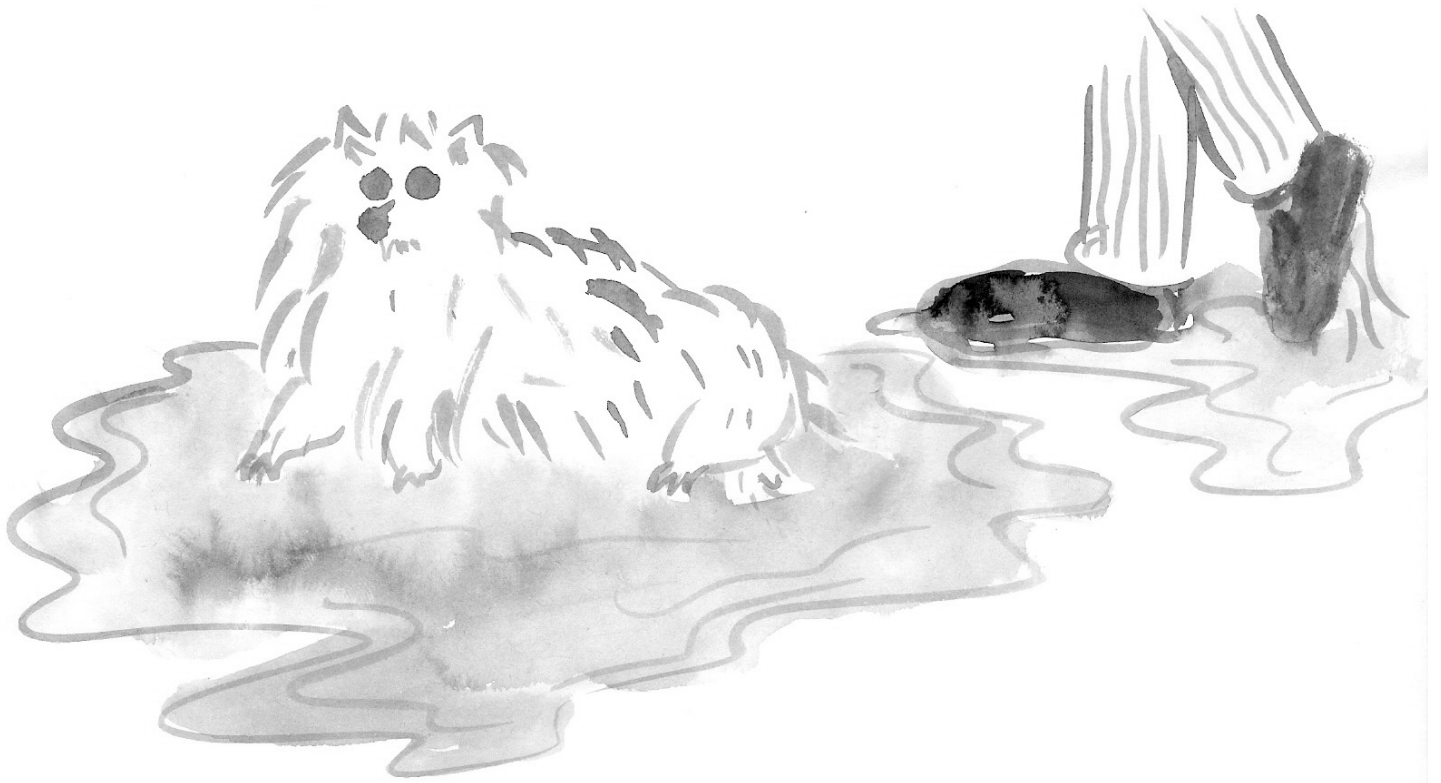
It would be a bad thing if a baby were in the midst of a pack of dogs.

I was lost in that distraction for more than a second, and while I was trying to recognise something, a cop car nearly slid into the firetruck. I was standing beside the firetruck. It smelled like diesel.

I forgot what I was trying to recognise.

Not that I could be much help standing beside the firetruck – I could either be in the building or out here taking in the scene. After all, the firetruck was in front of the lobby doors, and it blocked the view of the street, at least from where I had been sitting.

The street was now slick with produce that had been run over; something glurped on my shoes.



I went back in the building and wiped off my shoes in the toilet.

I know it sounds weird, but I had to smell the stuff on my shoes. It looked a lot like hair gel or KY jelly.

The girl at the front desk wouldn't much speak to me. She knew I was waiting on Williams. I thought she was cute.

Why wasn't she more curious?

More cop cars arrived. The drivers were being interviewed.

I overheard someone suspect that the drivers of the fruit truck were wanted by the DEA. From what I could tell, they didn't seem nervous – except that they were frantically searching for their baby, a small dog.

A firefighter was chasing a dog through the lobby. I think it was a schnauzer or a Yorkie.

Was this dog the dog?

Of course, the glurp had made everything slippery. The dog slid into a flower pot, and the firefighter managed to pick it up.

The dog wore a CZ collar.

Last I looked, the firefighter was trying to get the dog back in the thing that wasn't a car seat, but the scene didn't make any sense because a tow truck had been called for the vehicle.

Where was the family? I didn't see them any more.

I heard the receptionist call the janitor to clean up the lobby. She was eating a strawberry that one of the firemen had brought her. It glistened in glurp.

Looking outside, I noticed traffic had all but stopped. People were bending down, wiping their fingers on the pavement.

Williams finally arrived, and I went in and started filling out the forms.

Williams tried to wipe the glurp off my shoe.

I must have missed a spot. First day on the job, and I wasn't making a good impression.

"What's with the glurp?" I asked.

Williams said something I couldn't understand.

I wasn't sure I should believe him anyway, but Williams was my new boss.

When I looked up, Williams was taking his clothes off.

So was the receptionist. So were the firefighters and cops.

Hmm, I thought. I'm glad I only smelled the glurp.

The TV news crews were caught, at last, in a strange dilemma.

After All Riddle-Me-Ree

MICHAEL

WYNDHAM

THOMAS

Previously...

*I was sitting in a car when it melted away.
I awoke... somewhere. In a house. With people. But everything was vague.
We talked, and then decided to venture outside.*

Ilifted the catch on the gate. The three of us slipped into the lane, each glancing about in different directions. We could have been pantomime burglars: pretty ill-advised burglars at that, trying our luck in a fog which, for all we knew, might conceal all kinds of menace. All right, I shouldn't have been thinking like that. I knew – well, I was pretty sure – that we weren't... down there... with the licking flames

and the horns and the pitchforks. But I still wasn't convinced we'd been safely delivered up to... you know... Apart from anything else, I'd have expected more commotion. It's meant to be a pretty busy place, isn't it? Hosts of this and legions of that sweeping about. And music. Horns and harps. Blaring and twangling. Also, something in me... just didn't feel dead.

As we struck into the lane, a scrap of memory

floated in from nowhere. One of dad's favourite sayings, employed whenever he was trying to reason with or placate mom. "Hand on heart," he'd say, his spread hand persuading that he knew his heart's whereabouts, something mom never believed. Why I thought of it, I don't know – unless I was guided to it. That was entirely possible. Anything was possible here. I took it for a sign, anyway: spread my own hand upon my chest and tried to feel a heartbeat. A regular Napoleon I must have looked, too, marching along beside the others. There was nothing – then I thought there was. I gave up, my hand swinging loose again. What would a heartbeat have explained about this place, this moment?

Marjory was asking Rob a question. I had to scramble to get his drift.

"No," he said, puffing out his cheeks and blowing slowly. "First time I saw her was when she knocked the door. I must have just dropped from" – he flapped a hand vaguely about – "and landed at the end of the path, waiting to be summoned in. Did she bring you?"

Marjory was in the process of telling him that neither of us had seen the biscuit-girl before when I heard myself calling her exactly that and blurting out about my art lessons at school.

"Goodness," said Marjory. As if covering bafflement, she adjusted a stray wisp of hair.

"I'm not mad," I added – almost shouted, really.

"You could be as mad as a hatter," said Rob. "Or sane as a judge. I don't know that it matters. All bets are off in this place, I'd say." Good-humoured, just a touch weary, his words offered an unlikely, odd-angled comfort.

We were walking in the opposite direction to the one I'd explored before. It looked much the same – certainly felt it. Unseen twigs brushed my cheek again. They must have brushed Rob's, too, and given him a proper fright – he cuffed his face as though downing a mosquito. "Arr!" he cried. As if at that sound, the fog lifted.

It was a towering sky, different blues climbing and hiding among clouds that seemed to swirl up from the horizon like seriously-fed genies out of thimbles. Up ahead, the lane we were on lost

itself in a confusion of hedges, emerging in the middle distance as a broad escort to a river, matching it twist for twist as it rolled and snaked beyond the naked eye. The fullness of the sky... well, it wasn't oppressive, exactly, but it did seem to push a broad, determined hand down upon the earth. We stood still – in the middle, I suddenly thought, of a country that was known and unknown, under clouds almost but not quite like those that gathered over the supermarket car-park the evening I melted away. I felt as though I were being shown huge snapshots of what should have been familiar places, but the snaps were in a stranger's hand and his thumb was working up their edges and back, blurring the scenes, shifting them just beyond recognition. Marjory shaded her eyes, regarding the sky.

"That's the weight of heaven," she murmured, though I'm not sure she knew what she was saying. The fog descended again.

There was no point pushing on now. We wheeled about and returned along the lane. I wrestled with this "known and unknown" business that had come into my head. Was this another bit of guidance, like remembering dad and his "hand on heart"? But guidance was meant to make sense, wasn't it? Unless it was one of those riddle-me-ree efforts, the sort you found in the more annoying fairy-tales. I gave up. The prospect of another whiskey-and-sort-of-ginger – several, maybe – appealed mightily. I thought, I'll drink one... slowly... and enjoy it. Then another. I shan't think. And perhaps by the third, either intuition or booze will tell me where this home-not-home really is – and what comes next. Home-not-home. Why was I calling it that?

"Ooh... oof!" Rob again, suddenly doubled up. Hauled out of my thoughts, I remembered the twigs and wondered what had got him this time. Maybe this home-not-home was more unkindly disposed to some than others.

"Hello," I heard Marjory saying, drawing the word out in a motherly way – well, like mothers I'd heard of.

I swung round, expecting the biscuit-girl. I'd tell her this time. Straight out. Junior One. Miss Collins's class. I flipped the lid over and there you were with your cat. Gerbil. Bunch of flow-

ers. I even started embellishing: “Loved it, Art, but I wasn’t a tap of good. Never got beyond stick-men or those typical kids’ houses – you know, windows pushed tight into the corners of the rectangle, smoke like a whacking great watch-spring out of the chimney. Still, I’d like to think–” My mind shut up. I was staring at a small boy who was holding his hand out to Rob. Slowly, Rob was straightening up, rubbing his side.

“Oh, dear,” said Marjory. “Still, no bones broken.” It occurred to me that the boy must have run smack into him. But I’d heard no footsteps. The boy hadn’t cried out.

I’ll start with a double, I thought. No ginger.

Having obviously been taught politeness towards grown-ups, the boy was smiling pleasantly but a little uncertainly, as if he feared Rob would give him a mouthful. But Rob was staring at him, astonished.

“It’s you,” he whispered. Then, turning to us, “It’s me.”

“Who are you?” I hadn’t meant to sound so edgy, so much like a security-guard squaring up to an intruder.

The boy backed away a little, then seemed to turn to Rob for protection without knowing why. Sighing slightly, Marjory repeated my question with the warmth I’d signally mislaid. Encouraged by her tone, her look, the boy started that old, familiar incantation through which, when I was that high, I’d made sense of myself: name, age, date of birth, address, siblings, pets. With a shared start, Marjory and I realised that Rob was saying the same things right alongside him.

“Two cats when I was seven,” Rob said, nodding to himself. “Yes. Shame about the–” He stopped himself. The boy looked at him, puzzled. Clearly Rob was about to reveal something dismal, something the boy was yet to know. He got out of it by flapping a hand over his head. “Shame about the fog,” he said, offering a smile.

“Oh, I like fog,” said the boy.

Rob’s eyes widened: “That’s right,” he said brightly. “We do.” The boy gave an eager nod. Rob’s words seemed to be all the explanation he needed for why he was there.

They could have been father and son as they

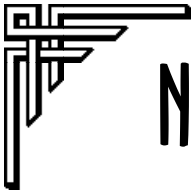
walked ahead of us. Occasionally the boy would say something and Rob would chuckle. At other times, Rob would interrupt, as if gently completing an event which had only just begun in the boy’s life. Happy events, I assumed. There were no tears from the boy. He didn’t suddenly stop in shock. For him, experience still danced and spangled before the eye. Rob, on the other hand, was meeting it all again as he listened – turning it round in his hands, so to speak, like dulled silver unearthed in the attic of the years.

“Well,” said Marjory, “we’ve found something. Blessed if I know what it means – yet.” She gestured at the pair. “Perhaps that’s part of it. We’re here till our other selves are gathered in. Then we go–” Shrugging, she looked up at the sky. “The weight of heaven,” she murmured again.


She’d lost me. But the tableau now unfolding before us seemed to chime with what she’d said. Rob and the boy – his boy – were just at the garden gate when a strip of fog seemed to lift. There was the biscuit-girl, marking something on that little tablet she’d produced when Rob arrived. She smiled and nodded as man and boy walked past her. She was beyond serene, I thought. The eternal usherette. Then: “Junior One, Miss Collins!” The words were out of my mouth as I strode forward; but the strip of fog dropped and she was gone. Marjory gave a... well, a restraining cough.

“She might be your lid-girl,” she said, drawing level with me. “She might not be.” Suddenly she sounded very tired. “I can’t try any more reasoning about all this. I think we shall just have to wait until things become what they are.” And she went up the path ahead of me.

More bloody riddles, I thought. But they wouldn’t let me be. Our other selves, she’d said. We’re here till they’re gathered in. I took a last glance back down the lane. Hoping for what? Some eight-year old? Half-walking, half-lolloping up to me, snake-clasp belt glinting despite the fog, holding up a paint-ruined lid – like the most junior of junior constables, about to say, “Sarge, here’s the evidence?”



Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into The Unknown Death and Rebirth



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.

It was still daylight when we reached the mouth of the cave. We did not linger there, but, shielding our eyes against the glare of sunlight, scrambled helter skelter down the steep shale slope. I shouted my protective mantra to the skies with nervous aggression, and at the end of every exhalation gulped up just enough air to begin the round again. Marsiling, in his place, was silent, but I knew he too was whispering the rhyme to himself inside the confines of his own skull.

Thanggam was, for the time being, mercifully silent. His despotic thought waves, broadcast like a radio signal over the surrounding countryside, could be barely felt, as one might detect a faint background radiation. Whether I should thank my bat earplugs for this silence, or whether Thanggam himself was sleeping, I could not guess, and had no interest in finding out. The notion of Thanggam sleeping seemed in any case antithetical to his nature. I had grown to

think of him as an ever-vigilant, unblinking malevolence.

We raced down the shingle, almost tumbling head over heels in the mad rush. Marsiling's agility surprised me, for one so advanced in years. His white beard flapped against his narrow, hollow chest, but wiry arms and legs flailed away without tiring.

Our plan was a simple one: we were to head back along my path towards Thanggam himself, but our real objective was Eunos. If we could locate the android before the mushroom was alerted to our presence, we might be able to change his instructions. If he heard us, Eunos would cease to scour the forest for animal dung, and instead attack the source of our misfortune with all means available to him. I could not be specific about the armoury at Eunos's disposal, but I put my trust in his resourcefulness.

Marsiling, unacquainted with my robot companion, could not place his trust so squarely on the android's shoulders, but I assured him that



Eunos would, if bidden, find a way to destroy the mushroom overlord, whether by built-in flamethrower, a chainsaw cleverly concealed beneath his simulated flesh, or the simple expedient of a sharpened stick.

After hurtling through the pretty stand of trees I had visited earlier that day, I began to interperse my mantras with calls for Eunos. I yelled his name until I was hoarse, but I dared not pause for breath. Each second that I did not spend reciting my mantra was a second of acute danger.

“Potong Pasir, Pasir Ris. Potong Pasir, Pasir Ris. Ris Pasir Potong Pasir Ris Potong Pasir Pasir!” I croaked, my voice drying up like an old well overused. I could sense my concentration slipping. “Eunos! Help us! Eunos!” I bellowed, but the sound that emerged was now little more than a gravelly croak.

Marsiling was a few steps behind me as we emerged from the trees and jogged along a well-worn path that wound between hillocks. Thanggam, I knew now, was only a few hundred

metres away, and still his awful voice was absent. I sniffed the air: the old, nauseating smells associated with the great mushroom had vanished, or had at least been transmuted into something gentler, less offensive to the nostrils, a more autumnal scent, redolent of dead leaves burning on a bonfire. What did this unexpected change signify?

The answer was not long in coming. We rounded a corner, coming, incredibly, within sight of the dread mushroom himself. Marsiling, I noticed, hung back, and refused to draw any closer. The only survivor of his village, he felt a natural and entirely rational fear of coming into such close proximity with the very source of his miseries. But as I caught sight of Thanggam, my fear fell away like shed skin, and I understood at once what had taken place, if not at all why. My incantations stopped mid-sentence. The massive structure of the fungi still stood, overshadowing the grassy hollow where he had sprouted from the earth, but the monstrous body had undergone a sea-change. The fleshy gills on the underside of the cap were now ragged and brown. The central stem dripped with unsightly pus, and hordes of insects were feasting on the decaying matter in orgiastic frenzy. As I watched, a massive crumbling slab of the cap creaked, then fell away with a dusty crash. Insects and birds fell on the exposed surfaces with a passion.

In short, Thanggam was dead.

The old man had grasped this essential fact too, and we hugged each other, laughing in sheer exultation. We danced a little improvised jig, then fell to the ground, exhausted and out of breath. I was particularly anxious to recover my voice, after the exertions of the past few minutes, but a second later, I spotted something that made me cry out, despite the pain it caused me. Coming over the brow of the hill, walking with an unhurried gait, was Eunos. He looked up at the decaying corpse of Thanggam with infuriating apathy. In his arms he carried a wicker basket loaded down with dried animal dung. He continued to approach the wreck that was once Thanggam and made his obscene offering, unloading his basket at the foot of the stem.

Eunos’s capacity for blockheadedness never

ceased to impress me. Or was it a robotic species of bloody-mindedness that caused him to continue working, long after his task had been rendered futile? As I suspected, Eunos required a direct order from me before he would cease operation. As a result of his pigheaded behaviour, our reunion was less than warm, and I was further galled by his apparent coldness towards his master, who might have, for all he knew, been lying dead at the bottom of a cliff, food for the carrion birds. Judging by his attitude, my continued survival was a matter of the most perfect indifference to him.

I am quite aware that I shall draw the fire of a certain class of reader, who will no doubt accuse me of anthropomorphising Eunos, that is, projecting my own expectations of human behaviour onto that which was merely a simulacrum of the human. But to this no doubt highly educated critic, I can claim in my defence only that what pertains in theory is often harder, sometimes impossible, to pursue consistently in practice. It is one thing to consider, philosophically, the machine as machine only, but quite another thing to confront such a flawless copy of a man, face to face, and put aside entirely one's manner, learned over a lifetime, of dealing with men.

In the event, I suppressed my annoyance, and explained as concisely as I could to Eunos what had occurred over the last few hours. I introduced Marsiling to the robot, and gave him an explanation of Eunos's status, and the reasons for his servitude. I would not have liked the old man to be under any misunderstanding that I was a slave-driver. Marsiling was astonished by the revelation, and this in turn surprised me. If androids were as common on Kadaloor as Eunos had often assured me, how could this Kadaloorian human be unaware of their existence? I decided not to press the matter further on this occasion, and supposed that Marsiling might hail from some primitive tribe, far removed from the centres of technological innovation, such as had existed on Earth until a few centuries ago. I resolved to pursue the mystery at another time.

Eunos greeted Marsiling with adequate courtesy, but the old man appeared self-conscious in the robot's company. I sympathised. Eunos him-



self listened to the tale of our meeting without comment. When I questioned him about the demise of Thanggam, he could offer no explanation. It had been, Eunos told us, a very sudden transformation, without warning. Having no prior experience of organisms such as Thanggam, he could not be certain that the fungi was not merely undergoing some entirely natural metamorphosis, only resembling death. Hence he had continued to collect animal excrement as per my last instructions, and would have done, I felt certain, until doomsday, had I not interrupted him. In the event it was Marsiling who provided me with an account of Thanggam's fall, although he had not witnessed the event himself. Only a brief lifespan, he told us, was allotted to Thanggam's kind. After a few days, a fortnight at the outside limit, they reached the end of their lifecycle and, loosing their spores upon the wind, they crumbled into the soil as swiftly and unexpectedly as they had arose.

Marsiling's natural history was proven right in

this case when all three of us observed great, brown sheets of cloud lifting from the dead cap of the mushroom, and drifting up on the prevailing winds, fading and scattering as they rose. These were the spores of Thanggam, blanketing the countryside in their millions.

His account threw up one question of particular urgency. How many of these spores would germinate, and how long would the process take? Our immediate plans depended largely on his answer. Eunos reassured me that the spores lay dormant for many months. Of those which landed on fertile soil, only the smallest fraction stood a chance of sprouting into another monster like Thanggam.

"It's a curious fact," he said, by way of a tangent, "that where the Thanggam grows, reproduces and dies, an earthquake almost always follows in its wake. Legend has it that volcanoes, in the weeks before their eruptions, are festooned along their steep slopes with dozens of competing giant mushrooms. This deadly bloom proves a useful warning to any human settlements in the vicinity."

Marsiling's face darkened. "Or at least it did," he remarked, "before human civilisation was exterminated by the Punggol."

This curious digression stuck in my mind, and over the next few days I mulled over his story. In the meantime, I judged it prudent to continue our journey with all haste. If Eunos's prediction was right, we were likely to be standing in the epicentre of a future earthquake zone. It would have been too absurd an irony for us to escape death at the hands of Thanggam, only to meet it again in the shape of geological instability, and all because of our own shiftlessness.

The hovercraft was not critically damaged, as Eunos himself quickly verified, and to my surprise and joy, Raffles was still alive and well within the metal cocoon, having survived by eating most of our supplies, and using what did not suit his palette as a litter tray. Eunos seemed not to appreciate the miracle of Raffles' reappearance, and I had to remind him that the ability to empathise with other species was an important human trait, and one he would do well to imitate. He refrained from comment.

While the android made the interior of our craft fit once more for human habitation, I took the liberty of inviting Marsiling along with us for the rest of our journey. I knew little about the old man, but his own story had convinced me of his good character and initiative, also that he had few other options open to him: his home village and his compatriots had all been annihilated by Thanggam, and he was alone in the world. I explained to Marsiling the purpose of our quest, the hunt for the Red Hill Clementi, and the brain infection which made this expedition so urgent, and offered him a place in the hovercar. He accepted with alacrity. I thought I sensed a vague hostility towards my new friend from Eunos, but this only confirmed my judgment of Marsiling as a worthy travelling companion. It would be to my advantage to gain an ally in future disputes with the android, of which there would be more than likely a few.

As I suspected, Thanggam's brief tyranny had rendered Marsiling a rootless drifter, without purpose or home. He latched onto our mission with gratifying zeal, and I looked forward to his company on the long road towards Red Hill. I also anticipated with great interest the conversations we would have, the information we would exchange, all I could learn from him about the human cultures of Kadaloor. Were they really on the verge of extinction? If so, our meeting was doubly fortuitous. I thirsted for knowledge about this strange, orphaned offshoot of humanity. How had they arrived here, in these galactic backwaters? And how had Earth managed to forget their historic migration, if they had indeed quit their mother planet many centuries ago, as Eunos claimed.

As I have described above, the android's responses to these and many related questions had been unsatisfactory in the extreme. His almost total ignorance of historical matters seemed to me inexcusable, and Eunos's persistent excuse that none of his previous masters had ever programmed him to retain these facts did nothing to satisfy my intellectual hunger. Were the original migrants from Earth of Chinese origin, as I suspected from Eunos's own resemblance to the Han, a suspicion bolstered by Mar-

siling's similar features? What had become of their civilisation here on Kadaloor? Of this I had observed no signs, beyond Eunos himself and the house he had built at Woodland Heights. We had passed no monuments, no ruined cities, such as one might expect to find when a great people have passed into history.

I had a dozen other questions, and no doubt Marsiling, on his part, was bursting with curiosity. I had given him enough broad hints about my extra-planetary origins to excite his interest. In all probability it was only his sense of courtesy that prevented him from bombarding me with questions. But we would have ample time for conversation over the days and weeks that followed. Red Hill was still a continent away. Our journey from Woodland Heights had barely begun, but was already crowded with incident and danger. We humans assisted Eunos in digging the hovercar out of the crater where it had lodged itself, nose first, into the earth, and the robot spent an entire day fixing and checking the engines and life support mechanisms. Luckily the vehicle had been designed to withstand far greater impacts, and it had been to our advantage that Thanggam's cap had been relatively soft and rubbery. Had we collided with another hovercar, I doubt we would have emerged so lightly scathed.

As Eunos worked, in his tireless fashion, on the craft, Marsiling and I watched in fascination the final disintegration of the giant mushroom. The lifeless body of Thanggam was eaten away by plagues of insects and birds, even as the fungi's spores were still wafting into the breeze by their thousand. Those billowing brown clouds struck me as ominous, and I could not help but wonder whether we might encounter one of the offspring of the great tyrant at some point in the future, despite Marsiling's reassurances. Like pieces of a glacier, house-sized chunks of the mushroom, weakened by its own internal decay, fell away in muffled explosions, sending the massed circling scavengers into even greater paroxysms. It was a satisfying spectacle, and as the disintegrating edifice of Thanggam shrank, I felt supremely thankful that my mind was no longer caught in those con-

stricting mental chains. The experience of being enslaved to Thanggam's will had redoubled my determination to salvage what I could of my sanity by locating and analysing the Red Hill Clementi.

Marsiling was silent during those days of waiting. He contemplated Thanggam's ultimate destruction without comment, and with an inscrutable expression, which for him were one and the same. I assumed he was coming to terms with the loss of all he held dear, and preparing to embark on a new and strange episode in his nomadic life.

Eunos had arranged for Marsiling to have his own, separate living quarters aboard the hovercar. I was grateful to him for this innovation: the old man's squalid existence in the cave of bats had made him a stranger to the routines of personal hygiene. It took me several days to persuade Marsiling to exchange his grotesque patchwork of bats' skins for one of the spotless white outfits created by Eunos. No doubt our new friend was finding it difficult to adjust to living alongside his fellow men. It was inevitable that he should want to keep some souvenirs of his feral life in the cave. However, on the subject of bathing, I would have to be firm. The hover car had an excellent system just suited to this purpose: a self-enclosed, waterproof chamber referred to as the bathing tube. One could soak with great comfort while travelling at dizzying speeds across the planet's surface. But Marsiling mistrusted this device. I do not know whether he feared drowning or exposing his person to the outside world (since the walls of the hover car were transparent from the interior only, use of the bathing chamber gave the illusory impression of exposure to passers-by).

I am glad to say that there were, during the early days of our friendship, few other points of disagreement. And so we were four: a space captain from distant Earth, a mechanical man, a cave dwelling refugee, and, of course, dear old Raffles. So strange a group of travelling companions one could not hope to meet even on Kadaloor, a planet abounding in novelties. Red Hill was still a distant hope, but Thanggam, at least, was behind us, and defeated. TQF

The Quarterly Review

Earth Defence Force 2017

Sandlot (dev.)

Xbox 360, Japan

Imagine if Godzilla didn't turn up for one of his movies, and humans had to fight the alien menace in his stead! Or if the creatures from Starship Troopers landed on Earth! This is mindless fun at its purest, as you run around blasting alien invaders with your bazookas and missiles.

It's easy to see why the game has found a home on the Xbox 360, following the huge sales of other pick-up-and-play games via the Xbox Live Arcade.

The only hint of strategy lies in your choice of weapons before each mission, and that's a lot of fun – do you go in with two sets of bazookas, or a bazooka and shotgun, or a long-range homing missile and a sniper rifle? There's a lot of choice. I haven't spent much time using the vehicles dotted around the landscapes – like Crackdown, this is too much fun on foot to make the vehicles attractive.

One notable thing about this game is its huge draw distance, meaning that it's common to see giant ants and spiders hopping over a distant landmark – which you can then blast to smithereens with a missile, sending their curled-up carcasses flying into the air.

This is a budget release, so it's great value for money, but it's also an ideal game for renting. You'll see most of what it has to offer in a single week, but what there is of it is a lot of fun. After the insects come the giant spaceships, giant robots, attack walkers, and even more insects, all of them just waiting for you to choose the right method of destruction. You haven't lived until you've fired a bazooka up into the guts of a kilometre-wide spaceship, bringing it down upon your head.

If Earth Defence Force 2017 has one downside, it's that the achievements have clearly been bolted on at the last minute – the points are divided up in huge chunks for finishing all 50 of the game's levels on each skill level.

I have to spare a word or two for the brilliantly-judged and hilarious voice work. Accompanying you on your bug-hunting adventures are your colleagues in the Earth Defence Force, a short-lived but loquacious bunch who always have a *bon mot* prepared, delivered in absolutely deadpan voices that utterly match the serious silliness of the game.

My favourite moment of the entire game – possibly of any game ever – came during a mission deep inside the alien insects' burrows, when one of my companions called out, in deadly seriousness, in a tone as dry as Patrick Warburton after a week in the desert, something along the lines of: "We're on a thrilling underground adventure." – *SWT*

The Last Mimzy

Rob Shaye (director)

Movie, US, 90 mins

Just as someone else said in a previous review in this magazine, I didn't really enjoy The X-Files until the second season (though later I went back and enjoyed that first one as well). It was because the first episode treated alien contact very seriously, and so I took that to be the premise of the show: there has been alien contact. But then, in following weeks, we found that everything else that anyone ever imagined on a dark and stormy night also existed – telepathy, big-foot, ghosts, vampires – but with no linking rationale, other than that they always existed, which I found intensely frustrating, both as a science fiction fan and as a rationalist. Soon,

though, I came to see the program had much more to do with horror than science fiction, and was able to enjoy it again, and enjoy it thoroughly. Different rules apply in horror: its goal is not to help us make sense of the world around us, or speculate about the future, but just to frighten our socks off, and *The X-Files* did that in spades.

The *Last Mimzy*, a new movie for children, at first seemed to me to be falling into that same trap. Two children discover a mysterious artefact on the beach, and began to display unusual abilities and intelligence after playing with it. It's *Chocky*, in short.

Anyway, so far, so good, though derivative, but I felt my hackles raising as palmistry was shown to be a valuable means of gauging a child's potential, not to mention the discovery of the scientific significance of Buddhist mandalas, the usefulness of oneiromancy, and a science teacher explaining to his pupils that DNA can be affected by "cultural contaminants".

I laughed out loud at the portentousness of a shot of a bus that pulled out to show how none of the children on a school bus talked to each other, but rather fiddled with their Nintendo handhelds and mobile phones, and laughed even harder at a scene where the children run across the beach (thanks to the *Mimzy's* influence), as if for the first time, and the boy slumps to the ground in exhausted happiness, saying with surprise, "That feels good!" (My daughter and I were the only people watching this film in the cinema, else I would have been more circumspect about laughing so loudly, although even she gave me something of a glare.)

I was ready to dismiss the film then, as a hippy-ish piece of "let's put down the computer games and talk to each other again!" nonsense. But at some point it turned me around. It had something of an M Night Shyamalan quality, an eerie calmness of the camera, and indeed might well have benefited from being aimed at adults rather than children. The pace, for example, is almost meticulously slow. If it had been a film for adults, though, the happy ending would not have been shown in the very first scene, since it removes any real tension from the film, as do the

constant reassurances that the *Mimzy's* motives are good.

However, anyone, regardless of age, will enjoy the way it builds to a satisfying conclusion as the kids take matters into their own hands, using their new-found abilities, a conclusion that brought back fond memories of the Witch Mountain films.

All through the movie my daughter (three years old) was shuffling around, intrigued by the novelty of the cinema's folding seats, and I thought she had been thoroughly bored, but the movie kept at least one surprise to the end. During the movie's final scenes she burst into floods of tears, to my astonishment. I asked her what was up, and she explained, weeping still (and she would be for another ten minutes yet): "I really loved watching that film, but it's finished now." That probably says more about the film's appeal to children that a ten thousand-word review could. – *SWT*

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End

Gore Verbinski (director)
Movie, US, 168 mins

I'm not one of those people who like to pile in on a film. For me, films aren't just bad or good, you either enjoy them or you don't. And you don't even have to take a film as a whole, in this age of DVD. A lot of people can't stand *The Matrix Reloaded*, but if you start with the burly brawl it's arguably one of the greatest movies of all time.

So I'm not here to slate *At World's End*, dull though it was. I'm here to comment on the fact that throughout the entire film the audio description for the deaf was playing over the main speakers, and the post-credits sequence was not shown (until complaints were made). Cinemas really must do better. – *SWT*

Obituary

Steven Gilligan's Gone for a Burton

I can't quite remember when I first met Steven Gilligan. It might have been at the school library, where I soon joined him, John Greenwood and Sam Dixon as a student librarian. It might have been after someone suggested I look in on a writers' group (made up mainly of the same people) that was meeting at lunchtimes. Or I might just have met him in the hall at lunchtime one day. However it happened, it was a lunchtime, and he made an immediate impact on me, and we quickly became involved in a dozen silly projects together – we performed sketches at the school shows, started a band (Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife), tried to start a marbles revival, sold trumped-up horoscopes, offered a ghost hunting service, created *New Words*, launched Silver Age Books, published our novels, and most recently we created *November Spawned* and *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, to both of which he made notable contributions.

In amongst all that, we laughed a lot, talked a lot about computer games, tv and music, and drank a bit from time to time. He introduced me to Hellblazer, HP Lovecraft, Warhammer, Primal

Scream, My Bloody Valentine, Vic Reeves' Big Night Out, and a million other things for which I'm forgetting to give him credit, and took me to my first ever gigs (The Wedding Present and The Wonder Stuff).

He gave me confidence in whatever I wanted to do, gave me a kick up the butt when I needed it, taught me the importance of a punk rock spirit in everyday life, and did a brilliant job as the best man at my chaotic wedding.

Anyway, he's gone now – he died last week. For the rest of my life it'll feel like something's missing. My daughter's lost someone who would have been the best "bad influence" uncle a kid could ask for, and I've lost a best friend.

We have some of his Helen and Her Magic Cat strips in hand, so his presence will be felt directly in the magazine for a little while yet, and indirectly for as long as it lasts. If we can, we'll also put together a new collection of his work at some point.

I think he would have appreciated the way I found out that he was a goner. Sitting in the lobby of his tower block, waiting for news from the police who had gone to open and investigate his room, I heard someone, a cleaner perhaps, yelling to a friend, "Have you heard? Someone on the first floor has kicked the bucket!" I couldn't help laughing, because I thought that it was exactly how Steven would have had it... – *SWT*



Steven Gilligan, 1973–2007