
Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 24

Festival Special

2008

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The Fantastic Soul

Stephen Theaker

I was planning to write an editorial for this issue about the idea of the soul, and how it is used in fantasy fiction. I've found myself receiving a lot of submissions lately that concerned souls, in one way or another (both for this publication and for *Dark Horizons*). One of those stories was, in fact, up until the point where the point where the soul came into play, one of the best stories that has ever been submitted to this magazine, but I ended up rejecting it.

I began to wonder: at what point does a bugbear become a bigotry?

I'm an atheist, a rationalist and a humanist. I have a bit of a problem with stories about souls. Soul collectors. Souls wandering the earth. Souls going to heaven. Lost souls. They all bug me. I can't get behind the Cartesian idea of the soul as a separate entity that can fly off to new adventures once the body has gone. It doesn't make any sense. For example, in rejecting a very decent piece of writing recently I asked: "how does [the ghost] see without eyes, hear without ears, taste without a mouth, breathe without lungs, or think without a brain? I wouldn't be able to do any of those things!"

Is that criticism at all relevant to a piece of fantasy writing?

Cartesian duality may be a hopelessly outdated idea, but then surely so are things like vampires, zombies, werewolves, gods and witches. Why do I object to souls and not those other things?

Part of it, I think, is that I believe I have a responsibility as a writer and editor, and sometimes I might take it a little bit too seriously. (I'm not serious about many things, so I hope you'll allow me this one peccadillo.)

If I publish a story about vampires or werewolves, few people are going to be reinforced in a potentially dangerous worldview. The soul, on the other hand, stands somewhat apart from those other fantasy staples: it's an old-fashioned idea, that doesn't have any place in current scientific thinking, but is still fixed in the popular imagination, encouraging all sorts of odd beliefs: spiritualism, heaven and hell, astral projection, reincarnation, possession, and so on. It's very much a part of the mainstream, and one whose influence I think is rather unfortunate. Imagine if women were being drowned for witchcraft: would responsible editors publish stories about evil witches? Probably not – and children have died in modern Britain as a result of their parents believing them possessed.

As an example of what I would call irresponsible writing, one line in the recent pilot of *Fringe* made me cringe: about to take a huge dose of LSD and have a spike shoved into her head by a mad scientist, the FBI agent is asked, "What makes you think this will work?" She replies, "What makes you think it won't?"

To me that seems a hugely irresponsible attitude, one likely to encourage the desperate to hand their money over to hucksters and charlatans. What makes you think this crazy get-healthy-rich-pregnant-quick scheme will work? What makes you think it won't? It's the responsibility of the person making crazy claims to prove them, not the responsibility of sensible people to disprove them.

I *do* think the makers of *Fringe* are responsible – to a degree – for what principles people may draw from their stories. *However*, their first re-

sponsibility is to tell a good story. The story would have come to a standstill if the FBI agent had shook her head and said, "This is crazy – I'm going back to my desk."

In the early days of *The X-Files* I had a huge problem in this regard. Every time Mulder opened his mouth to profess belief in some ridiculous hoax I felt like throwing something at the television. But in the long term I couldn't let that get in the way of enjoying some superb and terrifying drama. In the end, after all, *Mulder was right*. In his world, all of those things really *do* exist. In *his* world, there *is* evidence, and Scully is the irrational one.

* * *

Anyway, I decided against writing that editorial – though clearly I now have! I didn't think there was much mileage in it, and my ideas (as you can see above) were rather vague and contradictory. What prompted the change of heart?

Well, I've been reading recently about an editor who allowed his bigotry to show through when rejecting stories, and that got me worrying about my own prejudices all over again.

A writer, Luke Jackson, posted on a blog a rejection email he had received from William Sanders, senior editor of *Helix* (an online zine), on a blog, asking for advice on interpreting it. Readers of the blog were rather more interested in Sanders' *obiter* comments about Muslims and Arabs.

The story was that of a would-be terrorist. If, when Sanders referred to "the worm-brained mentality of those people", he meant terrorists and fun-

damentalists, it would be easy to agree with him. But then he went on to say that “he’s being mendacious (like all his kind, he’s incapable of honesty)” and that “most of the SF magazines are very leery of publishing anything that might offend the sheet heads”. Which puts it in a rather different light.

Talking of that “worm-brained mentality” Sanders said that “at the end we still don’t really understand it, but then no one from the civilised world ever can”. If he was still talking about terrorists, and he said that no civilised *person* could understand them, I would have been right there with him. Apart from anything else, killing people indiscriminately to achieve a political goal is just rude. Civilised people don’t do that – they write pointed letters to the newspaper. But there are civilised people in every country in the world who share each other’s bafflement at the horrors inflicted by their more brutal cousins.

If you say that there is a “civilised world” it makes your belief in an “uncivilised world” quite clear, and there’s no doubt here which part of Sanders’ world is full of the worm-brained, mendacious sheetheads.

Ironically, Luke posted the email completely unaware of how people would respond to it, and has now become one of the editor’s prime apologists in the matter – two things that say quite a lot about him. So he seems to be something of a blunderer, but if a more principled writer had done the same thing with the intention of blowing the whistle on something similar I would have supported them outright.

Unsurprisingly, lots of other writers and editors have had something to say about all of this, although a lot of the initial discussion was focused on the idea of whether rejection letters should be posted online at all, regardless of content. Gardner Dozois, for example, was critical of Luke Jackson for making the email public, but later said, “I like to think I’m not seething with racial hatreds, but even if I were, I wouldn’t put any expression of them into a rejection letter; that’s acting unprofessionally as well.”

Tobias Buckell, on the other hand,

said that he wouldn’t usually post rejection letters, but he would “make an exception if a rejection contained a racial epithet ... because it would just blow my flipping mind if one ever did”.

Jeff VanderMeer wondered “why there wasn’t an instant, complete, and sincere apology from all involved from the very first moments of this coming to light”.

Few people accused of racism ever seem to say, “Yeah, you’re right. I just don’t like brown people.” Or even, “I went a bit too far and said more than I mean. I’m sorry.” There’s always an excuse. They’ve always been quoted out of context. Racism is always redefined on their terms to mean precisely nothing. The reaction is never to look in at oneself, but instead to complain about the complainers.

In short, it’s easy to spot a racist: they’re the ones who say they aren’t racist, not even one bit... Everyone else knows that we all come pre-loaded with a thousand prejudices that we have to acknowledge and work against. Everyone says off-colour things from time to time – whether it’s about race, gender (which is where I tend to go wrong, despite my best feminist intentions), the disabled, or people with ginger hair, or whatever – and we all get a bit blustery and embarrassed when it’s pointed out. You shouldn’t apologise for saying it in front of someone it offended, or get angry that it leaked out: you shouldn’t have said it in the first place. You should either stand by what you said or apologise for it.

Like Jimmy Carr says, if you have to look around before telling a joke, you shouldn’t be telling it at all.

* * *

I don’t *think* I would get too angry if anyone posted my rejections online, as long as they were posted in full. It would be a bit rude of someone to do it without asking, or at least letting me know, and I would certainly be more guarded with them in future, but I don’t say anything in email that I don’t mean (though I can be terribly gossipy).

On the other hand, if it was posted with a comment from the author say-

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ing, "Look at these comments – what a jerk this editor is", it would be a different matter. I've sent a couple of rejections out which have made me think, "Hmm, I can see this ending up on a forum under a POLITICAL CORRECTNESS GONE MAD! heading." But as long as the criticism was posted in full anyone reading it might be as likely to take my side as the other.

For example, someone who posts a response from an editor which says "this gives the impression of an author full of hatred of women, which I'm sure is inaccurate" (to paraphrase and conflate a couple of rejections I've given in the past) would be unlikely to get many supporters – or at least not ones about whose opinions I would care (although it always hurts when people are unkind).

* * *

That brings me back to my rejections, and whether I need to change my ways. Do I let my anti-religion/pseudoscience/new age bigotry show through in my editing?

It can't help but come through, I think. If I think angels, souls, reincarnation, heaven, hell, ghosts, and what have you are daft in real life, I can't help but think them daft in stories.

But I hope that when presented with a story that makes something good out of them, I can see through my prejudices to recognise how good it is. A good story can be built on any premise. I'll never be a Christian, but I love *The Omen II* and *The Exorcist III*. My dislike of all that soul business is as stated above, but *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one of my all-time favourite programmes, and that's full to the brim of people turning evil once their souls are missing. So are a hundred other fantasy films, tv shows, comics and books.

On the flipside, *Uncanny X-Men* is the world's most misleading guide to evolution, but is still fab. (You and I might know that the sudden evolution of mutants in the Marvel universe results largely from the tinkering of cosmic beings, and vibranium, and whatnot, but anyone watching the movies or the cartoons would deduce that evolution means going to bed a fish, and waking up an amphibian...)

What I have to look out for is saying, "This story is rubbish because the idea that we have a soul is rubbish." That is missing the point, and taking the time to push my own views when I should be talking about the story – a story, of course, that like *The X-Files*, doesn't necessarily take place in our world, or in our universe, or in our dimension. In the next dimension along, maybe humans do have souls. (I'd imagine them as little Mr Mind type creatures who live inside our heads, and when we die they move on to the next host.)

Whether the concept of a soul or a vampire or a ghost holds water or not isn't always what matters in a fantasy story: it's how they allow for good fiction, whether they lead to drama, whether they are dealt with consistently within that story. It's the integrity of the story that matters, not the integrity of the idea.

And I'll try to remind myself of that as I deal with the next batch of submissions...

* * *

As a postscript to last issue's editorial, Ralan's Specific Webstravaganza has now listed *Horror Literature Quarterly* as a dead market (though on Duotrope it's just said to be closed to submissions). I hope it's the latter.

And sadly, *Apex Digest*, which I used last time as an example of a new magazine making a real effort to one day be commercial, has stopped publishing – on paper, at least.

They're now going to pay pro rates and publish online for people to read for free. Good luck to them; presumably they've worked out that it'll cost less overall than it does to pay semi-pro rates plus printers plus distribution. I hope it'll thrive online. I imagine they've worked out how much they're willing to spend on the first year or so and they'll keep their fingers crossed re advertising and referrals.

Apex (in print) was a very well put together magazine – Jason was kind enough to send me review copies, and I was very impressed. I really admired his ambition. The covers were exceptional (apologies to P.S. Gifford and his TQF-submission-guidelines-plagiarising *Glutenlump's Chilling*

Tales, but *Apex* was shamefully robbed in that category of the Predictors & Editors awards) and what I got around to reading of the fiction was of a very high quality. I feel rather bad for not having done my part by reviewing the issues properly...

Launching a commercial fiction magazine is clearly a very difficult proposition. Launching an uncommercial one, on the other hand, has never been easier. The question is just how uncommercial you want to make it!

* * *

Anyway, so here we go again: another issue of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*... Don't think for a moment that my enthusiasm for this marvellous magazine has waned at all. Oh no, far from it. But upon this issue a heavy obligation falls. I've tried to put it off for as long as I could, but the time is up, the bill is due, and the debt must be paid. I speak of course of the publication of the latest novel by Howard Phillips, our long-term contributor, erstwhile marketer and sometime editorialist.

Why continue to publish his asinine rubbish, you might ask, when TQF gets so many other wonderful contributions nowadays?

Well, the novels of Howard's Saturation Point Saga were one of the foundations of this magazine in its early years, and if there's one thing I know about construction, it's that if you take away the foundations the building falls down. Plus, I know for a fact that Howard will be here, year after year, plugging away with his novels, long after all the other writers we publish have moved on to greener pastures. He's my cow. I can keep on milking him as long as I want. The milk might be sour, but once it's in the bottle who will know? One day, if he keeps on trying, perhaps he'll make some milk worth drinking, but "it hasn't happened yet", as wonderful William Shatner would say.

It's a shame that this issue's other contributors have to share the space with Howard – let's hope that the stink of his shed does not attach itself to them.

In "The Brass Menagerie", Aaron Polson asks how much our happiness

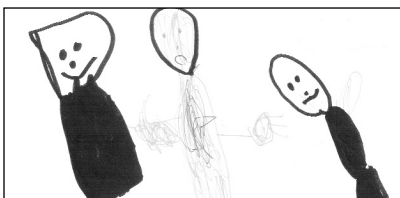
depends upon our ability to ignore the unhappiness of others.

In “The Hungry Apples” Lyon and Offut describe a terrible duel beneath deadly apples! It’s a story with an exceptional sense of place, and deadly apples! What more do stories need?

John Greenwood brings more Newton Braddell. By this point you probably know what to expect, and, yes, it’s more of the same. That is to say: twists, turns, surprises, character development, hilarity and death!

Lest readers be amazed by the sudden improvement in my art, I should admit that I’ve been helped in the production of this issue by my four-year-old daughter, Lorelei. I didn’t have time to do my own illustrations, so she has stepped in on my behalf. I’m sure you’ll agree that she has done a bang-up job! I’ll offer a few notes to help you enjoy them to their fullest extent.

In the picture on this page she shows me being assaulted by two monsters. One of them is hitting me with a bat, while the other is hitting me with scrambled eggs. That, of course, is why I am bleeding. The most terrifying thing is the way they smile while hitting me. For page forty-nine I asked her to draw a moon with blood on it, and she obliged, before going on to add a “scary man from the shadows”. The picture on page fifty-six is not as abstract as you might think: Lorelei has drawn a city (complete with inhabitant) and the mountain beneath which it sits. If you are having trouble connecting the picture on page sixty-four to the story it accompanies, it’s because my little sweetie decided to draw some camels and eggs, rather than the lovestruck robot for which I asked. Perhaps I should have gone back to Aaron and asked him to work more camels and eggs into his story... My favourite illustration is that on page sixty, showing the protagonists in combat beneath the threat of the titular hungry apples.



Contributors

Aaron A. Polson is a high school English teacher and freelance writer who dreams in black and white with Rod Serling narration. He currently resides in Lawrence, Kansas with his wife, two sons, and a rather sturdy – almost supernatural – tropical fish. His short fiction has appeared in various places, including *Reflection’s Edge*, *GlassFire Magazine*, *Big Pulp*, *Johnny America* and Permutated Press’s upcoming *Giant Creatures Anthology*. You can visit him on the web at www.frozenrobot.com. To this issue of TQF he contributes “The Brass Menagerie”.

John Greenwood has made contributions to most issues of TQF following his return from a round-the-world trip, and was ultimately made co-editor in recognition of his efforts. To this issue he contributes a further episode in the life of the universe’s least favourite peripathetic astronaut, Newton Braddell.

Richard K Lyon is a semi-retired research scientist/inventor whose hobbies include collecting pulp SF magazines and writing. He has also published numerous short stories and novelettes. A collection of the latter, *Tales From The Lyonheart*, is available from Barnes and Noble, etc. In collaboration with *Andrew J Offut*, famed author of *My Lord Barbarian*, he wrote the Tiana trilogy (*Demon in the Mirror*, *The Eyes of Sarsis* and *Web of the Spider*), and *Rails Across the Galaxy* for *Analog*. To our magazine they have contributed “The Iron Mercenary” (TQF#19), “Arachnis” (TQF#22), “Devil on My Stomach” (TQF#23), and, this issue, “The Hungry Apples”. This story previously appeared in *Flashing Swords* 1.4.

Stephen Theaker is the eponymous editor of *Theaker’s Quarterly Fiction*, and this issue’s cover artist. (This issue’s illustrations are by his four-year-old daughter, *Lorelei*.) He wrote most of this issue’s reviews. He is also the editor of *Dark Horizons*, the journal of the British Fantasy Society.

Some of his current favourite mu-

sicians are Foals, Sebastien Tellier (ever since his appearance on the Eurovision Song Contest) and Los Campesinos. He likes to dance to the current single by N*E*R*D, Everybody Nose, and to Lose Control by Missy Elliott. He has recently read excellent books by Brian Aldiss and Frederik Pohl & C.M. Kornbluth. Some of his favourite movies are *The Voyage Home: Star Trek IV*, *The Wedding Singer*, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Darjeeling Limited*.

Howard Phillips was once a promising science fiction poet, but unfortunately he fell into a downward spiral of drink and self-hatred, the horrid fate of all too many versifiers. Being given the job of marketing manager with Silver Age Books in the late nineties did much to put him back on an even keel. He still had good days and bad days, but he achieved some level of stability in his personal life.

His efforts at writing poetry and fiction during this period proved unsuccessful (a succession of novels were announced; none were written), but he achieved a level of musical success with his band, *The Sound of Howard Phillips*. In 2005, having left the band to fend for themselves, and in the midst of a second nervous crisis, everything changed forever: a vision set him off on a quest to assemble the world’s greatest band. He has chronicled that quest in a series of novels, all of which have been serialised in *Theaker’s Quarterly Fiction*. “My Rise and Fall”, the first part of the as yet incomplete first novel, *The Ghastly Mountain*, appeared in TQF#8. *His Nerves Extruded* (2006) appeared in TQF#9 thru 11. *The Doom That Came to Sea Base Delta* (2007) appeared in TQF#16 and 17. In this issue we present in its entirety the fourth novel in the sequence, *The Day the Moon Wept Blood*.

Rafe McGregor is a crime fiction author who spends far too much of his time rereading the work of H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James. He lives with his wife in a village near York. More details can be found on his website (www.rafemcgregor.co.uk).

To this issue he contributes several book reviews.

New from Telos Publishing

Telos Publishing have announced several new titles likely to be of interest to our theoretical readers of TQF:

- *Something in the Darkness: the Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to Torchwood Series Two*, by Stephen James Walker;
- *Taboo Breakers: 18 Independent Films that Courted Controversy and Created a Legend*, by Calum Waddell;
- *It Lives Again! Horror Movies in the New Millennium*, by Axelle Carolyn; and
- *Monsters Within: the Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to Doctor Who 2008*, by Stephen James Walker.

Stephen James Walker has had a hand in some of the very best Doctor Who reference books over the years, so those will be worth looking out for. Telos (named after the location of the tombs of the cybermen) are also, for a limited time, offering sets of the Time Hunter science fiction/horror series (a spin-off from their sadly curtailed but rather expensive range of Doctor Who novellas) at a discounted rate.

Riveting Reads of Fantasy

The School Library Association has published a guide to fantasy literature for readers in the 11–16 age range. It reviews over 200 current titles in thirteen sections. *Riveting Reads Plus: Fantasy Fiction* by Frances Sinclair and SLA in Scotland is £12.00 (to SLA members £9.00), 112pp, and its ISBN is 978-1-903446-46-1. For more details see www.sla.org.uk. Our review copy has been handed over to a real live librarian – we eagerly await her judgment!

Raw Edge – Final Issue

Most writers from the Midlands will be familiar with *Raw Edge*, a welcome staple of local libraries. Unfortunately, following a funding cut by Arts Council England, the magazine is no more – the current #26 will be its last, though there are signs that an online version might turn up at some point. In the meantime, anyone looking to get the word out on their literary events in Birmingham and the West Midlands is welcome to send a note to us here at TQF – especially now that we have a news page again!

Sad News from Ralan and Rimbaud

Tough times lately in the fiction listing world! Ralan's Market Report will now be online only, due to the email often being branded spam by various filters, which is a shame – seeing how many rival magazines had tumbled to their doom each month gave me a delightfully heady whiff of Schadenfreude! However, the website is still going, so I'll be sure to look on there and giggle with evil glee at others' failures!

On the other hand, Dee Rimbaud sent out a warning that he may have to shut down the AA Independent Press Guide altogether, due to a lack of time and funds, unless he receives enough donations to make it worthwhile. Again, it's a shame: it's a good website, and submissions to TQF got a nice boost after we appeared on there. I haven't donated any money, though, I have to admit. Enthusiasms change, and people *should* move on to new things.

As an editor my favourite of these sites is www.duotrope.com, just be-

cause I don't have to do any work to keep it up-to-date!

Shatner in the Royal Institution

No, the great Kirk has not been committed! The Royal Institution of Great Britain, rather than a home for the royally disordered, is a scientific charity that, for over 200 years, has been committed to scientific discovery and communication. It's the kind of place at which a gentleman adventurer like our own Howard Phillips might well present his findings and discoveries at the end of a intercontinental trek!

The Royal Institution has been teaming with SFX magazine to present some classic films on the big screen, and on Thursday, August 7, at 8.00pm, they will be showing my second favourite Star Trek film: *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*.

Given my misleading headline, I should make it clear that Shatner himself will not be in attendance. But does anyone remember his hilarious appearance on Channel 4's sci-fi panel show? Tom Baker was fantastic on that too. What a shame it only lasted for one series. If only someone could put William Shatner and Tom Baker into a programme together. It would be a sitcom, and I would call it *The Oddest Couple*. Each of them would alternate between periods of mania and depression, with hilarious consequences. While on the subject of If Onlys, if only Tom Baker had recorded a couple of albums. Both of Shatner's are unremittingly brilliant, in their own ways. As far as I know, apart from an LP of *Genesis of the Daleks*, Tom Baker's recording career was limited to a haunting track with Mansun, on the underrated *Six*.

For more information and to book tickets visit the RI website at www.rigb.org, or or call them on 020 7409 2992. Tickets cost £5 (£4 for concessions, £3 for RI members).

The Day the Moon Wept Blood

Howard Phillips

Volume 4 of the Saturation Point Saga

Dedicated to my Mum and Dad, for letting me stay up to watch *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* on the telly

The Way It All Began

It all began the day I met my dead friend.

You can see from that very first line that this is going to be a difficult novel for me to write. In previous volumes in this series you have seen me face danger after danger with only the merest hint of cowardice. In this one things will be different, because I had to face this adventure without my most important ability – my poetry! And I had to face my greatest fear – death!

But we'll get to that.

Let's go back to Christmas, 2006. Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point were playing our first gig: the Silver Age Books Christmas party. The publisher, Stephen Theaker, had reserved a chunk of Down Under, the Australasian bar on Broad Street, and we had been doing our best to distract the SAB employees from the sports showing on the televisions splashed everywhere.

There were four of us in the band now, as anyone who has read the previous books in this series will know. I performed vocals, and engaged with

whichever instruments took my fancy.

On drums we had the aptly named Mountain Drummer, who I had met in the course of my adventure upon *The Ghastly Mountain*. He was human, but a giant. He was the last of a tribe that had lived upon Mount Ban-Mossow, a mountain upon which I had nearly died so many times. I had found him banging out his grief upon a hundred animal skins stretched over a crevasse, creating a thunder that rolled across the entire country of Banet, casting every living thing that heard it into the depths of despair. We had no crevasse upon the stage, but his drumming still had much the same effect upon the audience.

On guitar was Prince Vann of Envia, who had joined us after I discovered that *His Nerves Extruded*. In the course of freeing him (and his entire world) from the clutches of his father, the dread Zuvanos, I had wrapped his extruded steel and nylon-coated nerves around a block of wood, to create a fearsome weapon. When he decided to return with me to Earth, I realised that his nerves could be tethered to a more shapely piece of wood. Now he didn't just play guitar – he was the guitar!

Finally (for now), on bass was J,J,T,L.M, a crystalline entity from the far future. I had introduced him to the joy of making music using instru-

ments during a lull in *The Doom That Came to Sea Base Delta*. When I returned to our time, I had been surprised to find him waiting with the other members of the band, jamming away. To his people, music was speech – their names were notes, their bodies instruments! To all of them I had been a curiosity, and a subject of admiration, as they watched me gamely plugging away at something they found so simple. Imagine meeting a fish whose hobby was breathing out of the water!

Anyone who has read *The Doom That Came to Sea Base Delta* will know that when I wrote “when I returned to our time”, above, I was fudging the truth a bit. To be exact, I had found myself in the far future, the last living human in a galaxy that barely remembered our species. All of you were dead, long dead. As I grew old among the Parang, they saw my unhappiness and worked to remedy it, and at the moment of my death they transferred my consciousness to this, this universe in which you find yourself. But don't worry – your life isn't a lie. This isn't a virtual reality, or a wind-up toy – this is an actual, real universe, as real as any other, but one created by my friends the Parang as an exact replica of the one I had left behind. It boggles the mind, I know. That's Howard Phillips through and through – I'm a mind-

boggler. But hard as the idea may be to stomach, bear in mind every day that this is your second chance. Do you think you made the right decisions the first time around? It's impossible to know. Just make sure you make the right ones this time!

The band wasn't finished. I didn't know what more it needed, but I knew that I had yet to fulfil the majesty of the vision that had initially inspired my trek across the world to find my drummer. After that adventure I had come to realise that I was in fate's hands. Something, I knew not what, was guiding me towards these people. I couldn't know who or why – though my money was on Athena. She was always my favourite of the Greek gods, being both sexy and smart, and it was my fondest dream that I would know when we were done, because she would turn up at the gig.

She wasn't there that night! Neither were many people, it had to be said. It was about an hour into the party, and so most of the Silver Age Books staff had already drifted out into the night in search of better company. A select few had latched onto our playing, and listened intently, but with puzzled looks on their faces. I could understand why – we were trying something new, trying to incorporate some of the new musical notes I had brought back from the future, and it didn't always make for easy listening! I could tell from my publisher's expression as he stood at the bar drinking diet Coca Cola – no ice, no lemon! as he was always so quick to say! – that he wasn't totally pleased with our performance. We finished the track, put down our instruments, and I went over to speak to him.

At that time he was in his mid-thirties, and had unfortunately put something like half a stone of weight for each of the previous fifteen years. He blamed it on discovering pizza and pasta in his first year of university.

"Hi Stephen," I said with a smile.

"Hi Howard," he replied. "Great stuff."

I smiled again. "We're getting there. Thanks for letting us play. Sorry if we scared the troops away."

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it. It's me that they're running

from. By the end of the working day they've had enough of me. I wouldn't expect them to stay any longer than they have to."

Theaker looked unusually glum. It came as a bit of a surprise to me. Gilligan had once called him the most positive person he knew, and though personally I often found him to be quite negative, I could see where the comment came from. His arrogance and lack of regard for others meant he was often able to swan impermeably and happily through situations that would have caused upset to nicer people.

I tried to cheer him up a bit. "Hey, come on, you aren't that bad."

"Maybe. But I've been in a bad mood this week, even more than usual. Things aren't going well for the SAB." He took another sip of his Diet Coke. "Your books have been great for us, you know that. They sell all over the world. People love to hear about your adventures. But we need a new one, Howard, and I'm worried that your focus is now going to shift back to the band. You barely wrote anything for us when you were with The Sound of Howard Phillips, and I'm worried it'll happen again."

I put a friendly hand on his shoulder, partly to offer him my strength, such as it was, but also because I knew that the invasion of his personal space would make him intensely uncomfortable. "You know as well as I do that these aren't really novels, they are memoirs. I can't write a new one until I have a new adventure!"

"But will you have any more adventures? You have the band now."

I shook my head. "First up, Stephen, I know I owe you a lot – you gave me a job when I was down on my luck, you fished me up from the canal when I was weighed down with booze, and you've always been there for me, albeit in a fairly distant and somewhat confrontational way. You're quite right, writing is a sideline for me now, but you should know too that I never take more than a month to write a novel. If I can't find a month to jot down my adventures, then they aren't worth the effort it takes for you to publish them. Secondly, the band isn't finished yet. We're trying some things out, but I

know that there's more to come. And so there will be more adventures, and more novels. Trust in Athena!"

He raised an eyebrow. "Okay, Howard." He went off to the toilet. He was constantly scoffing food, which meant there were far too frequent emissions from the other end.

I felt sorry for him. He had not begun life as a publisher. He had fallen into it. Originally he had been a writer himself, writing and ultimately self-publishing two poorly-received novels, *Professor Challenger in Space* and *Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!* After a gap of many years he had written a third, *The Fear Man*, but since then there had been nothing. In the course of self-publishing his books he had drawn other, better writers into his orbit, something that accelerated once he began publication of his half-way decent magazine, *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. Why he wrote nothing now, I did not know – perhaps it was a matter of time, perhaps it was an acknowledgment that he was better off playing (to use one of his own phrases) "the handmaiden to genius" than wasting anyone's time with his own work.

I saw another old friend coming in from the street – Cornelius Gilligan. He had been a school friend of Theaker's, and had moved to Birmingham from Brighton a few years before. Cornelius wasn't his real name, of course, though he had often mused on correcting that particular imperfection in the universe by deed poll. But long-time readers of my work may be aware of a previous occasion on which this friend appeared in my work – a fictionalised version of him, one strongly inspired by John Constantine, Hellblazer, played a part in my unproduced film script, *The Power of Death*. I'm going to use the same name for him here, because to write his actual name however many times the narrative makes it necessary would be excruciatingly painful for me, as the rest of this book will make clear.

"Hey, Cornelius," I called, happily. I was always glad to see him. As well as being a good and loyal friend, he was also very funny, but, best of all, I could always count on him to challenge me, to press my ideas, argue

against them – often out of sheer bloody-mindedness! – and I always left a conversation with him having a much better idea of the strengths and weaknesses of my most fondly-held positions. For many people that meant he was too much hard work, and it was hard work for me too, but you need to give your brain a workout every now and again, or it'll get flabby, as flabby as Theaker's unpleasantly overweight body had become over the last ten years.

"Hi!" He flashed a wry grin. "You're not surprised to see me?"

I shrugged. "You do live around here, and you've been published by Silver Age Books – I was just surprised you weren't here sooner."

"Okay," he said, pushing his hand through his hair, which, now I looked, was looking a bit greasy. He had once told me that he didn't need to shower very often, or to change his socks, because he didn't start to smell for a long time. Once or twice I had had to disabuse him of that notion, and this looked like it might be one of them, if he was sticking around. As it turned out, it wasn't. "Well, that means I can't talk to you yet. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Well, sure – don't you want to speak to Theaker? He's around here somewhere."

"Nah, it's okay. I'll catch you later, alright?"

"Hmm – okay."

And he left. If I was rather baffled by the encounter, I soon put it out of my head. I bought myself a Britvic orange juice and went back to the band. We still had a long way to go before we'd be ready for a bigger stage.

The Worst Day of My Life

Soon after that came the worst day of my life, or at least one of them. I've

had quite a lot of bad days over the years, as my readers will testify. Remember when I woke up in the clutches of the Master of Mongoose? Or when I had to spend the day strapped to a pole, burning in the Ennian sun? Those were pretty bad days. But this day wasn't a physical trial – it was a trial of my emotions, my spirit and my heart.

I was in my room at the Novotel – we had ended up taking a room there for each of the band, seeing as it was convenient for all of our purposes (drinking, womanising, rehearsing and the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery) and money wasn't an issue.

The rest of the band had headed out to Nostalgia & Comics, where I had no doubt they would be treated as celebrities, rather than shoppers – though I hoped that among the adulation they would still find time to pick up the DC Showcases I had asked them to buy for me. I really fancied reading the *Challengers of the Unknown* volume, for one thing. There's nothing like watching Jack Kirby on the loose to unlock your own creativity.

I was just having a half-snooze in front of an episode of *Diagnosis Murder* when the phone rang.

I picked it up and announced myself, somewhat drowsily. "Hi, Howard here."

"Is that Howard Phillips?"

The voice that spoke was unfamiliar and female, usually something that makes me wonder if I've forgotten someone important. She sounded upset.

"Hi," I said. "Yes, this is Howard Phillips."

She paused a moment before replying. "Hi, my name's Jan. I work at Winterstones. I don't want to worry you, but I'm a bit worried myself. Cornelius Gilligan had you down as his emergency contact."

"Is he alright?" I interrupted, full of sudden panic.

"I'm sure he is," she replied, "but he was due back into work yesterday, and he didn't come in. We thought he'd just forgotten when he was due back, but he didn't come in today either, and he hasn't been answering his phone. I've texted him as well with no reply."

"Hmm, I see." I relaxed a bit. "He's always running out of money, so that might explain why there's no reply to the text messages."

"But he doesn't normally just miss work like this – we're used to him running in an hour late or so after sleeping in, but this is unusual. I was going to go over to his flat to see if everything's alright."

I didn't want to mention my thoughts as to the likely situation – that he was probably sleeping off a stupendous hangover after drinking far too much, as usual – given that she was probably his boss. Still, it was worrying.

"Okay," I said to her. "I'm on Broad Street already, so I can meet you there."

She wasn't there when I arrived. Cornelius lived on the first floor of a block of flats, in a corner flat. His kitchen window, as always, was wide open, but the living room blinds were pulled down. I typed his door number into the intercom system, and listened to it ring, one time, two times, three times. With each ring I expected to hear the crackle of his reply, or for him to lean out of the window behind me. He would probably be annoyed and amused that I had turned up at his flat in such a panic over a lack of credit on his mobile phone. But there was no crackle, there was no call from the window. I dialled the number again, but my stomach already felt painfully hollow. Again, there was no reply.

I turned and looked around. What should I do now? Half of me said it was nothing, that I should just head back to my room at the Novotel and wait for Gilligan to show up. Then I began to remember our last conversation – no, not last, I berated myself, that's the wrong choice of words – our previous conversation, which had seemed so mysterious at the time. Had I failed some kind of test? Had I unknowingly said the wrong thing? I put the thoughts out of my head. There was no need to think the worst. Cornelius was after all a diabetic – it had dominated his thoughts and affected his worldview ever since he had been a teenager. Perhaps he had fallen into a diabetic coma? Immediately a voice that I did not want to

hear chirped up again – was that any better? Left in such a state for any length of time, he would not be in a good condition.

I turned slowly, looking around, wondering what to do. I had to go inside, really. My conscience wouldn't let me do anything else. I pressed the button that would call the concierge, and was buzzed inside.

A black woman with an unhappy expression was sitting behind a desk. I tried to explain the situation, but in my panic spoke too quickly and sputtering, and she was unable to understand a word. I began again, more carefully, and she shook her head.

"I'm sorry, you'll need to go to the building supervisor – he's the only one with a key."

Then a colleague realised what we were talking about. "Someone else has just gone to see him about that. A girl from Winterstones."

Jan must have got a taxi, or run all the way, to get there before me. I thanked the concierges and went out to find her.

I got through the entrance doors and stopped short. My knees felt like they had been kicked with studs showing. Jan was approaching, two police officers in tow.

"Hi, are you Howard?" she asked. Her eyes were rimmed with red.

"Yes. Are you Jan?"

She nodded. The police officers went past us and into the building. We followed them into the lobby. The worst lobby of my life!

"I went up to the flat," she said, taking a tissue from her handbag. "I looked through the letterbox, to see if I could see anything, and to call Cornelius. There was a chair that looked as if it had been kicked over."

I put my hand to my head and closed my eyes. "Oh no..."

"I'm very worried for him. Had he seemed unhappy to you?"

I had to admit that he had seemed unhappy for quite a long time. For someone like me, relationships are something to treasure – as long as they last! – at which I continue to treasure them – as memories! Cornelius, though he affected a similar attitude to love, and seemed at times to despise the domesticated lives of those of our friends who had found

apparently permanent happiness with their wives, had less success with women than I did, not being a famous rock star. I had recently begun to feel that he wanted a relationship, though he hated the idea of the compromises that would be involved. I had often felt that he would have been better off gay – indeed, he had once announced himself to be gay as a teenager, though he had gone rather quiet about it after meeting his first girlfriend! But if he had been gay, I think he would have found it easier to build a longer-lasting relationship. He would just have had to find a man with similar attitudes, and they could have lived in somewhat tense happiness. How much easier it would be to find a man to share night-long sessions on Silent Hill than to find a similar woman. Though I'm sure it would be possible to find such a woman, she would be in such great demand that it would be very hard to be the one to win her heart, showered as she would be with geeky gifts from every corner.

Not that Cornelius would have called himself a geek. I remembered well the night I attended a screening of an Alex Cox movie, *The Avengers Tragedy*, with him, as part of the much missed Birmingham Film Festival, and he had said loudly upon entering the room, "Look at all these geeks!" It had made my toes curl all the way up to my nose. If anything, he would have regarded himself as an otaku, as he was at that time deeply interested in Japanese culture, in particular in J-Pop. He would have made a great gay salaryman.

I didn't say any of that to Jan, though it passed through my mind. "He's been unhappy for a while," I said. "He's been quite lonely."

She nodded.

There then followed a long, long wait. We made small talk while we waited to find out what had happened. As the time went by, my hopes slowly faded. They were almost completely gone once I had seen the lack of haste with which a paramedic arrived. He dismounted from his bike with the look of a man who is on his way to see a dead body, not the look of a man on his way to save a life.

More police arrived soon, but none

were able to tell me anything. Soon my worst fears were confirmed.

A member of the staff, perhaps a cleaner by her clothes, called across the lobby, "Have you heard? Someone on the first floor has killed themselves!"

Ironically, she said it with the same emotionally detached but interested tone with which Cornelius had told us one day of the death of the Queen Mother, travelling back from Blackpool in a car. As I remembered it, he had learnt of her death while experimenting with the internet functions of his (at that time) brand new mobile phone, the same phone that had led to the discovery of his death today.

I had to laugh. If he could have chosen how I would learn of his death, he would surely have chosen this way. His death had been announced with all the sensitivity he would have shown in the same situation.

Once I stopped laughing, I began to cry.

There was still a faint chance, of course, that the cleaner had come to the wrong conclusion upon seeing the police gathered around the door to my friend's flat, but that chance was flattened immediately by the arrival in the lobby of the building supervisor.

"I can't tell you what has happened," he said, sadly, "because the police are going to come and talk to you in a minute. I think from that you can guess it isn't going to be good news."

The manager of the Winterstones at which Cornelius worked had arrived a while before, and he comforted Jan as she burst into tears.

Moments later a police officer arrived, and confirmed the bad news. Cornelius was dead. It had been suicide, and he had been drinking. The building records showed that he had not used his keycard to enter or exit the building for three days. The policeman was so tall, and I was so upset. I wondered what he would think if I threw myself into his arms for comfort. But I held myself back, and tried to keep a stiff upper lip, even as my weeping eyes betrayed my purpose. I answered a few of his ques-

tions about Cornelius's state of mind, and asked a few of my own. He said that an officer would come to see me later at home for a statement. I thanked him for his sensitivity, and then, as the hubbub of interested on-lookers in the lobby reached a crescendo, I asked if I could leave, and he said I could. I thanked Jan for having been so quick and capable in dealing with the situation, and then left.

I got a few steps out of the building before bursting into floods of tears. I sat upon a bollard and let them out for at least a hundred seconds, before heading back to the Novotel.

As I walked, I looked angrily up at the sunlit sky. Didn't it know that my friend had died? Why hadn't a thunderstorm begun? As it turned out, there was one by the end of the day, but up until then I was frustrated by the world's maddening indifference to the tragedy that had taken place.

I told the rest of the band, who had got back from their shopping trip and were sitting in the bar. Their attempts to show me their haul of free comics were deflated by the news, and though they had not known Cornelius very well, they knew how much he had meant to me. Each of them gave me a hug, and I went back to my room.

I felt that I should let people know, but the policeman had asked me to wait until they had had a chance to speak to the family, who lived in Yorkshire. (At midnight that night, I would receive a call from his father to tell me the news. It hurt so much to tell him that I had known since the morning.)

I called Theaker, though. He had to know right away. So did Greenwood, who had known Gilligan since childhood. I said as little as I could get away with, then left each of them to their own torments. Then I stared at the phone. Just that very morning I had sent my first text message on it – to Cornelius. I had texted a dead man.

I wondered whether to call Harriet. She probably wouldn't be awake yet, though, because of the time difference. She had been my companion through the course of my adventure on Sea Base Delta, and we had formed a strong bond, though it had

not gone further than friendship so far. While I had returned to my life in England, she had returned, as far as I knew, to her work on David Letterman's show. (We had met when I had been a guest, talking about the lessons I had learnt from my adventure on *Envia*.)

I decided not to call her. This was too heavy a load to dump on such an unformed relationship.

I put the phone down, opened the minibar and began to drink.

Things Start to Go Wrong for Everyone Else Too

I am going to skim over the next three months and pick up the narrative in May. I drank a lot, and wrote little. I became distant from the band, and encouraged them to find their own entertainment while I struggled to find my feet once again. Given the amount of booze I was putting away, that took a while.

In May I started to try living once again. It wasn't easy, but then it never had been. From the day I was born I found living hard. Every time my eyes opened in the morning I had to hunt for reasons not to close them again permanently. To some extent, I had tried to keep such thoughts to myself, because I know that once they are expressed, they can become infectious. Life is utterly meaningless, as any sane person can immediately apprehend, other than the meaning we ourselves attribute to it. Many people find that incredibly hard to face, and so they are predisposed to believe the ridiculous answers offered by religions and other such sources of flimflammy. It's not hard to understand why – most people aren't quite intelligent enough to see through centuries' worth of cunningly constructed deceptions, and in the

face of a thousand year old piece of doubletalk in response to a naive but sensible question assume that the resulting bafflement must result from their own stupidity. And even the most intelligent of humans are prey to a hundred urges which will override the brain without a moment's notice. Lust, of course, and love, I suppose, will make almost any man or woman ignore their own brain's careful analysis, but of course the most potent of the emotions in this regard is fear. Fear of death, fear of the unknown, fear of not being. I felt that fear, too, but not to the extent that I was willing to debase myself by pretending the universe is other than it is. There might be gods out there in the universe, but I've been out there a bit, and I haven't met them yet, although, I would often remind myself with a laugh, were the Parang not our true gods? They did, after all, create this universe – the one in which I now lived, and the one in which you read this book! As to invisible gentlemen, they would have to make themselves known to me in some way if they wanted my attention.

So things were hard, and I would not find comfort in pretending otherwise. Yet my friend could have used that comfort. I thought of the times we had discussed various religious and cults, and the way we had joked about them, and I wondered sometimes if he might still be alive if we had not been so stringent in our requirements. Should I have encouraged him to give them a chance? Even if they were patent nonsense, they made people happy. They created communities, and that was what my friend had lacked.

But, as I said, in May I started to try living again. I put such thoughts out of my head. I tried not to think about my friend at all if I could help it. Whenever my thoughts began to stray in his direction, alarm bells began to ring in my head. Red lights flashed. Sirens wailed. And I thought about something else. It made things easier. After all, there were a lot of other things to think about.

Because that was when things started to go wrong. By chance I happened to be there. It's only in retrospect that we can make the connec-

tions. At the time no one thought anything of the first thing that happened – it was a literary puzzle, the “And finally...” item on the news, a subject for jokes on *Have I Got News For You*. Now, of course, we know that it was something much more serious than that.

I had travelled down to London with Prince Vann, who had expressed an interest in seeing a performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the rebuilt Globe Theatre, which he had become aware of while watching the third series of *Doctor Who*, which had recently been showing on BBC1. The adventures of Martha and the Doctor, and their meeting with William Shakespeare, had intrigued him, and upon learning that the Globe Theatre had been rebuilt and was playing host to new performances he begged me to take him down there. Perhaps he wasn't sincere, perhaps he was just trying to get me out of my room at the Novotel, but I had to respond as if he was sincere. He wasn't human, after all, and I didn't want to offend him. Not all cultures have the concept of the white lie, and I didn't want to get myself into a duel with a man who could slice me like an egg with a flick of his fingers!

London was lovely at that time of year. Not too cold, and not too warm – I could wear my favourite hat and scarf without looking like a poseur. It was evening when we arrived, and the light was dim, just dim enough for the street lamps to come on, creating a sense of magic waiting to happen on every street.

“Do you think we should pay a visit to the Queen?” asked Prince Vann as we left the tube station.

“It's a bit out of our way,” I replied with a smile. “We'd miss the beginning of the play. And the play's the thing, I think they say around here!”

“I don't mean right now,” he said, rather sullenly.

I realised he had been serious, and was now a bit hurt. I was still learning to gauge his moods. He had only been on Earth for about a year and a half, and I'd spent quite a bit of that time adventuring in search of new band members, so we hadn't had much of a chance to get to know each other.

“Sorry,” I said, patting his shoulder. “I didn't mean to joke. I forget sometimes that you really are a Prince. Away from your own world, seeing you eat croissants at the Novotel each morning, it's easy to take you for granted. Why wouldn't you expect to meet the Queen while you are here?”

He shrugged, begrudgingly.

“I'll see what I can do. I've never tried to talk to the Queen before, and I don't know what the routines are, but I'll drop her a line and see where we go from there. It might not be this weekend, though. Does that sound okay?”

“I suppose so,” he replied. “I spent a lot of time wired into my father's security network, so I didn't get to live the life of a royal. I worked, non-stop, for year after year, to bring tyranny to my people. It would be a genuine pleasure to meet a ruler like yours, one who lives precisely the opposite life. Where my job was to bring misery, hers is essentially to smile benignly upon her subjects.”

I smiled, and nodded. “I suppose it is! I had never looked at it like that before. Up until this moment I was an unabashed republican, but I am now converted. What a brilliant thing it is, for our society to be able to pay someone to do that. How symbolic it is of our aspirations and freedoms! We could remove her from her position at any time, but instead she remains, smiling without end, waving without end, wishing for nothing but our happiness.”

“I'd like to see you doing that job, Howard.”

I laughed, for the first time in months. “I wouldn't make a good monarch, it's true. Not unless the people wanted someone to drink too much and lust inappropriately after women. Hey, maybe I would make a good monarch at that! In the fifteenth century at least!”

We headed into the theatre. We were both dressed up to the nines, which had drawn a few unashamedly amused glances on the tube, but it hadn't bothered us. There are times when a man has to look the best that he can look, and one of those times is at the theatre. He was a prince and I was a rock star – why shouldn't we

wear a sequin here and there on our suits?

The play that night was *Romeo and Juliet*. A romantic tragedy, I had thought it would appeal to the prince, who had suffered as much on behalf of his family as either of the protagonists, but had yet to experience any of their happinesses. If he was going to play the fullest part possible in Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point, he would have to learn to understand love.

It's funny that I write that, as if I have ever truly understood it myself! Or as if I even thought it understandable! Far from it – the essence of love is that which beguiles and confuses. As I mentioned before, it numbs the brain and confounds reason. I remember one of my earliest adult amours, a girl I fell in love with shortly before the close of my first year at university. I spent the following summer at home (in my parents' house – and I realise that this is the first time I have mentioned them, in the course of four novels: there is a reason for that, which I may someday disclose) doing nothing but drowse on the sofa, letting my head fall back in reverie, my eyes twittering as if I was in REM sleep. It's strange now to think of it, but at the time it felt like I was experiencing the most beautiful moments of my life. I was lucky, perhaps, to be separated from my new love, in that it extended my state of heightened emotion over a number of weeks. Of course, it ended badly. I failed her, as I have so many of my lovers and friends, and she found happiness with another, an exchange student from Africa. Disappointing as the experience turned out to be, I can take consolation from the fact that I still have the poetry I wrote during those happy dazes, and it remains a source of inspiration to me. It's hard to write about love, for so many reasons, but one has to do it to write popular music, and so I count myself lucky to have a store of undiluted, giddy adoration, to which I can turn whenever my aging heart runs dry.

We took our seats – front and centre, a few rows back, the best seats in the house. The benefit of international celebrity and exceptional wealth! On either side of us were equally fa-

mous and wealthy people, though I didn't recognise any of them. The prince and I spent a few minutes making small talk over the programme, and then the performance began.

It was as wonderful as you would expect. *Romeo and Juliet* in the Globe, sitting with my alien friend! What could be better? Every scene was more delectable than those that preceded it, and the hearts of the audience swelled with each exchange. From time to time I would glance over at my companion, to see how he found it, and although he clearly found the particulars of the dialogue hard to follow at times, he lost none of the meaning, so mellifluous were the tones and so elegant were the performances, each line being delivered as if it were the sweep of a dancer's leg through the air in *Swan Lake*. His expression was one of rapture, of a man taken beyond himself, beyond his own life, beyond his own feelings, into a region utterly new and utterly ecstatic.

Then it happened.

Juliet stepped out onto her balcony. "Romeo, Romeo, where you are standing there Romeo?"

There was no reaction from the audience – there was a non-reaction. It was as if the audience ceased to be, for a moment, as if everyone in the audience had died, for an instant, and hence could not react.

Then the audience rushed back into being, and began to laugh. At first it was a titter, at the back, but before long the laughter was composed of full-blooded guffaws, and even a portion of raucous braying. Prince Vann looked at me in unhappy puzzlement, unsure whether this was part of the performance, but a moment's glance at the poor actress would have answered his question. The poor girl was in floods of tears.

Something was not right. Behind the laughter, we could all feel it.

Romeo stepped from the shadows, and gave her an encouraging nod. But she shook her head sadly.

"What should it be? I don't remember." Romeo stared at her, then shrugged. She looked at the audience pleadingly. "What should it be?"

Abruptly the laughter stopped, and

the members of the audience began to furrow their brows, looking at each other in consternation.

"What's happening?" whispered Prince Vann. "Has she forgotten her lines?"

My own brow was as furrowed as anyone else's. "No," I told him. "It's not that."

Whenever I tried to remember the line, all I could think of was "Romeo, Romeo, where are you standing there Romeo?"

And I knew that was not right.

"Something strange is happening," I said to the Prince. "Perhaps it's just some form of group hysteria. But it might be something worse, like a mind control drug of some kind, or hypnosis. That is the wrong line – the actress knew it the moment she said it, we all did, but no one can remember what it should be."

Everyone soon came to the same realisation, and then the amusement and bemusement began to turn to anger. Men got to their feet and began to shake their fists at the stage, convinced they had been the victim of some hypnotist's trick. It was threatening to turn into a riot.

A man came on stage, even as Romeo was helping Juliet to leave it safely. I recognised him as Trevor None, the director of the play. He held a copy of the play in his hand – it was a familiar Penguin edition. He held up his hand to beg the audience's attention.

"I'm sorry everyone," he began. He had to repeat the words a few times before he managed to get the amount of shouting down to a manageable level. "I'm sorry, I don't know what has happened. I know as well as you do that those are not the correct words, but I'll be damned if I know what they should be. If any one of you knows, please will you get to your feet and tell us." No one stood up, and quite a few people sat back down, the wind knocked out of their sails. "I have a copy of the play right here." He waved the paperback in the air like a flag of truce. He began to flick through it to the right page. "And right here it says: 'Romeo, Romeo, where are you standing there Romeo.' You know it's wrong, I know it's wrong, but that's what it

says in the book. I have no answers. Perhaps this is all some elaborate joke being played upon me – upon all of us – but for now let us keep our dignity, and let the play go on from the next scene, after a short interval. I hope that will meet with your approval. Thank you."

There were a few isolated claps, and he left the stage as the curtains came down.

I looked at Prince Vann and raised an eyebrow. "How queer."

The rest of the performance took place without incident, and the lead actors took an extra bow at the end in recognition of their determination to continue.

We returned to Birmingham that night, and watched the reports of the incident as they appeared on BBC News 24. No answers were forthcoming, though the best bet seemed to be the involvement of a prankster of some stripe, perhaps Sacha Baron Cohen in some new guise. I was unconvinced. My own rarely-thumbed copy of Shakespeare's collected works had the same version of the line, and I knew that it was not right. Something had happened: reality had changed in some way!

Time for a Holiday

The weeks after that incident offered no answers either, and soon it was all but forgotten by the media, and left to the attentions of excited academics, who were thrilled to have something new to study.

But other things began to go wrong. For some reason I was finding it increasingly difficult to write new lyrics for the band. The words didn't seem to tie together, however I arranged them. More and more, I found myself poring through my old notebooks, searching for old words I could arrange into new forms. Even that, though, was less than successful, and I began to grow frustrated with myself, as did the rest of the band.

"Is the drinking finally taking its toll on you?" asked the Mountain Drummer. "You put away more than me, most nights we're out, and I am three times your weight."

I wanted to say no, but how could I? It did seem as if my brain was faltering in some way. What had once been easier for me than breathing seemed now more difficult than living. Where words had once been my willing tools, leaping into place more quickly than I might bid them to do so, they were now recalcitrant, obstinate and obdurate, resisting my entreaties as if they were unionised and militant.

"I don't know. Maybe I just need a break."

"It's been quite a hard few years for you," said J,J,T,L.M, using the dialoguing crystal he had grown after arriving on Earth. "Your quest to form this band has led you into a lot of tough situations. It wouldn't be any surprise if you started to feel the strain. You have already endured much that would have crushed any other human." He referred, of course, to the way in which I had awoken in his far future times to find myself the last living human.

Prince Vann wasn't so sure. "Could this be connected to what happened in London?" he asked. The others groaned, but he was unperturbed. "I know I've talked about it at length, my friends, but it was exceedingly strange."

"I don't think so," I said. "But I suppose it's possible, if it was hypnosis or gas that caused it, that I'm suffering after-effects of some kind. Maybe I should have a break. Where do you think I should go, and do you think I can justify hiring palanquines again?"

The adventure of *His Nerves Extraduded* had begun with me being carried to the Channel Ferry by a group of beautiful hired actresses on a palanquin.

"If that's what you need," said the Mountain Drummer. "For me, it's simple. I bang the drums. If I feel happy, I bang them happy. If I feel sad, I bang them sad. My muscles know what to do, and I don't need to tell them."

"That's it," I replied. "When I

type, I don't think out each individual letter, and tell my fingers to type them one by one. I just think of the word, as if I'm dictating it, and the words magically appear on screen. Until now, that's all I had to do to write poetry. I would think of a mood, or a rhyme, and the words would magically form themselves into poetry. But not now. It's as if I had forgotten how to walk."

"Definitely sounds like tiredness to me," said J,J,T,L.M. "The business with Cornelius came on top of a lot of other stuff. You need to holiday. I don't recommend palanquines, though. Organisationally, it would be difficult, not least because everyone knows what happened to your last batch." Many of them had died, some on Prince Vann's home planet, others on our own, killed by his father's soldiers, testing our defences. "Where would you like to go?"

I thought for a moment. Even considering the break made me feel a bit better. I could feel something beginning to unwind, something hard and cold that had been coiled around my spine. "I think I'd like to go to Cardiff. To see where they make Doctor Who and Torchwood. Would any of you like to come?"

"I would love to come," said Prince Vann. "That would be most thrilling!"

J,J,T,L.M shook some of his crystalline appendages in a negatory tinkling. "I am in the middle of developing my skills on the bass. I have to work hard to justify my place within this illustrious band of musicians, but I would applaud your decision to visit Cardiff. From all I have seen, it is a very pleasant place for a stay."

The Mountain Drummer clapped his hands. "It is decided, then! I will visit thetrainline.com and order our tickets – we will collect them from the station tomorrow and be on our way before we have a chance to change our minds!"

"Remember to buy two tickets for yourself," said Prince Vann dryly. "I do not want to find myself sitting upon your lap."

We all laughed. It felt good.

The next day found Prince Vann, the Mountain Drummer and I collecting our tickets from a machine in

New Street station. We bought a good selection of magazines, drinks and snacks and headed for the train. We drew a lot of attention, of course. For one thing, the Mountain Drummer was eight feet tall with hands like pork joints! But it was also because word was starting to get around about our band. My previous band, The Sound of Howard Phillips, had been extremely successful (and was still, though I had moved on), and I was well known among the public as a result of my previous adventures, so there was a lot of interest in what I would do next. Our website was popular, and fans (or at least those who planned to become our fans, once we had released some music!) traded information across a hundred forums devoted to our activities. (Our recent gig at the Australasian Bar had given rise to an explosion of activity, not least because so few people had actually been there.) Having spent many an unproductive day browsing those forums, I was aware that lots of people, perhaps most of them, thought the story of my vision a smokescreen, that in truth I suffered from writer's block, and had ceased to create music. Others held true, and believed that I was preparing something spectacular. I hoped that they were right.

Whatever they believed, everyone was interested in seeing the band members out and about.

We got onto the train. It would only take about two hours to get to Cardiff, but we were keen to have the proper holiday experience, so as the train pulled out of the station we began a game of Travel Scrabble. It was good practice for the Mountain Drummer, who had only learnt English a couple of years before, when he had first returned with me to England. Prince Vann had no need to practice – the aristocracy of Envia, and a large proportion of the people, had learnt English in their youth, in preparation for their invasion, an invasion which I had happily foiled. Now our shared language, rather than aiding their aggression, helped to promote a friendship between our peoples.

Travel Scrabble over, we opened our magazines and shared out some sweets. I was reading the latest issue of *SFX*, hoping for a review of my

latest novel, but of course there was none, Theaker, in his usual cheap-skate way, presumably having failed to send out any review copies. The Mountain Drummer was enjoying the latest issue of *Total Film*, and Prince Vann was reading *Uncut*.

The hours passed like minutes, and we were in Cardiff.

Stepping out of the station we gave each other high-fives (something to be done with care with those two gentlemen!) – here we were in the city where so much of the new Doctor Who was filmed. What better reason could there be for choosing a holiday destination?

Our first order of business was to find a hotel. I was a bit annoyed that the Mountain Drummer hadn't sorted it out while he was on the internet the night before, but he explained how much of a strain it was to use the tiny keyboard on my laptop, and I berated myself out loud. It's easy for the person who doesn't organise things to criticise the person who does. It's hard to be the person who takes on the responsibility of getting things done. I gave him a hug and we walked into the city centre, booking into the first hotel we encountered. Luckily it was a good one, a bit fancier than our Novotel at home, as it happened, and we spent about an hour in the bar, enjoying the decor, before heading out. It was about lunchtime at that point, and our dual mission was to visit the Doctor Who exhibition and the Millennium Centre, under which the Torchwood Institute, one likes to believe, is based. We decided to head first for the Doctor Who exhibition, it being within walking distance.

Thus we found ourselves on a long and apparently unending road.

At first we trudged along quite happily. The view was nice, and the walking was simple, but after passing a second bus stop we began to wonder whether we should have waited to catch one. Just how far away was the magical Doctor Who exhibition? Would we ever actually get there, or would we trudge on forever along an endless road to eternity?

We would not – life had bigger surprises in stall for us than that!

I heard something far behind us, a

low rumble. I turned to see what it was, but by that point it had already become a huge roar! Charging down the road towards us were three red cars, each of them trying to outdo the others for speed. It was irrational to think that they were coming for us, but I couldn't bat that irrationality away.

"Get over the wall!" I shouted, leading the way.

The Mountain Drummer and Prince Vann leapt after me, and we turned to see if my suspicions were well-founded. Apparently they were not, as the three cars rushed past us like wind through a turbine. They were not so fast, though, that I could not make out the men within – there were four in each, wearing suits of black and red – or the jeers they threw our way. They were out of our sight long before their catcalls stopped ringing in my ears.

"What did you make of that, Howard?" asked Prince Vann.

I shrugged. "Local yahoos? I don't know. I haven't seen outfits like that before." We climbed back over the wall. "This road comes to a dead end, so I guess we'll probably get a chance to take a better look at them."

We carried on walking, and soon came to the shopping centre within which the Doctor Who exhibition was housed. None of us could contain our excitement, so we headed straight inside. There was no sign of the yahoos, or of their vehicles, and so we gave them no further thought for the time being. We queued for our tickets and then entered the exhibition.

It was as good as we had expected. Full-size figures of cybermen, sea devils and judoon threatened at every corner, and there was a superb selection of artefacts from the series, as well as lots of intriguing text to read, some of it from the hand of Russell T Davies himself.

I was particularly fascinated by the dalek, and by the way its eyestalk swung around to stare at me. I couldn't look away, and so fell behind my two friends, who were keen to see K9 in the next chamber. As I looked into that blank eye, so redolent of evil, so reminiscent of the other evils I had encountered during my adventures, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I spun around, ready to fight. It was Cornelius Gilligan. "Hi Howard," he said.

A Chat with an Old Friend

Cornelius Gilligan. My dead friend. Standing in front of me in the dalek chamber of the Doctor Who exhibition in Cardiff. Much of my life has been surprising, but that surpassed it all.

"Hi Howard," he laughed. He leaned forward to speak into my ear, to be heard over the squawking of the dalek. "Are you going to say hello, you rude bastard?"

"Erm..." I was struggling. "Hi Cornelius."

"Now, are you surprised to see me this time?"

That was easy for me to answer. "Yes, I'm surprised," I shouted back.

"Good. Let's get out of here and have a chat."

He took me by the arm and led me back the way we had come in. It looked like I wasn't going to get to see K9, I thought sadly. Seeing my dead friend again was some consolation, though.

We walked over to a cafe on the opposite side of the shopping mall, and he ordered coffee for both of us.

"If you remember," he began, "last time we met you weren't surprised to see me. Well, that's because I hadn't died yet. I didn't want to talk to you until you knew I was dead."

I didn't know what to say to that. I looked around the mall – had this entire year been some appalling practical joke? Was I being Prank'd? I was famous enough, after all. Much more famous, in fact, than many other people who had been on the programme. In the end I just shrugged and said, "Naturally."

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "You're thinking it's all some

huge joke, or that you're dreaming, or that you're on drugs, or something like that."

I nodded.

"Well, you're not. I am dead – I did die in that flat. I was desperately unhappy, and I thought it would last forever, and I took my own life."

"So are you a ghost now or something?"

He shook his head, laughing. "You knob! Of course I'm not. I'm a time traveller."

"I see," I said, but I didn't.

"I know, it's hard to credit. But you have to give me credit for making contact with you here."

"Eh?"

He laughed again. He always seemed to be laughing at me, as if there was some essential part of me that was somehow pitifully funny. I waited for him to get it out of his system. "Here, at the Doctor Who exhibition. I thought you'd like that."

I took a deep breath. I had handled more difficult things than this in the past, I told myself. Maybe it was a dream, despite what he had said, and if it was I should just see where it was going anyway. Many of my most important ideas had come to me in dreams, trances and hallucinations, not least among them being Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point. I trusted my subconscious. Its goals might not be the same as my own, but at least it generally meant well.

"Okay," I said. "You're a time traveller."

"Too right," he smiled. "Okay. I'll explain as much as I can. I don't have long. Did you see my body?"

I shook my head. "A police officer brought up the subject of identification at one point, but I wasn't keen, and they had plenty of photographs of you anyway."

"Okay. Well, I know that one day I'll be in that room. One day I'll be that person, but I don't know when. Perhaps they found a sixty year old body in there, perhaps I'll be there tomorrow. But till then, I have a planet to save."

It was my turn to smile.

He shrugged. "I was all set to do it. I'd been on a bender for a week. I'd had a week off work and I'd spent every penny I had – and some I didn't

– on booze, and I'd drunk it all. I'd finished Final Fantasy XII, and I didn't have anything else to look forward to, except my eyes going bad and my extremities being amputated."

"Your diabetes wasn't that bad yet," I said.

"It was only a matter of time," he replied. He looked down at his coffee. "It is only a matter of time." He shook his head. "It's strange. Before, this all seemed too painful to talk about, but now I'm dead it comes so much easier. And yet I'm not dead. Funny how the human brain works, isn't it? Fucking hilarious, in fact. Anyway, so I'm about to do the final deed, when there's a knock on the door. I go to answer it, because I don't want to be disturbed halfway through, and it's a pretty lady. She said she was a friend of yours – Harriet, her name was."

I frowned. Why was a production assistant on David Letterman's show knocking on his door? Why had she come to England without coming to see me?

"She told me that I had work to do before I died. She told me that they would make sure I still died, they wouldn't interfere with that, but only after I was done. Any other time, I'd have told her to fuck off, but I was pissed, so I went with her. She locked the door after me, I got into her car, and they drove me down to London. There I learnt a bit more about why they'd come for me. They knew about things I was supposed to have done, things in the past, things I hadn't done. They knew I had to live a bit longer, so that I'd get those things done. They also knew when I was due to die. Don't ask me how, when none of you knew, but I think that's one of the perks of being a secret organisation."

"Ibis." So Harriet had been a member of Ibis all along. Or had she been recruited after our adventure? There was no way of knowing. If she had been a member all along, she had played me well.

"That's the one. I didn't know you knew about them."

I nodded. "Well, first of all they were mentioned in Theaker's book, *Professor Challenger in Space*."

"Oh yes. Hm. I'd forgotten about that."

"And then they recruited me to work for them last year, when I went down to Sea Base Delta. Did you read that one?"

"No, I haven't, and there's a reason for that." I didn't ask him what that reason was, something I would always regret. I was afraid to. "Well, I think that explains why they were keeping an eye on me. After they took me to London, they gave me a gun and set me loose."

"They gave you a gun?"

He pulled his jacket open enough for me to see it. "Don't say it too loudly. I don't want to get fucking arrested!" As always, he raised his voice to say fucking, and I looked around apologetically to see if anyone had been offended. It was a routine that always seemed to amuse him. He closed his jacket again. "They told me to watch you, and to make contact when I thought it was best."

"They seem to be pretty laissez-faire for a secret organisation, don't they?"

He nodded in agreement. "Then I came to the gig, but it was too soon. I wasn't dead yet. I thought I was. Or else I was dead, and you just didn't know it." He took his glasses off and wiped them with his handkerchief. "To be honest, Howard, since they let me loose time has been a bit weird for me. I don't seem to be quite in control of it. As far as I know I haven't travelled in time yet, other than in the usual way, but my sense of time seems to be gone. It's as if the travelling in time I'm going to do is already affecting me."

"Okay," I said. "Let's say I'm buying all of this. Why have you followed me down here? Do you need my help?"

"This is the hard part, Howard. I'm not here to help you. I'm just here to give you a head's up."

I took another drink of my coffee. I hated the stuff, but since he was dead I felt I owed him the courtesy of giving it a proper try. "Go on."

"Alright. There's a guy by the name of Peter Navaroni. Have you heard of him?"

I shook my head.

“Well, he’s probably the worst writer the world has ever seen. He self-publishes on Lulu, and puts together endless anthologies which he edits with all the ability of a lump of mud.”

“Sounds like Theaker,” I said.

He laughed. “Worse, if you can imagine it. Anyway, Ibis have learnt that he recently came into a very large sum of money. So far, they told me, Ibis has been able to block his activities in the US. However much money you’ve got in America, it’s still only a drop in the ocean of a country so large. Their worry now is that he’s coming to the UK. He thinks he can put his plans into action here. Be a big fish in a smaller pond.”

“What can I do about it? Ever since the Ghastly Mountain I’ve had enough money to live comfortably, but this sounds a bit out of my league.”

He shook his head. “This won’t be about money.” Suddenly he looked away from me and glanced around the mall. “Can you hear that?” Other than the sounds made by the excited children queuing up outside the Doctor Who exhibition, all I could hear was the tuneless burbling of a Postman Pat ride for toddlers, plonked in the middle of the mall like flypaper for tiny humans. The mall was otherwise empty. “It must be my imagination. Anyway, yes, it won’t be about money. It’s going to be much bigger than that. But you have to be ready, Howard. You have to make sure you’ll be safe.” He broke off again. “Are you sure you can’t hear that?”

Three sets of doors led into the mall. Only two of them were visible from where we sat, but we heard all three explosions. For a terrible, beautiful second the mall became a glittering hall of a million mirrors, as shards of glass flew in every direction.

Then the screaming began. The queuing children seemed to be mostly unhurt, and their parents quickly hurried them inside the exhibition. To safety? Who knew? But they could not have walked out across so much glass.

Even as we tried to make sense of what we were seeing and hearing, there was more: three red cars roared into the mall, their occupants scream-

ing at the top of their voices and waving guns through the windows.

They saw Cornelius and me, and they began to fire.

Death in the Mall

“Hit the ground!” shouted Cornelius, pushing me out of my chair and pulling the gun from the holster in his jacket.

Did he think I’d never been shot at before?

At first my irritation threatened to overwhelm my fear of the bullets, but soon I had to concede that he was right to push me over. At the moment there were three pistols firing away at us through the car windows, without much care. But once they were confident that we were pinned down, they would all emerge from the cars, and then we’d be facing twelve guns (unless they had more than one each!) and they would take the time to make sure we were done for. I needed a plan.

We were given slight protection by a fence that marked off the territory of the cafe we were in, but it was already showing signs of damage. We had to get into the cafe, and drop down its shutters. I nudged Gilligan, who was busily but ineffectively trying to pick off our assailants, and motioned towards the interior. He nodded, and once he had let off a volley to get their heads down, we ran inside, crouching to minimise the targets we offered.

The cafe was wide open, with no walls or windows to offer protection, other than the pillar of brick at the front corner, so we had to move fast. For the moment they still seemed happy to blast away, causing random destruction, but that wouldn’t last long. We found the barista hiding behind the bar. He hadn’t been as lucky as us – flying glass had sliced his shoulder right through, and blood poured from the wound like tears from a clown. I leapt over the bar and

tried to get his attention. Weeping into his hands, he barely noticed me, so I had to take drastic action. I squeezed his shoulder. The sudden pain made him scream, though I could barely hear it over the racket the bullets were making, and his head jerked up, his eyes wide in astonished agony.

“Sorry!” I yelled. “How do we get the shutters down?” I pointed to them in case he hadn’t heard me.

He pointed at a big red button under the counter. It looked like a police alarm.

“No, not the police. There’s no time – we have to deal with this ourselves. Shutters – how do I get the shutters down?”

He shook his head and tried to shrug. I gave his shoulder an extra squeeze to convey how important my question was, seeing as the bullets whizzing past our heads didn’t seem to be getting it across to him. But he gave me nothing. His eyes widened, then closed, and he slumped to the ground.

There was a thump as Cornelius landed beside me. Miraculously, he was still uninjured.

He leant over to shout in my ear. “I think it’s over there.” He pointed to a panel on the wall, next to the staff entrance.

I nodded, very slowly. They would have a clear shot at me if I went for it. Still, they’d have an equally clear shot if they jumped out of their cars and came to get us. I wondered if I had time to strip the barista and put on his uniform. Perhaps the gunmen’s desire for coffee and tea would get the better of their violent impulses. That made me realise – so accustomed was I to being thrown into such situations, I hadn’t given a moment’s consideration to their motives. Were these Navaroni’s men? Were they after me already? I began to long for the days when I would get into adventures more gradually, perhaps after a romantic chapter or two of palanquinading! Then again, I considered, when had this adventure begun? A lot of strange things had been happening lately. Perhaps this was the sixth chapter, not the first.

Anyway, there was no time to strip him. It had been a stupid and desper-

ate plan, but when you are indeed desperate, if stupid's all you've got to work with, it'll have to do. On that note, my eye fell upon a pile of trays – steel trays. I nudged Cornelius and pointed to them. He nodded in response – he knows how my mind works! I rooted around under the bar, hoping against hope that I would find what I was looking for. And what do you know, I did – a roll of brown tape! I would have thanked the fates, if it hadn't been for them putting me in this situation to begin with!

With one hand I held a tray to my chest and with the other I held one against my back while Cornelius wrapped the tape around me, six times at least. He grinned with satisfaction. I grabbed another tray and held it up to protect my head.

"Tally ho!" I yelled.

I didn't jump over the bar. I thought they'd be expecting that, so I sneaked around to the edge and then ran for it like a madman – and they must have thought that was what I was, using tea trays as body armour. Luckily (I do seem to have more than my fair share nowadays) the trays had the double effect for which I had hoped: at first surprising the attackers enough to stop them firing for a few seconds, and then blocking a bullet or two that the no-goodniks managed to get off, even as they laughed.

As the shutters came down, I heard shouts from the cars: the shooting stopped, and the villains quickly flung open the doors. It seemed that they were here for me, or at least for Cornelius, otherwise they would just have gone after someone else once we were inaccessible. I flattened myself against the alcove of the staff door, watching the shutters take their agonisingly slow journey to the ground. It had only reached waist-height when the attackers arrived, and I thought all was lost. I saw the knees bend as the men crouched to come in, but then there was a pop-pop-pop from behind me, and I turned to see Cornelius picking off their kneecaps, one by one. I had no idea when he had learnt to shoot like that, but by gum it was coming in handy! The men fell to the ground, and just before the shutters hit the ground there were three more pops –

pop-pop-pop – and three heads burst with blood, like shaken and spiked beer cans.

"Nice work," I called to Cornelius.

He nodded. "I've had a bit of training, these last couple of months."

"Looks like it. What now? That won't keep them out for long."

He came out from behind the bar, a sandwich in hand. He tossed it to me. "Eat something. We're going to need energy. You can't fight on an empty stomach."

"Thanks." I bit a huge chunk from the sandwich. It was ham and tomato, which was nice, but with far too much mayonnaise (the curse of store-bought sandwiches). I didn't let that stop me eating it, though. He was right – I would need some energy.

He waved in the direction of the Doctor Who exhibition, invisible behind the steel shutters. "Will your band members be any help?"

I spoke through my sandwich. Rude, I know, but there was no time to swallow first. "We can't rely on them. There are civilians in that exhibition, and they will know to protect them first." I brushed the crumbs from my shirt and tie.

"Okay," said Cornelius. "This is my first mission, you know. At least I think it is. Like I said, time..."

"Time..." I repeated, sadly.

"Time... It's messed up for me. But even if this is my twentieth mission, I'm shit out of ideas." He began to look despondent, far from the confident figure who had so swiftly despatched three of our enemies mere seconds before.

I swallowed the last of my sandwich and slapped him on the back. "Don't worry, buddy. You're with Howard Phillips now. This is how I roll." I gave him my most serious look, and he laughed. "First we need to get out of here, and get off the defensive. We have to put ourselves in control of the situation, and quickly. If we're not careful they'll start to grab hostages and then we'll be sunk by our own sense of humanity." For the moment they were banging on the shutters, even taking the occasional shot at them, but despite their obvious amateurishness they would quickly abandon such ineffective efforts.

We made for the staff door, but it

was locked. I gave it a kick. It held, but Cornelius was already there with the keycard. He'd also picked up a chef's knife from the food preparation area.

He handed the knife to me. "Hope you're not too squeamish." He slid the keycard through the electronic lock.

"Hey," I replied with forced jauntiness, "if I'm covered in blood you'll be the one who has to look at it."

We laughed, and ran through the door into the staff area. Five minutes later we were outside the mall, and ready to plan our re-entry.

The best thing, we decided, was to split up. I headed for one of the blasted entrances, and Cornelius went to the opposite one. We had synchronised watches – his was a large and expensive diver's watch that told the time in the UK and Japan simultaneously to a depth of 500ft, while mine was a fob watch which had long lost its cover and chain, leaving it a streamlined timepiece that barely made a dent in my pocket. I've never been able to wear a watch. My skin revolts at the idea of any jewellery clinging to it. In fact, it barely tolerates clothes...

At the appointed time I heard Cornelius begin his attack, yelling like an idiot and firing his gun to grab their attention. One minute later he stopped firing (for my sake) but continued shouting, and I swiftly dashed into the mall. My life was once again in the hands of fate, while in my own hands I held the fate of many others. I reached them unnoticed and one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight they dropped, like the incompetents they were. Whoever had sent them here – Navaroni? – must not have realised the quality of the man they were being sent against. Either that, or his scheme was not as well funded as Cornelius feared!

The last I kept alive, though I sliced through the fingers of his right hand to send his gun falling safely to the ground. I swept his legs from under him and smiled grimly as he hit the ground. The look he gave me almost made me forget that they had been the aggressors, that they had been reckless of the collateral damage, that they had laughed while they

had shot at me. Sometimes, in the heat of battle, I find myself doing terrible things. When you see your hated enemy looking at you as if you are monster, it's time to take a minute to breathe.

But it was possible that I would have to do more terrible things before the day was out, so I did not take a minute to breathe. I took one second, and then said, "My friend, it's time to talk."

* * *

Cornelius ran up to join me. He seemed to be in shock at the destruction I had wrought.

"Fucking hell, Howard. You could've saved a few for the police!" He crouched down and took a few deep breaths.

I looked at the man I had caught. "I saved one," I told Cornelius. "Whether he makes it to the police remains to be seen."

The man swallowed, but I think he saw our eyes note as much, and from somewhere he dredged up a smidgen of additional courage. "You can do what you want to me, I won't give you anything," he said, punctuating his words with a scowl. He had an English accent. I think he was a Londoner, but I've always been terrible at identifying accents – and cars. They are my two weak spots!

I smiled, grimly. "If I did what I want to you, you wouldn't have anything to give." He looked blank. I sighed. "By that I mean, I'm inclined to cut off your penis, given your recent behaviour." His face went grey. "To fire a gun at me is one thing. To put children in danger is another. But to do those things at the Doctor Who exhibition, to spoil what would have been one of the greatest memories of those children's young lives, that's another thing altogether, and a thing that makes me very angry. And when I think about the damage you've done to this mall, about the likelihood that it'll probably have to be shut down for a while for repairs, with the result that hundreds more children who have been looking forward to visiting this place will probably miss out, I get even angrier. And when I get that angry, I want to, as Limp Bizkit so aptly put it, break stuff."

I tried not to catch Gilligan's eye, because I knew he'd be trying to repress a smile. I gave the man a few seconds to take it all in. Then I held the knife up for him to see, and let the blood of his friends drip from it onto his lap.

"So what do you say?" I asked him at last. "Do you want me to break your stuff today?"

He held his nerve for a few moments more, but I could see that each drop of blood carved a huge chunk of it out. Five drops of blood and he was done.

"Okay," he said, closing his eyes with the relief of giving in, "I'll tell you what you want to know. It won't make a bit of difference anyway. You can't stop what's going to happen."

"Well, that sounds like a good place to start," said Gilligan, coming over to face him, now that the risk of breaking into laughter had receded. "What's going to happen?"

"Oh, it all is," laughed the man. "Navaroni is coming, and you bitches are fucked. All you literary bitches are going to be fucked."

"So you're working for Navaroni?" I said. "Why did you come here?"

He showed a bit of reluctance to answer, so I gave his testicles a friendly prod.

"Okay, chillax," he said swiftly. "Look, he wants to make the takeover a bit easier. He knows that the Silver Age Books gang will be trouble, and he wants you out of the way before he gets here. We were sent after you. Some of the others were sent after Theaker. And if that fails, we're striking at the heart."

"But Theaker is the heart of Silver Age Books," I said. "He's the publisher. Who do you mean? Greenwood? Wyndham Thomas?"

"Oh, they'll get their turns, they all will, but no. Navaroni's going after someone he calls the English Hemingway. He's going to do it himself. He reckons that'll destroy Silver Age Books forever. And he's doing it tonight."

I was aghast. I very nearly dropped the knife, in my shock. Things could have gone badly at that point, but luckily the Mountain Drummer and Prince Vann arrived to take custody

of my captive. I let myself fall back onto the ground and closed my eyes. I began to weep. I sobbed huge salty tears that poured down the sides of my head like miniature Niagaras.

Cornelius rushed to my side. "Howard, dude, what's up? There's still time to warn Theaker. But who the fuck is the English Hemingway?"

I pulled myself together. There wasn't enough time for me to do anything else. No doubt in the course of my adventures I was racking up enough accumulated PTSD-inducing events that one day I would simply stop functioning and curl into a ball for the rest of my life – it was only a matter of time. But until that day of blessed freedom arrived, I had to keep on doing the things that only Howard Phillips can do.

"Terrance Dicks. They're going after Terrance Dicks."

The Attack on Theaker

I have no direct experience of the events I will now relate, but I believe the accounts that I had of them to be true and accurate. I will narrate them as if I were omniscient, just to make it all a bit easier to read.

Stephen William Theaker had had a tough day in the Silver Age Books offices. The proofs of the latest *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* were beginning to seem an insuperable obstacle to his ever going home. It was his own fault, for being so keen to accept stories right up to the last minute before publication was due. This latest issue was getting far too long, but he couldn't help himself. He was amazed to find that so many otherwise reasonable people were so keen to allow him to publish their work without expecting payment, but had not imagined that exploiting them would be such hard work!

Finally, though, he got to the last page of the proofs, stuffed them all into the photocopier and set off for home. Walking through the city cen-

tre of Birmingham in the late evening is not the undesirable experience it would be in some cities, but he wanted to get home to his family as quickly as possible, so he hurried, to the extent his portliness would allow.

He was heading for Colmore Row, where he would catch the 101, which would carry him up through Winson Green, past the prison, across Soho Road and then to his home. It took longer to get to Handsworth than the 74 or the 79, which took a direct route up Soho Road, but he found the queuing to be much more civilised. The stop for the 74 and 79, on Bull Street, had no obvious place in which people could queue, and so they did not, leading to much tension and pushing and shoving whenever a bus arrived. In contrast, the queue for the 101 curled naturally around a wall, and so people were generally much happier there. On the downside, it was less frequent, but on the upside, it saved him a five minute walk at the other end.

He took £30 from the cashpoint outside Marks & Spencers, keeping an eye out for an approaching bus, and then crossed the road to join the queue. There were already a dozen people waiting, usually a good sign that a bus was imminent.

Unfortunately it wasn't as imminent as he might have liked, and after another ten minutes' waiting people were starting to get a bit restless. He looked around, whistling to himself silently (he had never really mastered whistling, having a fairly large gap between his two front teeth) and then wished he hadn't.

A large fellow stuck his head out of a telephone box over which over Theaker's gaze had passed. He wore the clothes of a fifteen-year-old, but looked to be in his late twenties. He called a woman over. She was attractive, dark-skinned, well-dressed. At first Theaker assumed she must be the man's girlfriend, but they seemed something of a mismatch.

"What's he laughing about?" he asked the woman, waving a fist in Theaker's direction.

She looked at him and shrugged. "I didn't hear him laughing."

"He better not be joking about me."

Theaker looked away, very determinedly and pointedly.

"I don't think he was," said the woman.

The man loudly sucked air through his teeth and went back into the telephone box.

Theaker raised an eyebrow and continued to work hard at waiting for the bus. He willed it to come, because he really didn't want to have any trouble. He wasn't a physically brave person – he had a great fear of any damage to his bodily integrity, and found it difficult even to think about the various separate organs within his body, much less to put any of them in the way of danger.

Eventually the bus did arrive, and he sighed with relief. The sigh was interrupted midway through.

"Were you laughing at me?" said an angry voice at his elbow. "Were you making jokes about me?"

Theaker prepared to answer, but the man's friend, acquaintance or accostee chipped in to defend him.

"You're paranoid," she said, with a laugh.

The man grunted, and walked off to the head of the queue.

"Thanks," said Theaker. "Are you with him?"

"No, I've never met that psycho before in my life," she said. "I'm here for you."

Theaker took a couple of steps away from her, though he was careful to maintain his place in the queue. "Well, I'm flattered, of course. You're very beautiful. But I'm very happily married."

She smiled at him. Her bright teeth glistened in the gathering darkness. Suddenly Theaker became aware of how few people remained on the street. "I'm not here to seduce you, Mr Theaker!" She laughed, and though the sound was pretty, it was also sharp, cutting through the night air like a spotlight. "I'm here to kill you."

She made no sudden move, which on one level made it hard for Theaker to take her too seriously. Something in her attitude made him think she meant it, not least the fact that she knew his name. But for some reason he wasn't making a move to evade her. It was as if his brain was aware of

the danger but it couldn't convince his body.

"I'd be grateful if you didn't," he replied. "I don't want to miss my bus."

She laughed again, and reached into her handbag. She withdrew a long silver blade.

That was enough to convince his body that there was a problem, and it leapt (somewhat sluggishly) into action. He shoved his bag at her (he had ordered it from an advertisement in the *Radio Times*, and would miss it very much, even though the strap was being held together by three heavy duty staples and a triple wrap of sticky tape), knocking the knife out of her hands, then he ran for it.

He was slightly taller than her, and had a good few stones on her in weight, so she needed the weapon to be sure, even if she was in much better condition. She bent to retrieve it before pursuing him. She knew his breath would give out quickly (if not his heart!) so there was no great hurry.

Theaker too knew that he didn't have long to get away. He ran across the road and headed for the cathedral grounds. The gangs of skinny emoclad teens who had unaccountably made that area their hangout pointed and laughed to see such a fat old fellow wobbling along. There were plenty of people around here, but he knew there was no chance of mixing in with them – he would stick out like the sore and aging indie kid he was. Plus, even if he did have a *My Chemical Romance* album or two, he had been listening to a lot of (currently) less credible acts of late, such as *Ride* and *The Wedding Present*, and good though he believed those bands to be, hand on his heart, he could not risk being drawn into a discussion of their merits with an assassin on his tail!

So on past the cathedral, and off towards Maplins. He had no real plan, but he knew that down there could be found various odd alleys and doorways, and occasionally he had seen rear doors left open for the unloading of trucks. Maybe somewhere in that area he could find somewhere to hide. Failing that, he had a vague idea that the various bits of electronics on sale in Maplins could be fash-

ioned into some kind of weapon. I don't know what he had in mind, precisely – cracking open a DVD-drive to reveal the laser within? – but as I say the idea was vague. Possibly he'd heard too many tales of my adventures, and that had given him some crazy notion that he could copy my efforts! But as they say in the United States (and if they don't, they should start), not everyone can be MacGyver.

Reaching Maplins, he saw it was already closed, and even as he kicked himself for not realising it would be, he saw that there was no other way out. He could have headed into one of the many pubs on the street, but that would have put other people in danger, and in any case he disliked the loss of control that came from joining a crowd. He could have continued to run, but he could already hear the click clack of heels striding down the street towards him. There was nothing to do but turn and face his destiny.

"You can't escape me," the assassin called out. "Navaroni wants you out of the way. Silver Age Books will be nothing without you, and Howard Phillips will be nothing without Silver Age Books to publish his mindless witterings."

"So you're not just a killer for hire?" asked Theaker, keeping eye contact and trying to back away. "You're really committed to the cause? Well, at least I'm not dying by a disinterested hand. I would have hated to have died a random death. At least when you'll stab me it'll be because you've thought it through." He had spotted an opportunity. He knew, being one himself about so many things, how glad enthusiasts always were to find someone willing to listen to them for a few minutes. His poor wife had suffered through so many of his enthusiasms – TiVo, Xbox Media Center, Elder Scrolls, the internet, Lulu, and so on through an endless list – that he now thought of her as cringing with fear and embarrassment whenever he opened his mouth to speak about them in public. Here was his chance. "But who is Navaroni, and why does he matter so much?"

She didn't stop advancing, and she didn't lower her dagger, but she did start talking. "He's the greatest writer

who ever lived. He changes the paradigm of what writing should be. He's the Jackson Pollock of writing – he flings words at the page and watches the patterns reveal themselves to him. He is Lovecraft and Poe and King and Laymon and he never wrote a word about a gay vampire in his life. Do you get me now?"

Theaker frowned apologetically. "Not really – he's a writer? So why's he sending people to kill me?"

"I told you – your links with Phillips. If we take you down, he stands alone."

She had reached him now. He silently berated himself for walking backwards – he had always been going to lose a race with someone walking forwards.

The street was empty, and his life was going to end.

She brought the dagger up above her head, and prepared to plunge it into his chest.

"You don't have to do this," he said, pleadingly.

He wished he had gone to the toilet before leaving the office. He hoped he would be dead and gone before his bladder let go. That had always been the thing he dreaded most about death: urinating in his trousers. He feared the end of his life, because he enjoyed living, and he wanted to be there for his family, and he feared death, in case it was painful, but he didn't fear being dead. He was one of these peculiar people who believe that you can't actually carry on thinking once your brain shuts down. You can't think without a brain when you're alive, so how would you be able to do it when you're dead? It's an *obstacle de plus!* So he had no fear of continuing on after death in some kind of ghostly sub-existence, or of being sent down to some fire-drenched pit. No. But he did fear wetting himself in those final moments before the lights went out.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I do. Apart from anything else, this is my job within the organisation. If I don't do this, what do I do? Ask for a typing job? Sorry, dear, but I don't type."

Her arm came down and Theaker closed his eyes.

Death didn't feel as he had expected. Rather than a sharp pain in his

chest followed by the flooding away of his consciousness, there was a high-pitched whine and a spatter of dust against his face.

He opened his eyes to see his beautiful assassin staring in dismay at her empty hand. Then her eyes widened at something over his shoulder.

He thumped her in the face, three times in fact, until she finally fell unconscious to the ground, then turned to see what she had been looking at. At first he thought somebody must have left a Christmas decoration up too long, but then his eyes snapped into focus and he realised it was J,J,T,L.M, shining with the light of every star in the sky, and gently tinkling with the strain of having vibrated the assassin's knife into nothingness.

"Thanks, man," said Theaker, with as much sincerity as he had ever gathered together at one time. "I thought I was a goner."

"Not tonight," said J,J,T,L.M. "Howard told me you might be in trouble, and I tracked you to the bus-stop just in time to see you chased off. I'm glad to have saved you. But it looks like there are tough times ahead. You might want to sit down." He twisted one of his crystals to point at the bench.

"Is it my family?" asked Theaker.

"No, or at least I hope not," said J,J,T,L.M. "They are going after Terrance Dicks."

Theaker simply stared in horror, speechless, and dropped to the ground, despondent. J,J,T,L.M rattled with repressed emotion. It was true, then. Howard had not been exaggerating. If Terrance Dicks fell that night, it would be as bad as if they had succeeded in striking directly at Theaker himself.

The Battle of Hampstead

"I still don't understand," said Prince Vann as we emerged from Hampstead tube station. A quick Google had

helped us to find where Terrance Dicks was now living. I hoped the information was up to date. "Why is this writer so important?"

I quickly looked around. We had no way to know which house Dicks lived in, and for all we knew the three hours it had taken us to reach London had been more than enough time for Dicks to meet his fate. Our plan was to hit the pubs and newsagents, tell them what was going on, and hope one of them could help us. We had tried to alert the police, of course. They had taken down the information, and said that they would act on it, but there was no way we could know if they were sincere. And of course they could not release any information to us about his location. For all they knew, we were the assassins ourselves. So we had to assume the worst, that they would think we were kooks, and accordingly do nothing at all.

"It's all about Theaker," I said. "Navaroni wants our gang neutralised before he makes his move, and he thinks knocking Theaker out is the best way to do it. He's wrong, of course. He doesn't realise that my novels are the least of my creative works. But still, we have a duty to protect Dicks himself. They may be killing him for stupid reasons, but that won't be any comfort to his family."

"But why?" said the Mountain Drummer, as we dashed towards the first newsagent we spotted, a black and white printout of Dicks' photo in hand. The Drummer and Prince Vann were my only two companions – Cornelius Gilligan had headed for the loo on the train and not returned. I had gone to look for him, but without luck – he seemed to have simply faded away. "Why does Theaker care about Dicks so much?"

We paused outside the newsagents to catch our breath.

"There is a television series called Doctor Who. When Theaker was a boy – from when he was done with Enid Blyton all the way up to when he got started on Tolkien – he read little else but adaptations of the Doctor Who stories. Most of them were written by Terrance Dicks. Theaker has always regarded them as perfect ex-

amples of direct, exciting and tense writing. In the limited space available, writing them over just a few weeks, Dicks made each set of episodes into a haiku of death and destruction, glittering pearls of galactic woe. They are all he's ever aspired to in his own writing, and all he looks for in other people's writing."

I should have spent longer getting my breath back, but we had to go inside now.

We were unlucky with that first newsagent, and with the second, and the third, but the fourth at least recognised Dicks (not to mention me – that wasn't particularly helpful but it was at least flattering). Unfortunately that turned out to be because he was a fan of Doctor Who himself, rather than because Dicks was a customer. But he had a clue for us.

"You want to head over closer to the Heath," he said. "I have a mate who says he's seen Terrance Dicks on the street near there a couple of times. I never really believed him, but if you haven't got anything else to go on it might be worth a try."

He was right, we didn't have anything else to go on, so we headed in that direction. Supposedly, there are more millionaires in Hampstead per square kilometre than in any other place in Britain. I don't know if that is true, but the homes and buildings looked pretty secure, and that gave me some hope that Dicks would be safe. A silly hope, since a burglar alarm wouldn't have a great deal of effect against a pistol, but at least it was something to go on, to keep our legs pounding away.

We reached Hampstead Heath, and began to skirt it, on the lookout for any pubs or newsagents, or indeed anywhere else you might expect Britain's (second) greatest living novelist to visit. (I tried not to write "second", but I just couldn't put my vanity away, even for a moment. Not when I know that that moment's false modesty would be immortalised in my writing!)

We came first to a pub, the Spanish Arms, and went inside. It wasn't all that busy – it was still early evening. I went up to the bar, photo in hand.

"Hi," I said to the barman, a gruff-

looking man in his mid-fifties with a remarkable moustache. "Could we have four pints of Fosters, please?"

"Of course, squire," he replied, before setting his hand to the pump. "Waiting for your mate to catch up, are you?"

I pointed to the Mountain Drummer. "Two are for him."

He smiled. "He is a big one."

I decided that we needed to have a proper break before going on, else we'd be in no condition to get into any trouble we found, so I also ordered four plates of burgers and fries to top up our energy levels. Finally, I showed the barman the photograph.

"I don't know if you happen to know Terrance Dicks?" I said, phrasing the question as gently as I could.

His posture changed, but not subtly. It was an overt display of aggression. "No, never heard of him, mate." He turned his back on us to ring up the bill.

My eyes met those of Prince Vann. This was promising. The barman turned back to us.

"I think you should eat up your food and get out of here as quickly as you can," he said, passing us the first two of our pints.

"That's not too friendly," said Prince Vann. "We're here to help, you know."

"That's what your friends over there said," said the barman. "I gave them the same answer. I don't know Terrance Dicks, and if I did I wouldn't be sending thugs like you in his direction."

"Friends of ours?" I said, surprised.

I followed his pointing finger. The door to a function room had swung open, and within sat seven men and two women, all wearing the ridiculous red and black outfits of Navaroni's organisation. They were staring right back at us.

I took a deep breath.

"Barman," I said to him in a low voice that I hoped would not carry. "We really are here to help Dicks. Are the police with him now?"

He nodded. "It can't hurt for you to know that."

"Good," I replied. "I want you to pull the fire alarm. Get everyone out. Those people have guns. We have

guns. This could be very dangerous. The only reason they haven't begun to shoot is that they don't know who I am. They don't realise that all but one of the colleagues they sent to kill me are now dead."

That one survivor was now, presumably, in the custody of the Cardiff police, trying to explain the circumstances in which he had come to be lying in a pool of eleven men's blood. We had made our escape in one of their cars, making it to the city centre before the police arrived on the scene, and catching the train before anyone began to look for us. On the train I had texted the police to explain what had happened, and why we could not stick around to explain it in person. I had given them our room numbers at the Novotel. I was not naïve enough to think that they would be satisfied with what little information I had given them – there might well be a man-hunt on for us, for all I knew – but at least it would stop them chasing up false leads. A bunch of terrorists had attacked the mall, and we had killed them. For more than that they would have to wait until the threat was over.

The landlord was ashen-faced. Clearly he had just thought us a group of dangerously obsessed Doctor Who fans. He had had no idea of the seriousness of the situation.

"Can you set off that fire alarm for me? I really wanted to eat that burger I ordered, but there isn't time."

He nodded, and a few seconds later the alarm rang out. The regulars turned to look at him with bemused smiles.

"Don't just sit there," he shouted at them. "This is a real fire, get off your arses and get out of here!"

They quickly left, as if there really was an actual fire beneath them, rather than a metaphorical one.

We did not leave, though, nor did our foes. It must have been clear to them now that we were antagonists of some sort.

"You should go too," I said to the landlord.

He nodded, and ducked out into the back.

"Hey there," shouted the Mountain Drummer. "You having a good time in that little room? Why don't you come out here where there's room to

party?" He began to walk towards them, and they began to shift in their seats. They made the mistake of trying to play it cool. If they had just gone for their guns we would have had a very difficult time of it, but they were young and they wanted us to think they weren't frightened. They should have been!

"Fuck off," said one of them, the most brave, or the most foolish. "You don't know who you're messing with."

They had clearly been taking a more lackadaisical approach to their mission than we had, simply hanging around in what might be Terrance Dicks' local pub until he arrived, or perhaps they had simply given up after hearing he was in police custody. Lucky for us, lucky for Dicks, unlucky for them.

As the Mountain Drummer approached them, he came close to a long trestle table, and without breaking stride he scooped it up with one mighty hand and flung it their way, right at their heads. It smashed through the doorway and its surrounding glass windows like a... well, like a trestle table through a window. As most of them fell to the floor he picked up a chair and set about those that were still conscious.

Prince Vann and I looked at each other and smiled. We had not even had to take out our guns. We did not like to kill, and most of these men were after all simply misguided – or poor, and in need of the work. So it felt good to get through an encounter without adding to the copious blood already on our hands.

"Looks like Terrance Dicks is safe," I said with relief as the Mountain Drummer's chair connected with the last hooligan's head. "Everyone's safe for now."

We called the police and let them know where to find the failed assassins. Then we were back on a train to Birmingham, and midnight found me lying on my own bed, freshly showered, and watching BBC News 24. I had phoned Theaker to make sure he was safe, and let him know the good news about Terrance Dicks.

"And now," said the newsreader, "more about the astonishing theft of Shakespeare's folios from the British

Library. The Metropolitan Police say they have little to go on, while, due to the rarity of the items, literary experts warn that they run the risk of never being recovered. No one could hope to sell them, so they must have been stolen for a private collector."

I had a hunch that the theft of Shakespeare's folios was not unrelated to my day's adventures.

The Death of Winterstones

For a few days life went on as usual. I talked to the police, and explained what had happened. I expected it to have been more work, given the number of people I had killed, and in the brevity of my interviews I detected the hand of Ibis. The organisation was not particularly strong on this side of the pond, but they had connections in high places. There were no more attacks by Navaroni's men, and I had no real urge to go after them until I had to. I rehearsed with the band, relaxed, and waited for something bad to happen. It wasn't long before it did.

I did spend a bit of time reading up on Navaroni. It was something like stepping in a puddle, then realising it was a pond, which then became a lake, until I found myself drowning in an ocean, an ocean of thick, glutinous treacle. I had never done anything that was so simultaneously entertaining and depressing.

He claimed to be a writer, but every piece of writing by him which appeared on the internet was so bad as to make the reader doubt his own sanity. The texts were riddled with spelling mistakes, naturally, but that was the least of it. His word use was poor, but the malapropisms were almost the easiest part to read. No, the badness of his writing was much more fundamental, no mere surface errors that would have been corrected

in minutes by any half-competent editor. He seemed to lack entirely the ability to construct a sentence. Beginnings of sentences would not match up with the endings. Tenses, genders and numbers would change from one word to the next. Authorial interpolation (of which of course you know I am very fond myself) was taken to new, dizzying extremes – he would describe his own writing in terms of the authors he was trying to mimic, out of context and in entirely nonsensical ways. Characters would enter and exit scenes with no reason, act and react in ways that bore no relation to reality, and seem utterly unaware of the circumstances in which they found themselves. He was, without a doubt, the worst writer in the world.

But that, on its own, would not have been enough to earn the notoriety he had gained, even before beginning this war upon Silver Age Books. His appalling lack of writing ability was coupled to an incandescent belief in the shining brilliance of his own work. He was a relentless self-promoter. What's more, his primary means of self-promotion seemed to be to harass, insult and abuse as many other people as he had encountered online. It was clear from the pattern of his harassments that he paid very careful attention to the results of his vanity Googling (something I noted for future reference). His attacks on people online were as bizarre as they were offensive. A frequent rejoinder to any doubter of his writing talents was that he would put their photograph in the toilet, defecate upon it, and take a photograph of the results. "I will literally take a shit on you," he would declare with glee.

It was all fascinating, and I could see that I was not the only one fascinated by his behaviour. There were websites, forums and blogs devoted to tracking his activities, cataloguing his indiscretions and recording his offenses. None of them seemed to be aware that he had employed an armed militia, so perhaps that was a new development. In fact, from what I could glean from all those sources, he was not a well-off (or indeed a well) man and how he came to acquire these resources was at first a mystery.

Then, on one site I noticed a reference to his grandparents. It seemed that Navaroni had still been living with them in their house in New Jersey, despite being in his mid to late thirties, and at some point he had published their phone number and address upon the internet, at which point his many enemies had begun to contact the house to make their feelings felt. This had prompted a plea from Navaroni to leave his elderly relatives alone.

With that address in hand, I was able to find the names of his grandparents.

Googling their names, I found the key I had been looking for – three months ago Grandma Navaroni had won the lottery, becoming, as a result of a number of rollovers, a millionaire several thousand times over.

Two months ago she had died, and Navaroni had inherited everything.

I told the police everything, but of course I had no evidence to contact Navaroni to any of the crimes his men had committed. He was not on the radar of the British police (though his local police had visited him for a chat a number of times in response to complaints about his online and offline behaviour). None of the men we had captured would admit to his involvement, and so the investigation would progress slowly. They would have to track the payments made to the men, and examine the purchases of the vehicles, guns and uniforms, all of which would take time.

And while that went on, Navaroni, unknown to us, slowly and surely drew, as HG Wells would say, his plans against us. This man, who so many had regarded as little better than microbial life, now regarded England as his Petri dish, and he was beginning to stir bacteria into it with a long spatula.

On June 1 I turned on the television to find that the business world had been somewhat surprised that morning. An American buyer had purchased Winterstones, lock, stock and barrel over the weekend, and the shops had that morning remained closed. My radar for evil – my evil-dar, you might call it – bleeped powerfully. An American buyer?

Prince Vann was with Theaker, on

bodyguard duty, keeping him as safe as was practical, so I took the Mountain Drummer with me.

We left the Novotel and strolled down Broad Street, through the Central Library and down New Street to Winterstones.

Sure enough, it was closed, but there was activity within. I couldn't get close enough to listen at the door – the iron gates were locked shut – but even from a distance I could hear the banging and yelling of men at work.

"There doesn't seem to be much we can do, short of breaking in," said the Mountain Drummer.

"You can't see anything?" I asked.

He stood on the tips of his toes. "Sorry, no."

A girl approached us. She was pretty with a handful of brightly-coloured clips in her hair. Her cheeks were streaked with the tracks of her tears.

"Are you trying to get in?" she asked. "Do you know what's going on in there?"

I had to admit that I didn't. "But I have my suspicions. Do you know anything?"

"I work here," she said, struggling to put on a brave face. "Or at least I did. They fired us all on Sunday, every one of us. It's on the news. Didn't you see?"

"No, I left too quickly. I should have known that the man on the spot often has the least idea what is going on. Do you know anything about this mysterious buyer?"

She knew nothing more, and so, after offering her a hug, which she gratefully accepted, we made to leave. Just before we did, one thing occurred to me.

"Look," I said to her, "we're journalists and we want to get in there and investigate all of this. Do you have a key we could use?"

"I'm not sure..." She thought about it for a few seconds. "Are you going to get us our jobs back?"

"What would any of us do without Winterstones? You must have seen me in there before – I must spend fifty pounds in there every month."

That seemed to decide it for her. She couldn't get us through the iron gate or into the building, but she had

a keycard that would get us into the staff area, if that was any help.

I didn't know if it would be, but it made sense to be prepared, and so I put the card into my wallet.

* * *

The days continued to pass. What was going on at Winterstones remained a mystery. I kept surveillance on the building when I had a chance, because whatever was going on in there was tickling my evildar like crazy, but a week passed without my seeing anything incriminating. Trucks pulled up outside, and boxes were unloaded, just as they had been for years and years, ever since the building had first been converted for use as a Dillons bookshop. After some time it had then become a Winterstones, with minimal alterations. But what would it become now? I had a feeling that this time the alterations would be more than minimal.

Enquiries with my friends around the country indicated that the story was the same in all the major cities of England, while the stores in Scotland and Wales were unaffected, and carried on their business as usual. Whatever was happening, it seemed Navaroni was limiting his efforts to our patch. That might be a choice of territory he would come to regret.

Then, on June 10, England was changed forever. News was hard to come by, and information was sketchy, but word got around: Winterstones had declared war on every other bookshop in England. In Birmingham, first to go had been WH Smiths. Armed militia men in their dozens had issued from the two Winterstones stores and had closed on Smiths in a pincer movement. The staff had been forced out of the building and the books destroyed with flamethrowers. Their work done, the militia men had left as quickly as they had come, and retreated to Winterstones. Stunned WH Smith employees tried to explain to disbelieving police and fire crews what had happened. The story was the same the nation over, and over the day the attacks were repeated. They all fell – Ottakers, the independents, even the comic shops, the libraries and the CLC. News didn't get out at first, but in the days to come we heard

that Amazon's main warehouse had been blown up by a van loaded with semtex, the staff given mere minutes to evacuate before seeing their jobs go up in smoke. In a single day, Navaroni took complete control of the sale of literature in England.

England's Darkest Day

The attacks might have been sudden, but it wasn't long before the police responded. They should probably have stayed in their stations and watched the news, for all the good it did. On BBC News 24 I saw the same pattern repeated all over the country: armed police surrounded the branch of Winterstones, tried to gain entry, and failed. The doors seemed impervious to their battering rams, the windows equally resilient to rounds of tear gas grenades. Men dropped from helicopters to find themselves sliding off the buildings and landing on the pavement instead, the ropes on which they had descended the only things saving their necks.

By lunchtime the army had been called in, and by teatime Britain was treated to the sight of a tank firing point blank at the door of a Somerset branch of Winterstones, with absolutely no effect.

Before the sun had set, an air strike had been called on our own New Street branch. The missile had absolutely no effect on its target, though the windows of H&M on the other side of the road were blown to bits. Everyone other than the emergency services had long been evacuated from the city centre, of course.

But it is not quite accurate to say that they were firing upon Winterstones. A new sign had replaced the old one shortly after the attack on WH Smiths. It said, simply: Literary Enforcement.

"What do you make of it, Howard?" asked the Mountain Drummer. Prince Vann and I were sitting on the bed of my room at the Novotel

(fortunately it was just beyond the edge of the evacuation zone) while our big friend sat on the floor beside us, knees pulled up to his chest. He was making his way through a bowl of fruit. J,J,T,L.M was currently keeping one of his optical crystals on Theaker.

"The media don't seem to know who is behind this yet, but I think we can be pretty sure that our friend Mr Navaroni has made his move," I said. "Clearly he's the American who bought out Winterstones, and he's now made each store into a base for his militia. He wants control, and he seems to have it. I don't know why no one can get in there, but it's good for him that they can't. Even with so many soldiers on active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan right now, however many disaffected hooligans and mercenaries he's hired, the British Army would still be able to overwhelm them."

Prince Vann nodded. "It looks to me like some kind of force field – I'm sure you have come to the same sort of vague conclusion. The question is where he got it, and how long it will last."

"You think it might be alien technology?" I frowned. Not even the most rudimentary of plans was suggesting itself to me at the moment.

"I think it must be," he replied.

"Envian?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. We might have had the odd thing along those lines in development, but nothing on this scale. If we had, I would have known. Perhaps it's something the US military derived from that alien ship you were trapped in near Sea Base Delta."

"No, it can't be that. They didn't have a chance to get into it before it was destroyed. The only men who went there before me were there to blow it up."

"I see. On the other hand, you don't know whose ship it was. There could be more of them around."

The Mountain Drummer grunted to get our attention. "What about the Chaste? We know nothing about them, but what we saw in their base was beyond anything humans could make."

I raised an eyebrow in his direction. "Are you feeling paranoid?"

"They do seem to crop up in a lot of our adventures," he responded, throwing me an apple to eat. "I think you'd better eat something, Howard."

"Why's that?" I asked.

He pointed at the television, which I had neglected during our discussion. Navaroni's militia had emerged from the Literary Enforcement building on New Street, and seemed to be on their way to do some enforcing.

The attending soldiers thought it was their chance to strike, but any attacks met with utter failure, bullets being bounced off into the air, into the ground, into the everything. Within seconds they were ordered to cease fire, for fear of hurting themselves.

"They seem to have some kind of portable shields with them," said Prince Vann. "That technology is definitely not human."

"It's probably limited," I theorised, "in some way. Else they would have been out and about before now. And look at how they're running – they seem to be on a deadline. I expect it'll last long enough for them to get out, perform a mission, and get back to base again."

"We might be able to exploit that, later," said Prince Vann.

"If we get a chance," said the Mountain Drummer. "How are you getting on with that apple, Howard?"

I gave it a theatrical bite. "Happy now?" I said sarcastically through the chewed-up apple chunks.

He smiled indulgently. "Look at where they are heading."

Their expedition was being followed by a spy-in-the-sky camera in a helicopter. After leaving the erstwhile Winterstones, they had headed up towards Victoria Square, and were now temporarily invisible as they rushed through the Central Library.

"I see. They're heading for us. I should eat this apple."

"You got it," said the Mountain Drummer. "There aren't any bookshops here, unless they are on their way up to Harborne."

"There is a brilliant Oxfam there," I said. "One of the best little bookshops in the city. Maybe they missed it."

"I'm joking," said the Mountain

Drummer. "They knocked out Harborne this morning. They are definitely coming here, and we have about three minutes now before they start shooting. Let's get going."

"That's my line," I said with annoyance, but getting to my feet and grabbing my coat and things.

For those interested about my things, this is probably a good time to discuss my adventuring pack. I get involved in so many adventures that over time I have learned to keep a pack of useful adventuring tools with me.

First among them is of course a PDA and foldaway keyboard. (I had experimented with an Alphasmart 3000, but although it was useful, especially in terms of battery life, it had taken up too much room in my bag.) No one can predict when inspiration will strike, and some of my best poetry and lyrics have been written in the direst situations. Others, needless to say, came to me during the longeurs inevitable in any adventure. I have to be able to write at any time, or my inspiration will be lost. The PDA is also useful for more mundane things, such as keeping track of my outstanding tasks, timing the duration of events, when necessary, and even functioning as a remote control at times.

The next item in my pack is not the towel you might have expected, but a flannel. As a child I was washed with little else but little square flannels, and learned to dread their clammy touch. So through my teens and twenties I used sponges, loofahs and even experimented with a scrubbing brush before finally realising the utility of my original bathtime companion. A flannel can be used to wash, of course, but can also double as a cleaning rag for dirty glasses, or as a blindfold to help you sleep during the day, or, in especially dangerous and desperate circumstances, as a tiny wet whip to whack upon the noses of wild animals.

The third most important item in my adventuring kit is a pack of Handy Andies, although often it will be a store brand rather than real ones. Either way, there's nothing better for a runny nose. It's admittedly hard to keep this item in stock upon alien

worlds, ghastly mountains and the like, but I like at least to have it in there when I'm setting off on an adventure.

Fourth on the list was now my spare pair of glasses. I had learned my lesson as to this on Envia, when the loss of my glasses had made hard work of my final confrontation with the evil Emperor Zuvanos. Never again would the future of Earth be put in jeopardy by my reluctance to take Boots up on their offer of a free second pair. Ironically, I seemed to find it harder to keep my second pair intact than I did the main pair! I had been through three second pairs in the lifetime of my current main pair. Perhaps they had each taken offence at my preference for their rival, and had chosen to spontaneously crack in anger and angst. Or perhaps my adventure pack was just no place for something as gentle as a pair of glasses. It had never occurred to me to look into buying a proper pair of adventuring glasses, but as I write this it does occur. Perhaps, by the time of my next adventure, I will have had time to find out what other ocularly-impaired adventurers wear. There must be others.

Fifth on my list, and finally for now (there were and are other items, but they tended to rotate according to availability and the perceived challenges I faced), was my favourite mug. I had bought it at a sale at the BHS store in Sutton Coldfield. It was mainly black, with TEA written upon it in big white letters. Mugs are always useful. You can drink from them, use them to scoop water for washing and rinsing, threaten monsters with them, and speak into them to make your voice more threatening. And I kept a spare pair of socks stuffed into my mug, to keep it from breaking, and also to have a spare pair of socks! Nothing can be as depressing as a pair of wet feet in an adventure. I probably forgot to mention it at the time, but after Arelline, Johnny Quondam and I crossed the Deep Blood Sea on Envia, the first thing I did, before being captured by the Emperor's soldiers, was to change out of my wet socks.

"You seemed reluctant to say it,"

he replied, flinging open the door and running through it.

Prince Vann raised an eyebrow. "He seems testy today."

I nodded. "It's easy to stereotype him because of his size. And because he's a drummer. If he thinks we don't take his ideas seriously he's going to get the hump. I'll make more of an effort with him. He's the best rock drummer I've heard perform since Lawrence Colbert of Ride. Both of them bring the thunder like no one else. Tenacious D would quest after three picks of destiny to get a drummer like him, and I would do no less to keep him."

"It's time to get going, Howard," said the prince, and he dashed after the Mountain Drummer.

I had wanted to discourse a bit more on the subject – I had much more to say about the similarities I perceived between the styles of Colbert and the Mountain Drummer, the ways in which their pounding seemed simultaneously as unpredictable as dust motes in the light and as metronomic as a ticking clock – but I could not argue with the sound of breaking glass as Navaroni's militia men smashed their way inside (why they didn't just open the doors wherever they went, I don't know).

I ran after them. We were going underground. Navaroni's men were hunting me, and I had to get away. I didn't really know how I would fight him – what could I do against force fields and machine guns? – but for some reason he was afraid of me, and so I had to keep myself safe, sound, and ready to strike back. I would be a cobra in the night, a rat in the sewer, and a hawk at dawn. Howard Phillips would return – but I did not know when.

Escape to the Country

I won't bore you with the details of how we effectuated our escape from the Novotel, but it wasn't pretty.

There was blood, guts and a whole lot of pain – luckily, none of it ours. Given the quality of our opponents, I don't think the world lost any potential Einsteins from the next generation. The portable force shield had protected them during their approach to the Novotel, but once inside, short of moving around as one big gang, it was useless to them, other than in establishing a base camp in the lobby, and we were able to use that to our advantage. As they hunted through the corridors and kicked open the doors, we hunted them in turn and kicked open their heads.

But their numbers were great, and we had no option, ultimately, but to flee. Each one we took down gave them a pointer as to our location, and before long they would have had us pinned down and overwhelmed.

So we got out through the kitchens and headed for the country. One of the sous-chefs was a fan of the Saturation Point, and had often prepared convincing simulacrums of Envian and Himalayan cuisine for the famous guests from the band. It took just a moment to explain our situation, but that moment wasn't even out before he had pressed his car keys into my hand and told us where to find his vehicle.

Once on the road it was hard for Navaroni's men to follow – they had come to the Novotel on foot, and they didn't have time to acquire vehicles for pursuit. On the other hand, none of our party had learnt to drive, so our escape was not assured. The Mountain Drummer was doing his best, using the skills he had acquired from various driving games on our Xbox 360. His gamertag, for those of you who are interested in looking him up, is MountainDrummer. If you do look him up, you'll see that he hasn't earned many achievements. Our escape was most definitely not assured.

We headed up to Five Ways, past the Cineworld cinema (or was it still a UGC at that time?) and then on towards Edgbaston.

At first I was frustrated to see the TV copter following our escape. I asked Prince Vann to give me his mobile phone, and he passed it over. I dialled 192 for directory enquiries and asked for a number for the BBC.

Soon I was through to the BBC switchboard, and was listening to a very pretty voice saying, "Hello, how can I help?"

"This is a bit hard to explain, but my name is Howard Phillips, and there's a helicopter following my car right now."

"I see, sir." She was quiet for a moment. "I'm not sure what I can do about that."

I took a deep breath. "Don't worry. Don't worry at all if you believe me or if you can do anything to help. I just need you to take my message, and pass it on to anyone you think might help. Send a group email to everyone in the BBC if you think that's best. If you don't, I'm probably going to get killed, and, what's worse, Winterstones will never re-open. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," she said, responding to my firm tone. I thanked fate that it was not someone like me on the other end of the line. Regardless of the pros and cons of the situation, I knew that I would have resented being given such instructions, and probably hung up or become abusive. That was only one of the reasons I had never worked in a call centre or as a receptionist – as well as lacking all necessary skills, I lacked all necessary human qualities, such as trifling matters as patience, understanding and the ability to listen to others instead of regarding the time when they were speaking as a chance to compose my own thoughts!

"Okay. Like I said, my name's Howard Phillips. I'm in a car in Birmingham on the run from killers, and there's a TV helicopter following me. I need to make a clean escape, so that I can form a resistance. That helicopter needs to be called off, else it'll give my location away. It might not be a BBC helicopter, but someone at the BBC will know who it belongs to, and who to ring, and can get it called off. How does that sound?"

"Fine." She read her note back to me. She had it word perfect.

"Thanks, BBC!"

"Thanks, Howard. If you pay your license fee, the least we could do is save your life. You do pay your license fee, don't you?"

I laughed. "You're a sassy one,

aren't you? Google me sometime when this is all over! Yes, I do pay my license fee. Always have, apart from a couple of years when I lived drunk on the canalside. And when I was a student we once bought a black and white license rather than a colour one. I did have a black and white television, but no one else did."

She laughed in return. "So should I send this email or not?"

I noticed that the sound of the helicopter was already fading. "I think that you already have."

"You've caught me," she said with another laugh. "My name's Barbara. If you're ever on Jonathan Ross, drop by and see me, Howard."

I promised that I would, hung up, and returned my attention to the car. You might think I had been wasting my time in flirting with my new friend at the BBC, but who knew when I would next find myself in a position to flirt? I envisaged months ahead of living in foxholes, creeping through mud, hiding out in sheds and barns. Even if I met another girl, I wouldn't be in any fit state to romance her!

Prince Vann was looking at a road map of England. He was no longer attached by his nerves to a world-spanning information network, but he had lost none of the analytical and tactical skills which had allowed him to make sense of the information that network had brought to him. Hence I had no reason to take the map from his hands. "Where do you think we should head, Howard?"

It was a good question. Despite having lived there practically all my life, occasional sojourns on alien worlds aside, I knew surprisingly little of England. I knew Birmingham fairly well, and had visited London, Brighton, and a few other foci of artistic activity, but when it came to travelling to the places in between, I knew no more than a list of railway stations.

"Let's just get out of the city and into the country. Navaroni's power is centred on the bookshops. If we can get far enough away to make the use of the force shields impractical, we'll have a chance. After a certain point, they won't bother to search for us."

Prince Vann nodded. Once we

were out of Harborne and onto a reasonably straight stretch of road he drew the Mountain Drummer's attention to the map. "I think we should head here," he said, pointing to a spot that was precisely in the middle of nowhere. No roads led to it, so until he went on I wasn't sure what he was thinking. "First we drive here." He pointed to another spot on the map. "I think it'll take us about three hours to get there, then we dump the car. Then we grab a lift on a freight train due to pass by here." He pointed to another spot, through which a railway line passed. I had been oblivious to it. The speed with which he had assimilated the details of the map amazed me, though I should have expected it from him. "And then we jump off there, hire a boat and make our way down the river. We can make a shelter in this wood, and from there start to make our plans."

It sounded good. And he knew what he was talking about. He had unwillingly helped his father to catch many, many fugitives on Envia. If anyone knew how to foil pursuit, he did.

Unfortunately we ran into a few problems.

The drive out of Birmingham went well, but once we were on the motorway things got a bit crazy. Our escape had not been as clean as we might have hoped – three cars full of Navaroni's men roared up behind us in their souped-up red and black cars, hollering and waving machine guns.

That might have been a big problem for another driver, but for the Mountain Drummer such situations accounted for more than two thirds of his entire driving experience!

As one of the cars tried to get ahead of us, the Mountain Drummer chose his moment carefully – a quick nudge to the rear added just enough to its acceleration to send it flying through the motorway's barrier. It plummeted down to the ground below, exploding in a satisfying fireball.

"That leaves two!" I shouted with pleasure.

Those remaining two cars didn't make the same mistake. Realising that they were up against a canny opponent, they trailed behind us at a distance of ten or twenty metres, while

the non-driving occupants leant out of the windows to fire away at us. Glass shattered around us, and we ducked as far as possible, unsure what we could possibly do next. Then our options narrowed further – the tyres beneath us exploded and the sudden impact of the bare wheels upon the road surface threw the car up into the air.

The three of us looked at each other. Though this was not a welcome development, I couldn't help but be thrilled.

Then we landed, upside down, and I let out a manly scream as the roof of the car buckled to within a centimetre of my head and the car slid on along the motorway, screaming out its pain.

We had all been wearing our seatbelts, which saved our lives. At least for a minute or two. As the car came to a stop, Navaroni's men drew up alongside on the hard shoulder. We were trapped inside an overturned car in the middle of one of the busiest motorways in England. If the guns of Navaroni's men didn't get us, the on-rushing cars would.

Things looked desperate for us.

But then, they almost always did! I remained confident that we would find a way to survive!

The Agents of Literary Devastation

"Come out, Phillips!" came the call from Navaroni's men, after they ceased shooting for a moment. Miraculously we had so far avoided serious injury. "Get out of the car and face your final doom!"

I looked at my two friends. There wasn't really any other option for us. It was either that or face certain death by vehicular concatenation. We unbuckled our seat belts, dropped down to the crumpled underside of the roof, and crawled out, one by one, through one of the broken windows. It hadn't

been broken enough to allow our egress, but once the Mountain Drummer had laid his hands upon it the gap was more than large enough for any of us.

We quickly crossed the lanes to reach the hard shoulder, hands above our heads.

“Okay,” I said, “we’re your captives. Take us to your leader.”

Their leader laughed. He was a dapper-looking kind of brute, with black hair slicked back with Brill-cream (or a similar product) and a ring of carefully-cropped hair around his mouth. His skin was pale, his eyes brown, and his nose pinched. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Howard? You would love us to take you to our leader. But there’s a problem with that, isn’t there?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Is there?”

“No one knows who our leader is, do they?”

“Of course we do,” said Prince Vann. “Your leader is that most detestable of men, that most pathetic of writers, Peter Navaroni.”

He laughed again, drawing it out with malicious glee. “But no one knows that for sure, do they? I certainly don’t. So I’m not going to take you to him. If you could confirm who our leader was, that would only bring him trouble. So let’s keep everyone in the dark for now, what do you say?”

I looked him in the eye. “So what do you intend to do with us? I suppose we have killed so many of your colleagues that you would like to see us dead. Most of them whimpered as they died, you know.”

His top lip quivered as he tried to maintain his composure. “You are trying to rattle me, aren’t you Howard? Good luck with that.” He paced back and forth in front of us, tantalisingly within reach of the Mountain Drummer’s gigantic hands. I could see those hands twitching to reach out and crush that head like a grape. I caught his eye and shook my head. There were too many guns trained upon us. “But it’s no good. You’re just going to die.”

He motioned to his men and suddenly the guns ceased to be an issue one way or the other, since they would be firing at us both one way

and the other. The Mountain Drummer did not need to wait for my order. The head was crushed and the dead body flying at the men before they had a chance to fire. Three of them fell to the ground and the other four took a moment too long to take in what was happening.

“Let’s go!” I shouted as I flung myself at them. “Saturation Point scramble!” It was the latest catchphrase that I had decided to try out. If they ever made a movie of my life I wanted the lead to have a few good lines, at least.

Who might play me in a film, the reader might ask at this point? It isn’t the first time that the question has been asked, and I have indeed given it a bit of thought. Johnny Depp is an obvious choice, having played his share of amiable eccentrics with English accents in the past – and his stock is currently high as a result of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy. But his price might be too high now, and I would prefer the budget to be allocated to the special effects that my life’s story would of course require. Crispin Glover would be right, physically, and I think he would be able to convey the poetic angst at my heart. Simon Pegg would be able best to sell the witty banter between me and the rest of the band, while it might take someone like James McAvoy to carry off the scenes of romance, to capture my charm. In fact, McAvoy might be perfect, and not yet too expensive. Let’s see how he performs as a man of action in *Wanted*, and keep our fingers crossed that he is not on the shortlist to replace David Tennant as *Doctor Who*! And David Tennant – there’s another good candidate. After playing the Doctor, he would find it a breeze to portray my dynamism, drive, sense of justice and confidence in my own genius!

Before they knew it, they were overwhelmed. We did our best not to kill them, but if one or two fell to the ground permanently, I’m afraid that was their fault for taking the coin of a villain, a megalomaniac. Personally, if I was going to turn to evil, I would at least be looking to sign up with an evil genius. Run of the mill evil? Worst writer in the world? I think I would have waited for the next evil

bandwagon to ride into town. I think that most of them survived, though, hopefully to choose a better path in life. If they chose to pursue the same path, then we would probably meet again after all, and the chances of them surviving a second encounter with the Saturation Point were slim!

We disabled one of their cars, set up warning lights around the wreck of the sous-chef’s vehicle, and set off in the remaining car, having checked it for any kind of GPS tracking system (there was none, and so we could drive in safety for the time being). While the Mountain Drummer drove as if he had taken his driving test in PGR3 – appropriately – I called the police and alerted them to the position of our defeated enemies.

“Thanks, Howard,” said the despatch officer. “As long as we can keep their location quiet, there’s a chance we’ll be able to get some information out of them.”

“That’s cool,” I responded. “Has there been anything more on the news about them? Do you know who they are yet, or what they want?”

“There’s been nothing more on TV yet, but from the few that have been captured so far we’ve learnt that they’re calling themselves the Lettermen,” he answered. “As in Literary Enforcement Team.”

“I see. Thanks.”

“You might want to turn on the radio, if you have one,” he said, just as I was about to hang up.

I slapped myself on the forehead. “Ha! Of course!” I thanked him being good enough to suggest the obvious thing to do. We have all found ourselves in that position from time to time: someone’s asking you about a problem, and there’s an obvious answer to it, but you don’t want to suggest it, because, if you do, that would imply that they are stupid enough to have missed it themselves. It’s easy to get angry with someone who does suggest obvious answers, easier still to thank them when it’s something you’ve missed and then get angry with them the next time they suggest something obvious! But we should thank those people willing to stick their necks out, willing to risk having their heads bitten off, whether or not we’ve already thought of the obvious

thing ourselves. It takes real bravery. Not the kind of bravery I showed in the face of those guns, or the kind of bravery shown by secondary school teachers every day, but bravery nevertheless. I thanked him – I thanked him heartily.

I put the radio on.

For our first hour of driving, there was nothing new. The Lettermen were still making occasional forays from their bases to destroy bookshops they had missed in the initial wave of attacks, and the army, air force and police continued to make ineffectual attempts to stop them. There were mentions from time to time of one successful counterattack – special forces had set a trap at a branch of WH Smith in Smethwick, and had brought the building down upon the heads of the Lettermen. It had apparently been a useful test – the force field had kept the militia men safe under the rubble for about 45 minutes, at which point it had given out and the weight of a building had fallen upon their heads. After that it had been thought best to leave them to their work. The city centres had been evacuated, after all. Should one kill a man to stop him burning a book? The government decided that one should not.

Then, just as we prepared to ditch the car, there was a new report. We listened as we gathered our things and scavenged what we could from the car – guns, ammunition, a packet of Tracker bars, and a few paperbacks. (We didn't know how long we'd be hiding out – something to read might save us from going mad. Unfortunately, Prince Vann did not look at the titles of the books as he was picking them up, else he might have thought better of it.)

We were listening to Radio 5 Live.

"I have breaking news. We have all heard about the appalling events taking place in every city and town in the country, and many people have lost loved ones today. We are now hearing that..."

The British Library had fallen. Where, previously, Navaroni's men had entered in secret, to steal the Folios of Shakespeare, they had now entered it in force, set up a force field, and were setting up base there. By all

accounts this was the largest force yet seen of the Lettermen, but that had not made a difference to the ease of their invasion of the British Library, which had been well-defended by police and the armed forces. No, a single man had taken it, had driven away every defender, by walking up to the front door with a lighter in one hand and Shakespeare's Folios in the other.

It was rumoured that their leader was with them. Navaroni's name was mentioned once in that connection, but quickly dismissed. There was nothing, they said, to indicate that he had the resources or ability to set up an invasion – because that was what most people were now calling it – of this sort. There was some debate about the word invasion. Some argued that it was more of a coup, or an insurrection, since the attackers seemed mostly British, but no one could dispute that the mysterious buyer of Winterstones, whether it was Navaroni or not, was an American. Could it be true, the presenter asked again and again, that invaders had set foot on English soil, for the first time in hundreds of years?

"We need to go," said Prince Vann, looking up from his mobile phone. "I've been using the internet to check when we should expect a train along that line, and one is due within the hour. If we miss that one, we could be facing a long walk." When he said he had been using the internet to find something out, I knew without asking that he meant more than merely using Google as I would have done, probably in vain. Part of his work on Envia had involved assessing the state of our world's technology, and he had told me how much intelligence they had been able to glean from our internet. He had almost found it embarrassing to admit it – embarrassing for us, that is, as if we had left the shower curtain open and he had walked in to find us scrubbing away at our downbelows. Much of that intelligence remained in his head, as did a thousand ways to crack a computer system. So although you cannot google goods trains to find out when they will pass, he was able to get the information as quickly as if he could. You might say he was a hypergoogler.

"Do we have a radio?" asked the

Mountain Drummer. "We need to know what's going on."

I shook my head, and made a mental note to add one to my adventure kit. "Perhaps we should stay here a moment or two more?"

A second later I slapped my forehead again. Prince Vann had waved the mobile phone at me. Of course – the internet! We could access most of the BBC radio stations from it, as long as it would run RealMedia. A quick test later – it did! – and we were on the move, the car hidden under an underpass. Against our emotional inclinations, we decided not to set it on fire – it would attract more attention that way.

And so we were off!

Rail and River

The goods train felt like a good place to be when people were looking for us. It was quickly carrying us away from where they expected to find us, and with luck they'd miss the abandoned car altogether and chase up to Yorkshire after us. Instead, we were on our way back down to Warwickshire. Michael Wyndham Thomas, who as I mentioned earlier was another of Theaker's captive writers at that time, lived down there, but we had no plans to make contact with him, at least in the next few days. He would be under surveillance, if he had not already been taken into custody or killed. No, we would hide out and make our plans carefully. But first we needed information, and so, sitting in the dust in the shadow of a dozen crates of jam jars, we continued to listen to Radio 5 Live as it squeaked from Prince Vann's mobile phone.

Just as before, for a time there was nothing new, merely frenzied speculation from experts (on terrorism, technology and urban warfare) and

openly baffled statements from government and the armed and emergency services. Ironically, one of the things that puzzled everyone the most was that the attackers had been relatively restrained in their actions, if you can believe it. They had turned every Winterstones branch in the country into military bases, laid waste to the city centres, and dealt a mortal blow to online shopping, but why had they stopped there? They could have taken control of the government with half the power they had so far displayed. Their attacking capabilities, admittedly, were unremarkable – machine guns, flame-throwers and a few grenades – but their defensive power more than made up for it. Why set up shop in the British Library? Why not the Houses of Parliament? Some commentators went so far as to wonder if the reason they had not taken control of the country was because they were already in control of the country – could the government have decided to implement some kind of totalitarian thought control over the country? Was this the first step towards a fascist Britain? Had Tony Blair decided to put a stop to further questions about the end of his term of office? Or had Gordon Brown grown tired of waiting for his turn? Some even wondered if perhaps a hard left conspiracy of some kind had taken power, and if we were on the verge of becoming a Communist state.

As we listened we began to break up some of the crates – if we could not find a boat to hire or steal we would need the wood for making a raft.

Then, abruptly, the speculation stopped, because Navaroni made a statement to the press. A live feed from the steps of the British Library was being streamed on the BBC website, and so for the first time we were able to see our enemy. He was quite short, and scruffy, despite the uniform. He was wearing a similar red-and-black garb to that of his militia, but somehow he seemed to have found precisely the right places to leave it untucked, to crumple its seams, to fray its edges. Each effect taken alone was small, but in sum they made him quite disappointingly

unimpressive. He had a black moustache and goatee beard combination which, from its straggleness, he had obviously had to work hard to produce. Thin dark lines of hair emerged from it on either side and wandered over to meet with his wiry sideburns. His nose was florid, pitted with the scars of a thousand spots and bursting with hair. His eyes had the slightly lost, unfocused look of short-sighted eyes used to hiding behind glasses, glasses which have been taken off in the hope of making a better impression. His lips were puffy and cracked, and I recognised the tell-tale streaks of dark red that showed he picked and pulled at them in his nervous moments.

A lot of detail was visible on that online feed, you might be thinking! I admit it's possible that I have read some of my later observations into this first time I saw Navaroni. It's hard to divide up my memories about him. Once such a man is in your head, it's easy to forget there was ever a time when you were not aware of him in all his repulsive and compulsive glory. Repulsive, yes, clearly, but why compulsive? Because knowing of a Navaroni is like the day before a cold is over, when you don't feel quite so poorly any more, and your sore nostrils dry out, leaving little flappy bits of skin around their edges. You know you should leave them alone, but somehow you cannot, you have to pick away at them, and end up doing more damage to your nose than the cold did.

Or maybe you don't follow that simile, and hence you might wonder if I have more in common with Navaroni than with you, if I am a nervous picker and scratcher, a spot-squeezer, a lip-cracker, a scrab-scraper, a Josie Grossie in comparison to you and your steel will, confidence and self-esteem. If you did wonder that, then well done, because from the very beginning I had more in common with Navaroni than I would have liked to admit. That was one of the things that made us such natural enemies. That was one of the things that made me such a perfect weapon against him.

Even before he spoke I felt that I knew him, but I made the effort to listen.

"People of England," he began, "my name is Peter Navaroni. Lots of you have read my books and my anthologies. I am just an author trying to get some royalties. Why wouldn't you let an author get his royalties? I could not afford to pay authors; that is not my fault; they should stop asking until my next anthology has been published."

I looked at Prince Vann and the Mountain Drummer. "Is he insane? What the hell is he going on about?"

They shrugged.

"My books include *The Darkest Spider Place*, *The Darkest Spider Place – Web II*, *The Darkest Spider Place III*. My anthologies include *Tabulated Fears*, *Tabulated Fears II*, *Tabulated Fears III*, *Tabulated Fears IV*, and I have already received submissions for *Tabulated Fears V* and *VI*. With the stories that did not fit into *Tabulated Fears II* and *Tabulated Fears III* I made a new anthology called *The Hammer of Fears*, which publicised many new authors." He paused for effect, though not quite long enough. "You should buy them on Lulu if you ever want to see Shakespeare's Folios again. I just want to get my royalties and then I can pay my authors. Why would you want to get in the way of an author earning his royalties?"

Now, I had not expected rationality on the part of a man who had invaded England and turned her finest bookshops into military bases, but, as they might have said in the olden days, this cat was cooked. What the hell was he blathering on about? I stopped myself – of course, he was going on about all the things he had gone on about before he had come into this money. He was a monomaniac, caring only about his strange little publications, desirous only of publicising them, but was his only goal in invading England really to just get people to buy them? It seemed it was, but I was forced to the conclusion that even if he was the leader and funder of this terrible expedition to our country, he was not the organiser of it.

After asking the prince to pause the feed, I said as much to my bandmates.

"I agree," said Prince Vann. "And

even if the money behind this organisation is his, I wonder if he controls the pursestrings. From what I understand, he wants to be a bestseller. If he came into a large amount of money, my impression is that he would simply buy a hundred thousand copies of his own book to drive it to the top of the charts. A futile exercise, of course, but one that would appeal to a personality such as his."

He unpaused the video feed.

"In the morning," Navaroni continued, "the bookstores formerly known as Winterstones will re-open for business. Everyone can come back and shop to their fucking heart's content. If no one causes any trouble, there won't be any. There is one fucking rule, though – no one else can fucking sell books. If you try to sell books in England, my fucking Lettermen will come and burn them. Do you understand? If you were selling important books before and now you don't have a place to sell them, please contact my representatives. If you were selling fucking midlist horror books about gay vampires having gay sex with animals then forget it – you will not be fucking published and you should thank me for saving you from the embarrassment of anyone reading your books and finding out how gay you are. No books will be sold anywhere but in my stores. Breaking this law will be punishable by death. You have seen what we can do – don't make us do it to you. That's all I have to say. Fair enough?"

He turned and walked away, and the BBC feed cut out.

"They know who he is now," said the Mountain Drummer. "At least we don't have to prove it."

I nodded. "That's true. What a publishing plan, eh? Take over Britain's main chain of bookstores, destroy all the others, and make sure that only your books are on sale. The government will try to stop him, but as long as he doesn't go any further than he already has, it'll be hard to summon the will to stop him. No one is going to approve dropping a nuclear bomb on London just so that Borders can re-open."

"We're almost there," said Prince

Vann, consulting the map. "The train isn't going to stop, but it'll slow down, so look out for a soft patch."

He pulled open the door, and we threw out the wood we had scavenged from the crates, plus four of the crates that we had left whole, but from which we had removed the jam-jars. It was about five in the afternoon, on a cloudy day, and so it was beginning to get quite dark. It was hard to distinguish the soft patches from the spiked railings. But there was nothing else for it: I had to make the leap.

The ground thumped me like Green Lantern's boxing glove, but nothing pierced me, and I let myself slump to the ground like a defeated super-villain safe in the knowledge that the hero would not deliver a killing blow if I stayed down. A few seconds later I heard the sound of two more thumps and looked to see Prince Vann and the Mountain Drummer about fifty metres further along the track, rolling down into a gully. They were safe, though, quickly getting back to their feet, which made me think I should do the same, as their leader. I don't know if it has been said before – perhaps this is the latest bit of original wisdom to spring whole from my own pen – but the greatest leaders don't just set an example to the men and women under their command; they let the men and women under their command set an example to them in return.

We collected our crates and wood – the Mountain Drummer did most of the work of carrying them – and then Prince Vann led us to the river. It took about half an hour to get there, and though I had not had as much to carry as the Mountain Drummer, my arms were ready to fall off. Slumping to the ground, I suddenly wondered what we would use to bind our raft together if we needed to make one. Would we find enough reeds for the job? Or... no, that couldn't be it? Was Prince Vann looking sadly at his extruded nerves, bound up as they were in a pouch on his wrist?

"No!" I shouted. "Don't do it, Prince Vann!"

He looked puzzled. "Do what, Howard?"

"Tear out your nerves to make the

raft! If we lost your guitar playing it would be the death of the Saturation Point!" When we rehearsed or performed he would string those nerves along a specially-made guitar. Without them he would still be good, but he would no longer be quite as great.

He laughed. It was a sad little laugh. "I'm not going to do that, Howard, any more than you would pull out your own hair to make a raft. But thank you for your concern."

"Why then," I said, "do you look at your nerves with such sad eyes? I am a poet, remember. I understand feelings!"

"Because of the blood already upon them, and because of the blood they are still to spill."

I grew sad myself. "I'm sorry for getting you into these situations."

"Don't be sorry," he replied. "It isn't your fault."

"But it is!" I shouted, getting to my feet and pacing back and forth along the riverbank. "It is, Prince Vann! Again and again I get you into dangerous situations – you, the Mountain Drummer, Theaker, everyone. Think how many palanquines died from following me!"

One tear emerged from the corner of my eye, crawled across my cheek, and dropped to the ground. As if it were a tiny mountaineer attached by an invisible rope to its fellows, first one, then two and finally a torrent of tears followed it into the mud.

"Howard," said the Mountain Drummer, getting to his feet. "Don't take it so hard. This isn't your fault."

He held out his arms to hug me, but I turned away, screwing my fists into my eyes.

"Then whose fault is it? Perhaps I didn't bring Navaroni to England, but I brought him down upon the two of you. If I hadn't been so public about my adventures he wouldn't have seen me as a threat. We would have been left alone. Theaker would be safe at home with his family, with his pregnant wife. Terrance Dicks wouldn't be sleeping in a police safe house. The Doctor Who Exhibition in Cardiff would still be open!" Then a new thought hit me. I spun around to face them, almost triumphant in my despair. "He calls them the Lettermen! What if I inspired him? What if

he saw my appearance on David Letterman? We know he's aware of me – maybe that's why, and that's what started this whole thing! I showed America that a writer could save the world. Maybe that made him realise that in comparison, conquering a country would be easy! What have I unleashed upon the world? Saddam Hussein was a novelist. Adolf Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*. Every author of fiction creates a world in their own image, a world which they control utterly. By my example, have I unleashed a new wave of despots upon the planet?" I dropped to my knees, and pounded my hands into the mud. "What have I done? Why couldn't I stop?"

This time the Mountain Drummer didn't just offer a hug, he forced it upon me, wrapping me in his gigantic arms but holding me as gently as if I were made of paper. "It isn't your fault," he said softly. "You're just doing what you have to do to survive. And once the band is ready, you'll be done with all of this. We'll find ourselves a residency in some basement club and play five nights a week until we are the band you dreamt of, all those years ago. Then we'll go out into the world and show them what we can do. It will be a new age of music, a new age for humanity, even. We'll inspire new developments in art, fashion, literature and even the sciences, as they try to analyse the new sounds and shapes we're making. We're going to do all that, Howard. It's what you told me up on the mountain, it's why I followed you to England, it's why I spent a year holed up in the Novotel while you went off to Envia!" He gave me the tiniest of squeezes and then released me. "You haven't ruined my life, Howard. Until I met you I had never slept upon a mattress. I had never heard poetry. I had never read a comic, seen a movie or kissed a woman. The only music I knew was the banging of my own drums and the only smiling face I had seen was my own reflected in ice or pools of water."

I tried to smile.

"A lot of that goes for me too," said Prince Vann. "Until you came down to my basement, everything I knew was second-hand. I saw nothing

with my own eyes, touched nothing with my own fingers, heard nothing with my own ears except the imprecations of my father and the sympathies of my sister. You brought me out of that, you showed me life, you gave me meaning."

I shook my head sadly. "I brought only death."

"I knew death before you, Howard," said the prince. "Now, though, I kill only to preserve life, to protect others, to combat evil. Before you ripped me from my machines, I watched my father kill for sport, for pleasure, and sometimes just out of boredom. There is no comparison in the two situations, other than that all death makes me mourn, even the death of my enemies, because, given time, patience and determination I know that I could have made each of them my friend."

"No one ever had a better band," I said with a weary smile.

The Mountain Drummer stayed with our little pile of wood while Prince Vann and I split up and scouted the river for twenty minutes in each direction. I was unsuccessful, but he found a rowing boat tied up on a rickety platform at the back of a riverside house.

Thankful to leave the planks and crates behind we followed him to it. I decided to steal it, rather than asking for permission.

For all we knew the relative of someone living there might be working for Navaroni – to take control of every Winterstones in England he must have had thousands of people in his organisation. If we asked permission to take the boat they might bring the Lettermen down upon us. But if we did not ask, they might report the theft to the police and that would leave a trail.

After some reflection I left a note upon one of the platform's many rusty nails, asking them to forbear from calling the police, explaining that we were being pursued by murderers, and promising to repay them once we were safe.

It was no guarantee that they wouldn't call the police, but it was the best I could do.

We got into the boat and headed down the river.

The Months of My Resistance

We had made our escape, and after a few days of hiding out in a draughty barn, we moved on and set up permanent camp in an abandoned military base Prince Vann found through careful analysis of Google Earth. Unlike some, it had never been put up for sale – perhaps to avoid drawing attention to the fact that it had ever been there, hidden away in sleepiest Warwickshire, or perhaps because in a different global climate it might be worth reactivating. It had simply been sealed up and left to gather dust, nothing to show its location but a manhole set into a metre-square block of concrete in the middle of a field.

The sealed manhole had been little of a challenge to the Mountain Drummer and a mallet. The manhole cover safely opened, a ladder was revealed. We climbed down for eight metres, and made ourselves at home in the base which we had found. After taking a short nap, we began by checking for stores of food and sources of water, and found ourselves amply availed of both. The food wouldn't have kept a gourmet happy, but it would keep us alive, and I had coped with much worse in the course of previous adventures. We even found that the electricity was still working, and so we were able to turn on the heating. Most of the base we left unexplored for the time being.

So we were safe, warm and fed. What were we to do next?

The first thing was to make contact with our friends on the outside, and make sure that they were safe. We had held off from trying to contact J,J,T,L.M and Theaker for those few days, since they were in hiding themselves, and there was thus a doubled risk of giving one or the other of us away. But on May 31 I borrowed Prince Vann's mobile and phoned the Saturation Point answering service. There were a few messages of sup-

port from fans (fans – before we had released a record!) who had heard on the news how we had been chased out of Birmingham, but nothing from J,J,T,L.M. Slightly concerned, I left a message for him, and hoped for the best.

For the next couple of days we worked on making the base somewhere a man could live. When people had been stationed there, it would have buzzed with life and activity, the desks and walls would have been covered with their business and their interests, pictures of children, calendars, motivational posters and what have you. But all of that was gone now, even the machinery and computers with which they had worked, leaving bare white walls and empty steel desks that threatened to suck you in when you looked at them. There was a danger, I felt, that if we ended up hiding out there for any length of time we might begin to lose our minds.

In a storeroom I found a pile of half-empty paint pots (mainly green, grey and white), and paper was not in short supply, so we spent some time painting, and tried to doll the place up a bit. I had no doubt that in a matter of weeks, if we were there that long, the paintings would become as over-familiar and annoying as the blank walls that preceded them, but at least it was a change for now, and painting them kept our minds off the likely fate of J,J,T,L.M.

Then, one morning, shortly after I had finished a salty breakfast of dried, vacuum-packed bacon, there came a knock on the door – or the manhole cover, I should say. It echoed through the base, all the way down to the bottom and then back again. Was it the Lettermen, having tracked us down? Was it the army, alerted to the presence of squatters? Or... but I hardly dared hope.

If there was a way to see who was out there, I could not find it. Probably it had left along with the army. I couldn't see any option but to open up and see what happened. Before taking that risk, though, I told Prince Vann and the Mountain Drummer to find somewhere safe to hide, a bulkhead behind which they could lock themselves, but they weren't having

any of it. Prince Vann unfurled two of his nerves and tied them around my waist, protecting me from being sliced with a tea tray in front and back.

"If whoever is up there isn't friendly, waggle your toes and we'll drag you back through here before there's time to shoot."

"Thanks for the effort," I said, with no little doubt in my voice. "But that's an eight metre drop. If they don't kill me, the fall will!"

"I'll be right beneath you," said the Mountain Drummer. "I'll catch you."

It wasn't the best plan to have been concocted during one of my adventures (though it was far from the worst!), so when I opened the manhole to reveal the shining ocular crystals of J,J,T,L.M I was happy for more than one reason! Calling down to my friends to give them the good news, I took extra care to do nothing which might be interpreted as a waggle of my toes.

I flung the manhole cover fully open, shrugged out of the nerves and climbed out into the field. I had a surprise in store – my bassist had brought some friends. Theaker was there, and I quickly shook his hand, to apologise for the danger that he'd been put through on my account. He shook his head and said it had been nothing. Clearly the assassination attempt had not changed him: he was as annoying as ever, refusing to accept my apology in the same way he would have refused to countenance my criticism or ideas in the days when I worked directly for him, as marketing manager of Silver Age Books.

Standing behind them were a man in his sixties and a woman with close-cropped hair. I couldn't place either of them, though the female looked familiar. Theaker turned to introduce them, indicating first the woman.

"This is Laura Tibbs. I think you met briefly before?"

"I'm not sure," I said, apologetically.

"In Birmingham," said Laura, holding out a hand for me to shake. "I gave you my keycard."

Now I knew her, and I shook her hand vigorously. "Of course, sorry. I

didn't recognise you without your impressive array of hairclips, and the hair that went with them."

"I haven't been in a long-hair mood lately," she said sadly. "Did you find any use for it?"

"For your hair?"

"For the keycard, I mean." She dropped my hand, obviously rather unimpressed with my failure to follow her train of thought.

I shook my head. "Not so far, but I've still got it. Who knows where this adventure will take me, and as I've learnt from watching my friend the Mountain Drummer play on the Xbox 360, if an object looks useful, and you've got room to carry it, best take it with you, to save on doubling back."

"What a wordy philosophy that is," said Theaker in a withering tone. "Thank goodness the future of English literature lies in the hands of someone so forward-thinking."

"I don't have to let you in here, you know," I observed. "I could bring a tent out for you and you could sleep in the field with the cows. We could call it keeping guard, if you like."

"No need to get snippy," he replied, and then laughed. He laughed in an odd way, doing his best to keep his mouth as closed as possible, to conceal the gap between his wonky front teeth, while his natural disposition to frivolity forced the laugh out regardless, the whole procedure turning it into something of a guttural, coughing grunt. He laughed as a way of asserting his dominance over the group; he chose when to laugh, regardless of whether it was appropriate or not; he laughed to show a lack of interest; he laughed to disdain; he laughed, largely, because he was a bit of an idiot. But for all that, he had published my writings, and had interceded little in them, letting me, for all my own flaws, follow my own muse. As an editor he did little but correct the odd spelling mistake and add a superfluity of commas, but I needed little more. "That has been one of my very favourite words since I heard about Al Gore saying it to George Bush on election night. It's been a difficult week or two, so thanks for giving me the chance to use it."

"I'm so glad," I replied. "Now,

should I ask Prince Vann to garrotte you or will you introduce me to your friend?"

He laughed again. "You don't know him then?"

I had to admit that I did not, irritatingly. He was in his sixties, I estimated, and white-haired.

"Why, this is Alec Abernathy!"

That set me back on my heels. When I had worked for Silver Age Books, during their initial burst of book publishing, but before they had launched their magazine, *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, we had announced the imminent publication of a book by Alec Abernathy, by the name of *Aardvark Attack!* It had been due to be published in 2002. A page for the author had been created on the Silver Age Books website, which had remained there for many years, despite the book having never materialised. In fact, there had been plans for two further volumes to complete the trilogy: *Aardvark Attack II: the Return of the Gods*, and *Aardvark Attack III: the Aardvark of the Covenant*. In the end, only one chapter of the book had ever been received in the SAB offices, and the book became a running joke. It was a bibliographic ghost, in that Theaker had failed to properly recant its publication, leading to its appearance in various information sources and bookshop databases, and I knew it still haunted him.

"Alec Abernathy!" I shook his hand firmly. "Do you know, I never really believed you were an actual person! I always assumed you were a pseudonym of Theaker here, and that he just failed to write the books he planned to publish under your name."

He smiled. "You know what, Howard, until I saw you on TV with *The Sound of Howard Phillips*, I thought the same about you." He had a sweet Scottish accent. I have always had a weakness for it, especially in women. "You never did write any of your books either, did you? Remember *The Cartesian Conundrum*? *The Socratic Solution*? *The Hieronymous Hideout*? We were as bad as each other, weren't we?"

"We certainly were," I said. "But even if we'd written them, Theaker didn't have the money to publish them!" We both laughed at Theaker's

obvious discomfiture. "At least I've found my voice now, though. I've done two novels in the last couple of years. What have you been up to?"

"Oh, this and that. I just ran out of steam on the novels. I worried too much that people weren't going to take my memories of my father seriously enough. I know that you got kick-started by taking part in NaNoWriMo."

I nodded. "So did Theaker. You should give it a try. Especially if you just want to make a quick record of what happened rather than worrying too much about the style with which you write it. You can always prettify it later."

He smiled. "I might just do that, Howard. If writing novels is still allowed come November."

I finally stopped shaking his hand and took a step back to bring all four of them within my line of sight. "It's great that you're all here, but why did you come? Are your lives in danger?"

"Mine is," said Theaker, "as you know. I'm here to join your movement."

I looked at J,J,T,L.M. "We have a movement now?"

He jingled around the edges. "I think we do. A resistance movement."

"We're hiding out for our lives," I said, scanning the horizon as I did. It occurred to me that standing out here like this for so long might not be wise.

"It's a passive resistance," he admitted. "But then so was Gandhi's."

I thought about it. "He had a nation behind him, though. One of the most populous nations on Earth."

"You do too," he replied. "And it's one of the most *literate* nations on Earth, which will be more important in this battle. Though it won't stay that way unless someone fights back."

I didn't say anything more on the subject. He was right, of course, but sometimes it's hard to be told to do something, even if you knew all along that it had to be done. "And you, Alec?"

"Theaker and J,J,T,L.M were staying with me when they received your message. When they said where you were staying, I felt I should come along. My father's stories were all

about this kind of base. He spent his life in places like this. I can help you. Who knows what is down there? Who knows what we could find in similar locations around the country? I don't know yet, but I can help you find out."

He was absolutely right. I shook his hand again. "I'm glad to have you on board." I turned to the girl. "What about you, Laura? Wouldn't you have been safer at home?"

She shook her head, but said nothing, leaving Theaker to speak on her behalf.

"We saw her on the local news every day, keeping a vigil outside Winterstones, lighting a candle every night. She was getting beaten up over and over again, whether by police trying to keep her out of the city centre or by the Lettermen on their way out to burn some books. A day or two after Navaroni made his statement, he must have come to some arrangement of mutual toleration with the government, and things began to settle down. At that point I sneaked into the city centre and brought her to Alec's place. She's more dedicated to this cause than any of us, and I wanted to put her energy to good use, rather than seeing it wasted on useless protest."

"Protest isn't useless," I said. "She was making sure people remember what happened."

"Maybe," he said. "But it was going to get her injured or killed." He shrugged. "I think we can use her."

"Okay, then," I said. "Let's get you all inside. It might not be far from Birmingham to Warwickshire, but you've still come a long way."

* * *

Once they had been fed and watered, our visitors brought me up to date on recent events. Although we had taken the risk of making a phone call, we had been reluctant to use the mobile to access the internet once we were installed in our base, at least until we could be sure the connection was secure and untraceable. Prince Vann was working on it, but it wasn't easy.

The day after Navaroni's address to the nation, the Literary Enforcement buildings had thrown open their doors and allowed shoppers inside,

each of them having to pass through a security scanner. The police might have tried to send people inside, but without weapons there was little they could do against armed militia men. Theaker had sent his pregnant wife into the Birmingham branch to gather information. Inside, she had told him, the ground floor of the shop was largely unchanged. The staircase to the basement floor was blocked. Her guess had been that the Lettermen were quartered there. The lifts at the back were inaccessible to the public, a security fence with a locked door closing off the entire back area. The erstwhile coffee shop now provided food and drinks to the Lettermen. Access to the two upper floors, including the balcony, was now blocked by a gate across the staircase, while armed Lettermen walked the balcony, guns trained on the shoppers below. It was not, she said, a congenial place to shop.

Winterstones was, however, the only place in England to buy books, and so people were indeed shopping there, despite the tension. Students still had to study, chefs still needed recipes, gardeners still needed instructions on how to care for their plants. In every walk of life and in everything we do, people need books. The books that people had bought in the past were still out there, of course. There was nothing Navaroni could do about that, short of sending Lettermen into every house in the country. But no one was selling them on eBay, no one was selling them in car boot sales, and no one was taking them to Book Crossing stations: to do any of those things was to invite immediate retribution. So if people wanted to read, they had to visit Literary Enforcement.

Most sections were unaffected, though they were now crammed into a smaller space. Even most fiction was unaffected, though certain names were notably absent, such as Jeanette Winterson. For that matter, the Gay & Lesbian and Black Fiction sections were gone entirely. Of those that remained, the Science Fiction & Fantasy and Horror sections were most changed. Much reduced in size, they had been combined and moved to the front of the shop. A few classic au-

thors remained – Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert, E.E. “Doc” Smith, early Robert Heinlein, Stephen King, James Herbert – but most others were gone, including all those who had seen first publication of their work since the early 1990s. One could only imagine that Navaroni, in his twisted way, saw them as his rivals. The resulting gaps on the shelves were filled by his own atrocious output. Customers leaving the shop without having chosen a book from those shelves were politely pointed (politely gunpointed, you might say) in the right direction before being allowed to leave the shop.

Perhaps the government was making secret plans to deal with Navaroni, but for the moment it seemed to be leaving him alone. I had no doubt that MI:5 agents were doing their best to infiltrate his organisation, Spooks-style, but as long as he had the British Library in his grasp, he had the literary soul of Britain by the throat. If he chose to burn it down, the country would lose forever thousands and thousands of its greatest literary relics. Much of its collection was warehoused in other locations around London, of course, but that would be small consolation if the main building was destroyed. Like the burning of Alexandria, such a disaster would leave a permanent scar across the history of the world.

* * *

The night after my friends arrived, I was woken in the night by a touch on my shoulder. I was bunking alone in what had been the base commander's quarters. I stirred, hopeful that Laura had chosen to pay me a midnight visit. She seemed to be in need of comfort, and I could have used some myself. But it wasn't her.

It was Cornelius Gilligan.

“Wow,” I said, grabbing my pyjama top from the floor and putting it on before sitting up. “I wondered what happened to you. You just disappeared on the train.”

“I don't really remember, to be honest.” He raised his eyebrows and adjusted his glasses. “I'm a bit lost in time at the moment. Maybe that hasn't happened to me yet. Maybe it hap-

pened and I forgot. I can't keep track of anything, and I can't stay on one track.”

“Sure, no problem. So how did you get here?”

“Not sure, mate. You know how it is when you survive your own death. Things get weird. You drift in and out of the world. I think I got a taxi, but I might have been dropped off by an army helicopter. It's an Ibis thing.”

“Ibis,” I repeated, unhappy to be reminded of the shadowy organisation that had done so much to put me in deadly situations and relatively little to get me out of them. “Okay. So why are you here? Do you want something to eat?”

“No thanks. Do I still need to eat? I don't know. Guess I'll soon find out if I don't do it. Anyway, I'm here with a message. I think it's from the future. On Halloween, Navaroni will release a virus, one that will destroy the creative faculties of everyone in England. He calls it the creativity bomb. But the virus is even more powerful than he realises. The effects are already being felt – ripples from that cataclysm are washing through time in both directions.”

“Is that what happened to *Romeo and Juliet*? The wrong words?”

“That's right.” He looked grim. “Think about it. Shakespeare was affected, hundreds of years ago. Imagine how it's going to affect you in November.”

“We have to stop him, then.”

He nodded, looking as serious as I had ever seen him. “It's going to be harder than you realise. You'll soon start to feel the effects, if you haven't already.”

“Oh, my. He's going to take away my most powerful weapon – my poetry! It's already affected us – that's why we went to Cardiff. I was finding it hard to write new lyrics, but I put it down to fatigue!”

“Have you tried to write anything since then?”

I shook my head.

“You should try. Build up a stock of material. Before it's too late.”

He tipped his head, gave me a wave, and stepped out of the room.

“Wait,” I called. I jumped out of bed and ran after him, but he was already gone. I woke the others and we

searched as much of the base as we were familiar with, but there was no sign of him. The chained doors leading further into the base were undisturbed, and the manhole cover was still bolted from the inside. He had, it seemed, just faded away again. I wondered if that was the last time I would see him. Was his work for Ibis now over?

Once everyone else was back to sleep, I talked to J,J,T,L,M about Gilligan's visit. I had told no one else what he had said. I didn't want them to panic just yet. At the moment almost everything Navaroni had done was reversible – other than the murders, that is. The shops could be refitted, the books reprinted. But if the creativity bomb went off, the country would stagnate within years. Everything that made it a great place to live – the art, the literature, the television, the music – would be gone, leaving only the things that made it, from time to time, a bad place to live – the anger, the resentment, the divisions, the weather.

"Can't we do anything?" I asked.

"I don't know," he jangled. "I suppose we will have to fight back, somehow. Tell people what he's planning. Spoil his plans. What else can we do?"

"I don't mean we, as in everyone in this bunker. I mean we, as in me and you. Your people created this world. Created it for me. If this bomb goes off, it won't be a universe worth living in. Can't your people do anything about it?"

My friend from the future (or at least that was the easiest way to think about it) was apologetic. "I wondered when you might ask this question, Howard, and I didn't look forward to it at all, because I knew that when it came, it would mean the situation was dire. I'm sorry, we can't do anything. This universe operates according to the same laws as the one you began in. It is not a game; there is no reset switch. And my people are not gods. They cannot reach into our world to fix the inconveniences we encounter. To do that, if it were even possible, would fatally disrupt this universe." He shook his main collection of sensory apparatus. "No, we must live through these events and re-

solve them as men. If we cannot resolve them to our advantage, then they will be resolved to our disadvantage. I'm sorry. It isn't what you wanted to hear. For that matter, it isn't what I wanted to say."

"It might not be what I wanted to hear," I said in a determined tone, "but it's what I needed to hear. There's no magic wand to fix this. If I want it fixed, I need to look to my tools. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go and get my keyboard out."

We said goodnight and I returned to my room.

* * *

So I sat down and began to write. This, I now realised, was the way to resist Navaroni. He wanted to control literary production in England, and so we had to take that control away. We had to write, and we had to publish, and then we had to get the books out there to the public. I had heard about books being published surreptitiously in the Soviet Republic, photocopied and passed around in secret, kept hidden under floorboards. That's what we would do – we would publish our own samizdat books, as they called them. (To give credit where it's due, I had actually first heard of samizdat books when reading *Philip K Dick Is Dead, Alas*, an excellent book by Michael Bishop, in which the books in question were Philip K Dick novels, being secretly swapped in an alternate reality where Richard Nixon had become dictator of the USA.)

I would write a novel about Navaroni, a novel which would tell people what had been happening. You might be thinking, is this the novel that I wrote in that bunker? The answer is no: the novel you are reading now was written with the benefit of hindsight, but parts are similar – parts of that novel acted as a very early draft for this one. A very early draft: my powers of writing were already being affected by the anteshocks of the creativity bomb, and every word was a struggle. It had been weeks since I had tried to write lyrics, months since I had tried to write prose, and now I began to wonder if subconsciously I

had been shying away from something my brain was progressively going to find harder and harder.

There was no shying away from it now. I had to force myself to do it, to write one word after another, even though the effort, at times, made me cry. My normal writing speed, editing as I go, and with hourly breaks for toilet and tea-making, is about one thousand words per hour. I continued to write until dawn (or at least when the corridor lights of the bunker returned to full brightness), and in those four hours I wrote just two thousand words.

When I tried to read what I had written I was reduced to tears. It was almost unreadable. If you are one of my regular readers you will know that I am by no means the best of writers. I am somewhat stiff. I find it difficult to describe actions. I have a limited range of descriptions for the things people do while they are talking. But I get the job done: I tell the story, as clearly as I can, and even if the sentences get a bit long they still make sense. What I read that morning had all of my flaws and then all – I could hardly dare to think it – all of Navaroni's as well. How could this have crept up on me? The incoherent sentences, the utterly incorrect word choices, the meaningless asides and interjections: they were all there. Was this, then, the true goal of the creativity bomb – to reduce us all to his level? Had he somehow found a way to infect others with whatever strange brain chemistry gave rise to the terrible nonsense he wrote?

I wouldn't let it stop me. I couldn't. I went back to the beginning of that two thousand words of dreck and started to work on it. At least I could still see how bad it was, something of which Navaroni himself was clearly incapable – else he would never have put any of his work in the public eye, much less invade a foreign country to force it down people's throats!

Sentence by sentence I worked away at it, tearing at my hair again and again in frustration, scratching at my face, grinding my teeth. It was one of the hardest mornings of my life, and given the amount of drinking I have been known to do from time to time, and the resultant hangovers I

have endured, that is really saying something. For example, I remember one hangover so bad (or perhaps I should say one bout of alcohol poisoning) that I spent the entire day on the toilet, sleeping when I could, but more often vomiting into the bath at the same time. (Incidentally, my cure for hangovers: ice cream lollies, specifically Walls' Tongue Twisters, aka Tangle Twisters. The combination of ice and ice cream will soothe even the most tormented stomach, as well as bringing your temperature down a bit.)

But I kept at it, for hour after blasted hour, until, by lunchtime, the first page at least was almost readable. The others had been knocking at my door, one by one, alarmed at the sweat on my brow, the screaming I could not help, and the blood upon my cheeks, but I had sent them away, assuring them that I knew what I was doing, and that it had to be done.

That one page complete, I took my PDA into what we thought had been the command centre, where the others were eating, drinking, playing cards, and pretty much waiting for me to say it was time to make a move.

I held up the PDA for them to look at, then gave it to Prince Vann, who passed it around the room.

"I used to write my novels in a single month, taking barely an hour-and-a-half a day, and while they weren't brilliant, they at least made sense from one word to the next. It's a lot harder for me now, but it's what we have to do. We have to resist. We have to write a new book, a book about what's happening in England right now, a manifesto, a gospel. It's going to take all of us, working together. It's going to get harder by the day, but we're going to do it. And then we'll get it out to the public, whether Navaroni wants us to or not. We'll break his dominance, we'll win back the soul of English literature, and show it's worth fighting for, and then we'll take him down. Are you with me?"

They were. But I had a feeling that we would need more writers to get it finished.

I wondered if we'd be able to contact Terrance Dicks.

Theaker's Lack of Principles Is Tested

I came up with a rough plan for the novel, covering the events in London, Cardiff and Birmingham (though not mentioning my strange encounters with Cornelius Gilligan, because their mystery might have clouded the real issues) and extrapolating the consequences of those events five years into the future. I broke the plan down into thirty chapters, and to begin with assigned one to each person present in the bunker. There were seven of us there: Howard Phillips, Prince Vann, the Mountain Drummer, J,J,T,L.M, Theaker, Abernathy and Laura. We only had the one PDA, so most of us worked on paper, taking turns to type up our writing. We had found more than enough odds and ends of paper lying around the base to cope with all the rewriting we would undoubtedly have to do.

It soon became apparent that the project would be even more difficult than I anticipated. J,J,T,L.M, for example, although he was presumably unaffected by the anteshocks of the creativity bomb, was barely familiar with the concept of the novel, and peppered me with a thousand questions a day. Could he write things that weren't true? Could he write about things he didn't experience himself? What tense should he write in? Was it okay to use his existing manipulatory appendage to hold a pen, or should he wait until he had had time to grow a carbon crystal to make it easier? In the end, it was more trouble than it was worth to have him working on the project, so that was one down.

Laura, Prince Vann and the Mountain Drummer found it similarly hard, having never tried to write novels before. Normally that would not have been a problem – almost anyone can write a short novel if they just sit down for about fifty hours and get on

with it – but the creativity bomb was affecting all three of them, even Prince Vann, whose Envian biology, I realised, must not have been as different from our own as I might have expected. (It shouldn't have been a surprise – his sister's biology had proved quite compatible with mine during our brief time together!) Theaker and I had written novels before, however poor they were in his case, and so we were able, to some extent, to follow our noses, and let our fingers do the work. We had our tics and tricks, and could rely on those to carry us part of the way. Those who had never tried to do it before had nothing to go on. They didn't know where to start, and made very little progress on their chapters, though they gave it their every effort.

Alec Abernathy was reluctant to work on the novel for his own reasons. He confronted me one evening in my room.

"I have never written a novel, Howard," he said. He was angry and upset. Angry with himself for failing and upset with me for asking him to try. "It's never happened for me. I couldn't finish one before. I certainly can't do it now."

"Nonsense," I said firmly. "You can do it. You will do it. I was like you, Alec. I started a thousand projects and finished not a one. Then I cleaned up my act, pulled myself together, and set my nose to the grindstone. My nose might be worn down to the cartilage right now, but I've never been so happy. Or at least I was happy until all of this Navaroni business began. I need you to grab yourself by the balls and write that chapter. Don't worry about whether it's good or bad. I can tell you right now: it will be bad. It will be as bad as the worst thing you've ever read, as bad as a child's first scribble, as bad as a dog wiping its arse on the paper. So don't worry about something you can't avoid. You just have to get something on the paper, something we can work with: the raw materials of the novel."

He shook his head, but said he would give it a try, and he did. For the rest of the week his screams drowned mine out, as he pummelled his brain into submission by sheer force of

will, dragging the words out as if they were embedded in his mind like barbed arrows.

We kept at it until June, by which point it became clear that we were never going to finish the novel alone by Halloween. We were not even going to come close – between the six of us still writing we had barely finished two chapters, and the effects of the creativity bomb were growing worse by the day. Eventually, on June 4, I called a meeting together.

“Hi everyone,” I began. “I think we all know that this isn’t going well. We’re not making enough progress, for all the effort that we’re putting in. So I think we need to get more novelists working with us. It doesn’t matter if they work from home or come here to help us in person, we just need to get them involved. The question is: what’s the best way to do it?”

Theaker spoke first. “What about setting the novel up online, as a wiki-novel? That way anyone who wants to help would be able to chip in, even if it was just with one word.”

I gave it serious thought before replying. “That isn’t a bad idea.”

Prince Vann shook his head. “It would be too easy for Navaroni to track down and punish the contributors. And for his sympathisers to vandalise it and set us back to square one.”

We talked for a while about whether there was any way to avoid those problems, but they seemed insurmountable.

“What about an announcement of some kind?” said Laura. “We could put out a press release, and in it ask authors to send their contributions somewhere...”

She trailed off, realising as quickly as we did that the plan was unworkable. If we publicly told the authors where to send their work, we’d be telling Navaroni where to find us.

“This might sound silly,” said the Mountain Drummer. “But instead of putting all this effort into writing a novel, why don’t we just find Navaroni and kill him?”

They all looked at me in silence, waiting for my answer.

I took a deep breath. “It doesn’t sound silly at all. It sounds very sensible, in fact. But the issue I have

with that plan is this: should we murder someone for the sake of being able to publish books?”

“It’s not just about that, though,” said Theaker. “He’s tried to kill us. He has killed other people. He needs to be stopped.”

“I agree,” said Abernathy. “We’re getting nowhere with this novel. A quick knife to the guts and this would all be over.”

I looked Abernathy in the eye. “You say that like it’s an easy thing to kill a man. Have you ever done it?”

He shook his head.

“What about you, Theaker?”

He too shook his head.

“Well, let me tell you, it’s not an easy thing. But the worst thing is that it gets a little bit easier every time you do it. Again and again I’ve found myself forced into life-or-death situations where I have had to pull the trigger, and each time I do I feel a part of myself flying away with the bullet, and the part that flies away is the part we’re trying to save right now: the part that creates poetry, music, literature; the part that invents, discovers and inquires. I won’t willingly sacrifice it.”

I let it sink in. Nobody had anything more to say on the subject.

I nodded. “I know it’s hard, and we’re up against the clock. I suggest we do two things. On one hand, we go out into the cities and the towns and track down the authors. We break the novel down into even smaller parts – pages, or even paragraphs – and we give one to every novelist in Britain. There were about seven hundred winners of NaNoWriMo in the UK, last time I looked, so that’s one place to start. Then there are the published, professional novelists. That might be more difficult, because many of them will be under surveillance, to make sure that they don’t cause a fuss, but we’ll do our best.

“And then, on the other hand, I think we need to get someone on the inside of Navaroni’s organisation.”

Theaker looked up. “That should be me.”

“But he tried to kill you,” said J.J.T.L.M. “Saving you wasn’t easy, Mr Theaker. I wouldn’t want it to have been a waste.”

He nodded his head with determi-

nation. “It should be me. Listen. He knows me already, and regards me as a threat, because of my connections to you. But it’s common knowledge that you and I don’t get on particularly well. It wouldn’t be hard to spin a story that I want to be on the winning side. I’ve always been open about my pragmatic approach to publishing, and my exploitative attitude to authors. That last at least is something that will chime with Navaroni’s own approach. Plus, I have a way in. From what I’ve read, before he came into this money, Navaroni was a relentless self-promoter, though he did it with the skill of a toad with a jackhammer – he did a deal with another editor to exchange their own stories and conduct an interview. The interview was published, and both were excoriated for its contents. Well, to my great embarrassment I’d earlier published a short story by his partner-in-crime, one Laurent Ramsten. They fell out shortly after – whether it was for real or not no one knows – but at least I can use the connection to show that we are broadly on the same wavelength.”

“That sounds convincing to me,” I said. “Do you think he’d want you on board?”

Theaker smiled. “One thing motivates Navaroni more than anything – the desire for respect. Whether he gains it through fear or writing ability doesn’t matter to him. But more than anything he craves the respect of other writers, even as he defecates on their photographs. My magazine, *Theaker’s Quarterly Fiction*, might not be *Analog* or *Interzone*, but it’s a step up from the other places he’s been published – principally his own anthologies and websites that indiscriminately put up stories by the dozen. I’ve got a carrot.”

“Well, pass it around then,” said Abernathy with a smile. “We could all do with some fresh food.”

I couldn’t argue with Theaker’s logic. He understood Navaroni, just as I did. The three of us shared many goals, many motivations, but we did not share Navaroni’s lack of self-knowledge. Theaker and I knew that in literary terms, we were mere hobbyists: though we had the ability to string together enough words for a

short novel, through a lack of dedication and, more significantly, an absence of true storytelling genius we would never compete with Stephen King, Philip Pullman or JK Rowling. Navaroni, however, saw no reason at all why he should not be mentioned in the same breath as them, be stocked on the same shelves, and given the same respect. He truly thought his work was that of a genius (I speak here with some retrospective knowledge, having subsequently met him and read up on him more thoroughly), and believed that only a conspiracy of authors could have accounted for his lack of literary success.

He had been wrong about that in the past, but perhaps we could make his paranoid fantasies come true.

* * *

We spent the next day or two making more particular plans for our missions. Then we left the bunker and hiked to the nearest village. From there the humans among us took a bus to Warwick, while the non-humans, who would obviously attract more attention in public, acquired vehicles appropriate to their needs and headed out on their missions.

After splitting from us in Warwick, Theaker headed straight back to Birmingham. There was a risk of being shot on sight by any Lettermen he encountered on the way, but the reports we had read on the internet, once Prince Vann had made it safe to use his mobile phone, suggested that the Lettermen had scaled back their activities once their literary dominance had been established. City centres were open again as usual, and shoppers went about their usual business, with the one difference being that books were on sale in just the one store. Navaroni's uneasy truce with the government had made him feel secure in his power, so the Lettermen made fewer sorties from their bases. Also, as time went on, those sorties put them at more and more risk from army and police retaliation. The government might have been forced into tolerating his presence on the High Street, but there were still warrants out for the arrest of his men, and there had been plenty of time to develop strategies to combat their portable

force fields – from collapsing sewers to blowing bridges to dropping electricity pylons to putting up road blocks to stop them getting back to base – and so the Lettermen kept their excursions to an absolute minimum.

That made Theaker feel confident of reaching his goal without being accidentally shot. Getting off the bus in Birmingham, he headed for the Literary Enforcement building, stopping only in Marks & Spencers to buy himself a selection of fresh fruit and a large white teatowel. He ate the fruit while he walked and then, feeling nicely refreshed, he approached the Literary Enforcement building, waving his improvised flag of surrender from the moment he set foot on New Street, just in case the Lettermen had a sniper stationed on the roof, looking out for just such literary rebels as he.

He reached the gates without his head exploding in blood, for which he was grateful. The guard standing behind the security scanner, a bulky, clean-shaven guy with a ground-in frown, looked at the flag curiously.

"What's that all about, then?" he asked.

"I'm here to surrender," replied Theaker. "I'm a publisher. My name is Stephen William Theaker. I'm the publisher of Silver Age Books, and of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. I've been on the wrong side, and I want to join Navaroni. He had your men try to kill me last month. He thought I would be against him, but he's wrong. I go where the talent is, and everyone else has lost it. Can I come in?"

"I'll have to talk to the manager. Could you just wait here for a moment please?"

He was one of the politer murderers you might meet, Theaker thought. He wondered with a smile if they had had any customer service training since re-opening the store. "No problem. I've got nothing else to do."

He sat down on the steps and waited while the Letterman talked into a walkie-talkie. A response buzzed out from it.

"Okay," said the guard. "You are on our list, but since you've turned yourself in I don't have to kill you right away. If you come inside, we'll

send a message to HQ to let them know we have you in custody."

"That's very good of you," said Theaker, cringingly over-polite as usual. "Thank you very much."

The Letterman waved him through the security scanner. "Okay, you're clean. Follow me."

Frightened-looking shoppers did their best not to watch Theaker being led through the ground floor and up the central stairs to the first floor. He tried to give them a reassuring smile, but any that caught his eye looked quickly away in shame. "Don't worry," he called cheerfully. "I'm a traitor, not a victim."

The gate was opened to let him through, and the guard returned to his post at the door. Waiting on the other side of the gate was a smartly-dressed fellow, wearing a suit rather than the usual red-and-black outfit – though his shirt was red and his tie and suit were black, so he didn't clash with his colleagues. He wore steel-rimmed glasses and had no facial hair except a small goatee beard.

"Mr Theaker," he said, sounding like the cat who found a mouse swimming in his milk. "What a pleasure to meet you. My name is Simon Xinon." He then spelt out his name in a plummy accent which Theaker assumed he had laboured hard to acquire, then looked his guest up and down. "Not quite as impressive as I had expected."

"Well, thank you," said my publisher. "I've been in hiding, you know. It wasn't easy to get dressed up. And I've always preferred a rather scruffy look."

Xinon shrugged. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I meant physically, though, rather than the way you are turned out. Did you really take care of Sandra Lowill?"

"Sandra Lowill? Did I meet her at a bus-stop, and take her leave outside Maplin Electronics?"

Xinon nodded.

"Well then, yes I did. I had a bit of help from a friend, but I'd like to think I did most of the work."

Theaker was an old hand at taking credit for the ideas of others, and he thought it would stand him in good stead here. They might resent him having defeated and killed their fel-

low Letterman, or Letterwoman, but the respect it earned him was essential. He needed them to believe he was someone worth the effort of recruitment.

"Interesting," said Xinon. "I think that our great and glorious leader would like to meet you. The order to kill you came directly from him. It still stands, in fact, so don't be tempted to give me too much backchat, Mr Theaker."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"Good, good. Follow me, then." He led Theaker away from the stairs and into the lift. "He wanted you dead, as I understand it, to hamper any attempts your man Howard Phillips might make to spoil our plans, but that's no longer an issue." He pressed the button that would take them to the basement level.

"No longer an issue? Is Howard dead then?"

"He might be, I don't know. But it doesn't matter any more: he can't block our plans because our plans are complete!"

They emerged from the lift. Apart from the positioning of the outer walls and the pillars that held up the ground floor, the basement was utterly unrecognisable. Completely stripped of shelving, books and tills, the walls were lined with weapons and the room dominated by a huge machine which reached up to the ceiling. Three men tended to it, clipboards in hand.

"Impressive, isn't it?" said Xinon.

"I don't get it," said Theaker. "Where are all the soldiers? I've only seen about eight of you people in here, plus these three scientists. But you've regularly sent out raiding parties of twenty people."

"I said it was impressive," he replied. He waved to the three scientists. "We're ready to go."

They bustled around the machine, fiddling with knobs here and there, while Xinon looked on like a proud father.

"Are you ready to see something really special?" he asked. "It's a good job I'm covered either way – if you'd seen this without joining us I would have had to kill you; if you don't join us I was supposed to kill you anyway."

"That's reassuring!" Theaker expostulated. "I hope it'll be worth the threat of death."

"Oh, it is."

The three men stepped away from the machine and pulled sunglasses from their pockets.

"Have you got any?" asked Xinon, putting on a pair of his own. "Best close your eyes if not."

As a bright light began to emanate from the centre of the machine Theaker took his advice, closed his eyes and, for good measure, put his arm in front of his face and turned away. As the noise of the machine rose in time with the brightness, he moved his hands to cover his ears. He began to feel as if he were in a train tunnel and so he opened his mouth to relieve the perceived pressure. In seconds the light and sound built to a crescendo, and then cut out entirely.

He put his arms down and opened his eyes to see the last thing he had expected – a pair of wooden double doors set into the front of the machine. Xinon stepped forward and pulled them open to reveal a rather plain corridor.

"Shall we go through?" he asked, and waved Theaker forward.

What else could Theaker do but go through the doors? He had no idea where they would take him. He had read my novels of alien planets, far future times and devastating hallucinatory episodes and so he knew many of the dangers that might await him through those apparently innocuous doors, if they were even there. But he had to do it: he had to take the chance. If he didn't, he would fail in his mission. If he didn't, he would be dead within seconds. His heart in his mouth, he grasped it firmly between his crooked teeth and stepped through the doors.

Xinon followed him and then closed the doors. Theaker turned in time to hear a little fizzle and see a light beside the door turn green. He laid his hands on the brass handles of the doors to investigate.

"Don't do that," warned Xinon, placing his hands upon Theaker's, a gesture that made Theaker very uncomfortable, as Xinon had probably surmised it would. "There's nothing on the other side. Not now."

Theaker released his grip upon the handles and shook off Xinon's hands. "Where are we? I take it we're not in Birmingham any more. This isn't human technology. Are we on a space ship or something?"

Xinon laughed. "Or something. Follow me."

They were in the British Library, in the basement. Xinon led Theaker up a stairwell and into the main building. Even in the circumstances Theaker could not help gasping. It was the first time he had ever visited the august seat of England's literature. Though militia men trained by the dozen in amongst the shelves and counters, the majesty of centuries past shone from its shelves.

"Do you understand now?" asked Xinon.

"I think I do," said Theaker. "This explains your apparently extraordinary numbers. You have a relatively small force, perhaps a thousand men and women, with a skeleton staff at each branch. When you become aware of a rival bookseller you send troops through to that particular city or town. No one realises that there are in fact so few of you."

"Exactly," Xinon replied. "Upon taking control of Winterstones, we had the transportation machinery installed in each branch with the staff to work it, and then ferried our Lettermen hither and thither as necessary."

"I had wondered how you had recruited such a large army without anyone knowing about it."

"Oh, some people knew," he laughed. "But even then we had Shakespeare's Folios. They dared not move against us."

He led Theaker further into the world of the Letterman, taking him up and up through the library until they reached what had once been the office of the head of the British Library.

"It's now Navaroni's office," said Xinon. "He wants to see you now. I'll wait out here." He leaned in to Theaker's ear. "Guy's a fucking psycho."

Theaker nodded and went inside.

* * *

It hurts me somewhat to write this scene. For one thing, these are my

memoirs, and it's frustrating to only have a second-hand account of such important events. And for another, I can't believe that Theaker got to meet my archenemy (for this adventure, at least) before I did. But those were difficult days, and sacrifices had to be made!

Navaroni was sitting behind a large mahogany desk, empty except for a computer monitor, keyboard and mouse. The computer itself was tucked under the desk, something guaranteed to drive Theaker mad. It was exactly the set-up he had at his own desk, for lack of space, and seeing it here reminded him of all the times he had banged his toes against his own base unit, and the subsequent seconds of worry as he waited to see if his improperly mounted second hard drive had been jolted enough to make the PC crash.

Navaroni got up with a smile and held his arms out.

"Stephen Theaker, Stephen Theaker!" he said with great excitement. "Fucking great to meet you! I think we are going to be friends. Great friends. All those fuckers don't stand a chance if we team up. We'll ream those bastards."

"Right," said Theaker, failing to avoid a hug. The smell from Navaroni almost knocked him out. This was clearly a man who did not wash enough, and was quite possibly incontinent. Perhaps the defecating on authors' photographs wasn't actually deliberate, Theaker mused, trying, as he always did, even at the most inappropriate times, to take some small pleasure out of an excruciating moment. "We'll show 'em all." The thing he hated most about himself – the thing he hated most in other people – was the forced jocularity he slipped into in social situations. He liked to think he knew himself, and was surprised to find in such situations that he didn't know himself as well as he had thought.

Navaroni took a step back to have a good look at him. "I'm glad we didn't kill you, my man. You ever publish any books about gay vampires?"

The question didn't catch Theaker by surprise. He had had time enough during the weeks of writing in the bunker to familiarise himself with

Navaroni's strange passions and obsessions, and had actually gone so far as to read the books we had taken as reading matter from the car we had stolen. He hadn't known when reading those books that the information was going to be particularly or personally useful to him. Like anyone, once you got a glimpse of Navaroni's soul, it was hard to look away. Anyone old enough to remember The Word will know what I mean – sometimes the most appalling and atrocious things in the world can be the most compelling. What's more, Theaker couldn't stop himself from reading, so he had had no choice in the matter. He was an information junkie who loved teletext with a passion second only to mine, who had his wife block his internet connection for twenty-two hours and forty-five minutes a day, who had lunch at McDonalds for three years just to read the free newspapers.

"Gay vampires? Who, me?" said Theaker incredulously. "No way. I hate that gay stuff. I'm into tough stuff. You know, Conan, Elric, Aubrey and Maturin. Real men with muscles fighting elementals and the elements, you know what I mean?" It took all his effort not to wink.

Navaroni nodded. "That's cool man, me too. Lovecraft and Poe are my main guys. That's what I call writing, none of that gay modern shit. I like straight-up horror in the classic mode. You get me?"

"I think I do," said Theaker. In his entire life there had only ever been two worse times to crack a joke: at his best friend's funeral and outside the operating room while his wife went under the knife for a burst ectopic pregnancy. On both occasions he had failed to avoid the temptation to make a wisecrack. (At his friend's cremation he had noted, "At least he's in a better place now. His flat was a craphole.") He felt a joke coming, but for the sake of the country he had to bury it. He had to take this moment seriously. He thought of Joey in Friends, explaining how he made himself cry when necessary. There was no hole in his pocket through which he could pluck hair from a sensitive place, but he could at least *imagine* something horrible being

done to that sensitive place. He imagined a miniature train steaming towards him, literally steaming, boiling hot smoke billowing from its smokestack – he imagined it passing between his legs, and how it would feel.

He looked Navaroni in the eye and said with the utmost seriousness. "Peter, I want to be on the winning side, and you've already won. You don't need me, but I can help. Now you're in control, it's time to get people used to you, rehabilitate your image. That's where I can help. I've worked in advertising" – to be precise, he had typeset the odd advert for his own magazine, but it was a lie that came easily, since he had used it so often to ease his way past market researchers in the streets of Birmingham – "and I can get you where you want to be." He pointed to his chest. "And that's in the hearts of the British public."

"Good man," said Navaroni, grinning with the intensity of a chimpanzee on crack cocaine. "Now, they tell me you have a magazine. You published that traitorous cocksucker Ramsten, but I won't hold that against you. Anyone can make a mistake. Let's talk some more about your magazine. But first, let's get them to bring us some tea."

Over tea they did talk about the magazine, and Theaker said he would truly appreciate the opportunity to publish Navaroni's work.

"Everyone else seems to be losing it," he said in explanation. "It's like writer's block is affecting the whole country."

"It's so true," said Navaroni, slapping his hand on the table. "Horror fiction is so far up its own arse that no one knows where to take it any more."

"And that's where you come in."

They clinked tea cups.

Navaroni adopted a more confidential tone. "You choose to publish me, and you're going to be on to a winner, Theaker. No one can sell a book in England without my permission. Well, we're working on something that'll make sure no one in England, maybe even the world, will even be able to write a book without my permission. What do you think about that?"

"Sounds pretty cool," said Theaker.

er. "Pretty cool, pre-et-ty cool." He had made a small joke after all, a nod to Curb Your Enthusiasm. Mentally he kicked himself, but he thought he had got away with it. Anyway, they were friends now. Navaroni gave his friendship easily: the problems came when one did not care to continue the friendship. Theaker felt that if he acted as if they were friends, they would remain friends.

"It's a virus that destroys creativity," said Navaroni. "But I'm immune. And I have medication to remove its effects. If people agree to write by my rules, they can have the medication. If they don't, well, they'd better find another job."

"Interesting," said Theaker. "The only problem I foresee is that creativity isn't limited to writers, or to artists, or to any particular group of people. This virus will affect people in every walk of life. Bricklayers combining bricks to form structurally-sound patterns, cleaners sweeping floors, mechanics bringing cars back to life. Every person in the country, signing their John Hancocks, adding their little flourishes. As Roland Barthes said, what is love other than the mutual composition of a romantic mythology? The virus will take all of that away. Love will die. Won't the country collapse?"

He shook his head. "The effects won't be as bad as that."

"Are you sure?" said Theaker. "People are saying it's so bad that it's already affecting us."

"That's rubbish," said Navaroni. "How could that be possible?"

Theaker went over to the computer. "Do you mind if I have a go?" Navaroni nodded. Theaker began to grumble. "You don't use the Dvorak keyboard layout? What is this, the 20th century? And your mouse pointer – you'll get RSI with it moving around so slowly. Turn it up to full speed and you'll only need to move your fingertips instead of your whole arm."

The fate of the country at stake and he still couldn't get off his hobby-horses!

Navaroni looked sad. "I'm actually classed as disabled, my friend. My fine motor skills aren't great. If my mouse pointer moved so quickly I

wouldn't be able to control it. What's the Dvorak layout?"

"It's a different layout of keys. The vowels are the home keys for your left hand and the most important consonants go under your right hand."

"Sounds great, but I can't touch type, so I don't know if it would help."

Theaker nodded. "I'm sorry to hear about your physical problems." He said it with as much sincerity as he could muster. This explained why Navaroni put so much of his creative efforts into producing this silly anthologies – he lacked the physical stamina to grind out a novel. In a few moments Word was launched and ready to go. "Okay, then, Nick, look at this."

Theaker tried to write a few sentences.

If he went back there yesterday in time he would know that tomorrow was the back end of when he could arrive in that state of being a man of his word, his word and his power; he was a powerful man of the world and his word.

"You see," said Theaker. "I was never the best writer in the world, but I could at least write a sentence."

"What are you talking about?" said Navaroni with a laugh. "That looks great! You should carry on – I want to find out what happens next!"

After all his efforts not to laugh, Theaker now had to put his efforts into avoiding tears. Navaroni really couldn't see the problem. That meant it would be impossible to reason him out of releasing the creativity bomb – lacking the necessary critical faculties, he would never truly understand its effects, and so he would never realise its consequences.

Perhaps he would be able to find others in the organisation to whom he could appeal – Xinon had seemed reasonable enough for a cold-blooded evildoer – but for the moment things seemed bleak for England. Theaker crossed his fingers and thought of Howard.

Then an idea came to him. He got up from the computer and walked back to the other side of the desk, to show proper deference. Navaroni sat down in his chair.

"Listen, Nick. About winning the

hearts and minds of the English people, I've had an idea. Now, we've only just met, so I don't want to be too pushy."

"No, please, Stephen, go ahead," said Navaroni, leaning forward with interest. "I'd rather be loved than feared. I'd prefer to frighten them with my stories and anthologies, rather than with my soldiers and guns, if you know what I mean."

Theaker smiled and nodded. "I do, I do. Okay, this is what I'm thinking. You know how in some tribes the strongest fighters challenge each other to see who will be the leader?"

"Yes," Navaroni answered, his face darkening somewhat. "Just like jackals, or high school."

"That's it, yeah. Now why don't you issue a literary challenge: fight England's literary champion, but not on the field of battle. No, you fight him or her on the page. With the written word. England's literature is turgid, dead. I know: look at my magazine. More than half of what I publish is American, Australian, and so on. You couldn't help but win. Especially with your immunity to the virus."

Theaker actually had his doubts as to whether Navaroni was immune to the virus. Having spoken to the man, he had begun to speculate that, in fact, Navaroni was its most striking victim, that he had been living with its effects all his life. It made sense: if he was going to release the virus, he might well be the worst affected – he might be so badly affected that he had had it from birth, and had learnt to live with its effects, or at least had been blissfully oblivious to them.

Navaroni was doing his best imitation of thinking. Theaker wondered whether he should take the opportunity to kill him. He had never killed, and wasn't at all sure that he would be able. He had within him a raging, bubbling deep-rooted lack of empathy for others that would allow him to murder in the right circumstances, he had no doubt of that. The question was whether he would physically be successful in any attempt. Navaroni was weak, but Theaker was overweight and unarmed. In the time it would take him to beat Navaroni to death with the computer monitor the

Lettermen would have time to run in and out of the room a dozen times. What's more, if he killed Navaroni, who would that leave in charge? Would the organisation fall apart? Or would a more proficient tyrant with less restricted ambitions take control? Theaker dismissed the idea of killing Navaroni, at least for the moment.

Finally, Navaroni nodded. "That's not a bad idea, not bad at all. Who did you have in mind? James Herbert, maybe? Brian Lumley? Do Neil Gaiman and Clive Barker" – he spat after saying the name – "still live in England?"

Theaker shrugged. "I don't know. There's quite a lot of choice. What about Brian Stableford?"

Navaroni shook his head. "Sorry, I don't know who that is."

"Funnily enough," said Theaker, "when I lived in Reading I saw in a newspaper that the council wanted suggestions for naming a street, and I suggested they name it Stableford Road after him, since he lived there. I don't know if they ever did. I loved a series of his science fiction novels called the Daedalus Missions. Anyway, I thought you'd like to take him on, since he wrote the only gay vampire novel I ever read."

Navaroni was both intrigued and inflamed. "Which one?" His cheeks reddened beneath the scruff of stubble that spotted them.

"It was called *The Empire of Fear*. In that – get this – vampires actually sire other vampires by having anal sex with humans."

Navaroni's eyes went wide. He was speechless. He began to grind his teeth and screwed his hands into balls.

"There's probably a copy of it in here somewhere," Theaker said casually, waving at the shelves of the British Library that lay beneath their feet. "You should have a look at it. You won't believe the shit that's in there." He said nothing more, letting the image settle into Navaroni's brain.

"Sounds," said Navaroni at last, "like he really needs a beatdown."

"Definitely," said Theaker. "And he's regarded as one of England's best writers, so he would definitely count as a champion worth defeating.

On the other hand, he is getting on a bit now. It might look a bit unfair. Maybe even a bit oedipal."

The man who held literary England by the throat nodded his head in mock wisdom, afraid to admit that he did not understand what the word oedipal meant.

"There is someone else you could challenge," said Theaker, raising an eyebrow.

"Who?"

"Howard Phillips. He's still out there, you know."

Perfidious Plans and Charming Challenges

While Theaker infiltrated Navaroni's organisation, the rest of us got on with our own missions. We travelled by bus, by tram and train. It took a week for Navaroni to issue his challenge to me, because he wanted to make sure that everything would be perfect, and during that time we searched out the writers we knew, and handed them their assignments. To each we gave a breakdown of the single paragraph we wanted them to write, together with the email address to which we wanted them to send the finished sentences. It was an online account that we'd be able to access from anywhere we went, because no one knew where we would end up.

The writers of England were in a bad way. Bereft of their talents, in many cases having lost their only source of income, and often unsure of whether they were still mentally sound, many were finding it hard to cope. We found them in bars and in clubs, drinking away their sorrows and picking fights with the kind of people they really shouldn't have been picking fights with.

Others were just getting on with

their gardening and enjoying the cricket.

But wherever we went we sang a song of hope, of purpose. We gave them a goal. We made them believe that literary England could still be saved, if only they helped us.

We were taking a chance, of course. Any one of them could have decided to turn us in, but we tried to minimise the risk. We spent as little time as we could with each writer, and only approached each one once our escape routes were planned out.

We had many adventures along the way, but I won't bore you with them here.

J,J,T,L,M headed for London, going by way of Northampton, Reading, Oxford and Cambridge. The Mountain Drummer headed for Manchester and then Liverpool. Prince Vann returned to Birmingham, visiting en route Coventry and Wolverhampton, before heading down to Nottingham and Leicester.

Rather than listing every writer we contacted, I will trust to your proficiency with Google. For one thing, my publisher fears the legal consequences of revealing which authors refused to help – but you know who they are!

* * *

Eventually we began to feel that we had reached the point of diminishing returns. We might find more novelists, but things were getting too dangerous. We had been lucky to survive this long – almost a thousand novelists had taken up our challenge, or had at least pretended to – and it was time to regroup and wait for our plans to pan out. We returned our bunker in Warwickshire. I expected to be the first to get there, having had the least distance to travel from my last visit – to my fellow Silver Age Books writer, Michael Wyndham Thomas in Warwick – but was surprised to find the entrance locked from the inside.

I rapped on it with my knuckles, which was ineffective and painful, and then looked around for the rock we had been using. A few bangs on the cover later and I sat back to wait for an answer. I was sympathetic to the time it was taking. Climbing the eight metres of that ladder was a

chore at the best of times, and if you were asleep when the clank rang out and reverberated through the bunker, waking up could be a painful process. I had arrived at about seven in the morning, after spending the night cycling across the fields to get here, so whoever was in there might well be asleep.

I lay back and looked up at the sky. The morning sun was bright and there wasn't a cloud in sight. With the smell of grass in my nose and the dampness of dew wriggling into my back I could almost feel things were going to be all right, even if we failed to stop Navaroni. I might never be able to write another poem, or compose another piece of music, but at least the fields would still be here, and the cities. I would rest from my life's work. I could stop fretting about being creative and become a pure consumer. As long as the effects of the creativity bomb did not spread beyond Britain I would be able to read American books, listen to American music, watch American TV and films. How much had I ever appreciated what Britain produced anyway, outside of my own work? My favourite authors were Lovecraft and Kuttner, my favourite bands were Sonic Youth and the Pixies, my favourite TV shows were The X-Files and Lost, and my favourite movies were the Chronicles of Riddick and The Thing. Though I had read the horror genre from one end to the other nothing filled me with more fear than the idea of an evening spent watching EastEnders, Coronation Street and Only Fools and Horses, followed by a few pages of Jeffrey Archer in bed. Maybe it would be a good thing. Maybe Britain could start over. We would lose a generation of artists, but then start afresh with new sensibilities, ones that were less parochial, more ambitious, not rooted in the quagmire of social realism and everyday dullness.

That was my tiredness speaking, I knew. My body had had enough: it wanted to do nothing but continue to lie exactly where it was. And my brain wasn't helping: it was telling my body that it was exactly right, there was nowhere better to be, no purpose in moving, no need to push

on. I could no longer create, and so everything was over.

I gave myself a mental twist of the nipples, and forced myself to think of all the great and wonderful things being created by British artists. (I'm not making the mistake of using England and Britain interchangeably, by the way – I realise how that can be offensive to the bloodthirsty neighbours on our borders! No: though Navaroni had conquered only the literary world of England, leaving Scotland and Wales largely to their own devices, his virus would affect the whole of our island.) I thought of Damien Hirst, Brian Lumley, Alan Moore, M John Harrison, Mark E Smith, Philip Pullman, and of all those who worked on the new Doctor Who series: Russell T Davies, Steven Moffat, Paul Cornell, and so many other talented scriptwriters. I thought of Terrance Dicks. He might be almost 72, but writers keep going longer than anyone. Who knew what book he would write next year, if we could only stop Navaroni? What about Alec Abernathy? Would I be happy to die without having finally read his *Aardvark Attack*? I thought about Spooks, I thought about The IT Crowd, I thought about The Mighty Boosh.

We had too much to lose to give up now, my brain finally admitted, and it quickly passed the message on to my body. My body acknowledged the force of the argument, but pointed out that as yet no one had answered my knock on the bunker entrance, and so, really, there was no need to get up. I see what you mean, replied my brain, and promptly shut down all systems, sending me off for a blissfully pleasant nap.

I was gently awoken by a hand on the shoulder. I opened my eyes slowly, hoping that it was lady's hand, but it was not.

"Alec!" I said with a smile. "Nice to see you!"

He looked apologetic. "You seem disappointed, despite your apparent bonhomie."

I shook my head and got to my feet. "I don't mean to brag, Alec, but I *am* an internationally-famous rock singer. When I wake up, more often than not there's a beautiful woman

beside me, rather than a field full of cowpats."

"Well, thanks for at least pretending you were glad to see me, then," said Alec, brightening up. "You really will be glad it was me soon, though. I've got something very nice to show you."

He climbed back down the ladder and I followed, bolting the manhole cover behind me. Down in the bunker he made me a cup of hot, sweet, army tea (and for once in my novels, it really was army tea, found in the remaining stores of the bunker – normally any hot, sweet tea gets called hot, sweet army tea in my adventures, as a nod to the beverage regularly prescribed by the third Doctor for his companions after they had been through one of their many trials).

"I was done with my assignment fairly quickly," he began. "I was sent to Sunderland. The first novelist on my list told me that he had already been meeting regularly with other writers in the city to discuss what was happening, and what they could do about it. He took all the paragraph assignments I had and said he'd make sure they got to the right people."

"I hope he wasn't one of Navaroni's agents," I said, trying but failing to keep a slightly critical tone out of my voice.

If Abernathy was annoyed, he showed it only by squeezing the teabag a little harder than usual. "If he was, I was lucky to escape with my life. Not handing over the assignments would just have forced his hand. But I don't think he was. When I explained to him what we knew about the creativity bomb, he slapped his head in amazement, and said that it explained a lot. He was a huge fan of Tolkien, and especially of *The Lord of the Rings*, and upon his latest re-reading of it had noticed some unbelievable infelicities in the writing."

He passed me my tea. It was too hot to drink, but I was desperate enough to take a sip anyway. It scalded my tongue, but salvaged my heart. "The same thing that happened to *Romeo and Juliet*," I said.

"Yes, people have been noticing such things everywhere, more and more, the closer we get to the release of the bomb. Anyway, with the as-

signments in his hands, I had nothing more to do, so I headed back here. Because we had got straight on with the writing after I arrived, I hadn't had a chance to look around. On the train to Sunderland, thinking about what I'd already seen down here, and remembering the things my father, Douglas Abernathy, had told me about such places, I had a few ideas that I was keen to try out."

He led me out of our communal area and down towards an area I had not explored. He pointed to a broken chain and its partner padlock upon the ground beside a heavy iron door. "I remembered to pick up a hacksaw on my way back here."

"You are a surprisingly capable old fellow," I said to him approvingly. "I should have included you in my adventures sooner!"

He smiled. "I wanted to write a few novels about my father's adventures before getting on to my own. Maybe there will still be time for that. We'll soon find out."

We went through the door and into a very odd little room. Its floor area was barely two metres by three, barely large enough to be any use at all. Even the ceiling was abnormally low.

"What is it?" I asked. "A store-room?"

"Perhaps," he smiled. "They might have used it for that."

"But why padlock an empty store-room?"

"Good question!" He laughed. "But it isn't quite empty. Look up here." He reached up to the light fitting and twisted it firmly.

The wall before us slid away to reveal another storeroom.

This one, though, was larger. Much larger. It was the size of a small aircraft hangar. More interestingly, it was not empty – it was full from one end to the other of metal shelving. Most interestingly of all, those shelves were not empty.

"Wow," I said, stepping into the warehouse – that was the only word for it – and gazing at the machinery and boxes that lined the shelves. "What is all this stuff?"

He followed me in. "I haven't had a chance to look at everything," he said. "But my guess is that it's mostly outdated material and old files,

stuff that it wasn't worth the effort of moving until they needed to do it. They know where it is, so for the time being it was fine where it was."

"Is any of it useful?"

"Well, that's the very nice bit!" He winked at me. "Come over here." He led me over to a desk on which he'd laid out a few bits and pieces – a backpack, something that looked very much like a remote control, and a hunk of metal that looked like it might have come out of the Iron Giant's ear on a giant cotton-bud.

"This does look interesting."

"I haven't been able to test it," said Abernathy. "But I think that this is an EMP device. Remotely or directly detonated, it'll release an electromagnetic pulse that I think might take down Navaroni's shields."

"Now," I said with a raised eyebrow, "I am definitely intrigued!" A thought occurred to me. "Wouldn't the army have tried these already?"

He shook his head. "They might have tried, but I don't think they would have succeeded. From outside the shield it'll be as useless as any other weapon. But if we could get it inside the shield, and take the shield down..."

"Everything would be up for grabs."

"Exactly. I was thinking that Theaker might be able to get it in. While waiting for a train I saw him on the news, standing at Navaroni's side during his latest address."

"I saw that too," I replied with a smile. "The funny thing is that Navaroni doesn't realise how insignificant Theaker and his magazine and his publishing house are in the real world. Okay then, if you could get the EMP device ready and stowed in the backpack, I'll get ready to travel down to London. If Theaker can't do it, or if he doesn't make contact, or if he really has gone over to the other side, maybe something else will come up."

I was almost ready to set off, just enjoying a bit of grub and another cup of tea, when the noise of a knock reverberated through the bunker.

"I wonder who it is?" I said to Abernathy as I got up to answer it.

It was Prince Vann.

"Have you seen the news?" he asked, even before saying hello.

I shook my head. I should really have purchased a mobile phone for myself, given the situation, but carrying them irritated me too much (or at least it did until recently, when I discovered a special mobile-phone shaped pocket in my jacket).

"Navaroni has challenged you to a duel. A literary duel. To the death."

Waiting for the Creativity Bomb to Hit

"Excellent," I replied. "That accords with my plans perfectly."

I think he had expected me to take the news slightly harder.

"But Howard," he said, clutching my arm. "You can't write any more. Nobody can, except Navaroni. You can't possibly win."

I clutched his arm in response. "I'll be fine. I've got every novelist in England on my side, remember."

He looked downcast. "About that, Howard. I've been checking the hot-mail account every hour. There's nothing there. None of them are sending any paragraphs in yet."

"Don't worry. It's hard to write, but they'll get there in time."

"Or they're too frightened to write, or they can't any more, or we've been betrayed." He had obviously sprinted across the fields to get to the bunker as quickly as possible, and there was panic in his usually serene eyes.

I smiled. "I think you need some hot, sweet, army tea. Come down into the bunker and Alec will sort some out for you, okay."

He nodded, and I led the way inside.

Once he had a cup of hot, sweet, army tea in his hands I explained why I was confident of victory.

"All I have to do is get inside his

force field with the EMP device. I set it off, the army or the air force strike, and it's all over." Suddenly I saw a flaw in my plan. "Wait a minute, where's the duel to take place? I'd assumed it would be at the British Library, but if it isn't my EMP might well be useless."

"It's going to be at Wembley Stadium," he replied.

"But it isn't finished yet."

"I know, but that's what Navaroni wants, and people are worried about what he'll do if they say no."

"So the EMP is useless," said Abernathy. "We might knock out the shields at Wembley, and get Navaroni, but his organisation will be still in control of England's literature."

"Hmm." Prince Vann was thoughtful. "I received a text message from Theaker this morning. He had no other way of getting in touch from inside Navaroni's organisation, and it had taken him till now to get access to a computer, get online and send a text via Messenger. He only had a few seconds to type, but one thing it said was that the Literary Enforcement buildings are connected by a teleportation system – that's why their men seem so numerous – they send them wherever they are needed. I have a feeling that Navaroni won't drive through London to get to Wembley. He'll probably send a teleport receiver ahead, and then travel through there, limiting his exposure. If we could detonate the EMP when the teleport was open..."

"We might stand a chance of knocking out the shields back at the British Library," said Abernathy, clapping a hand upon his belly while he thought it through. "It's almost certain not to work," he observed, "and it relies on a series of far-fetched conjectures, but it's worth a try."

"Neither of you think I'll win the challenge fair and square, then?" I observed. "It's always nice to have a back-up plan, but who on Earth could write against me, one on one, I who have tamed tooth-faced beasts with my poetry!"

The two of them looked at each other. There was something the two of them already understood, to which I had not yet caught on. "What is it?" I asked.

Prince Vann spoke first. "Howard, you're not going to win."

I took a step back and looked down my nose at him. "What on Earth do you mean?"

Alec spoke this time. "You can't win. You've already lost. Surely that must be clear." I looked blankly at him. "We're already feeling the anteshocks of the creativity bomb, aren't we?" I nodded. "So it must go off, else how would we feel it?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad that's all you're worried about. Let me explain things, the way I see them. I may be wrong – it's happened! – but I don't think I am about this. There are many possible futures ahead of us – in some of them, perhaps most of them, the bomb goes off and we all lose our creativity; but in some of them it doesn't go off. We only began to see the effects of the bomb this year, right?" They both nodded. "Well, that's because it was only at that point that the balance of probabilities tipped against us. Now consider this: if it was certain that the bomb would go off, if the future was already fixed, it would always have been so, and we would not have noticed any change in Shakespeare or Tolkien: they would always have had those flaws. Do you see what I mean?"

They nodded, but uncertainly.

"The future can be changed. At the moment it looks like we'll fail, and the universe as it stands reflects that. If we succeed, everything will be back to normal. *Romeo and Juliet* will be as lovely as ever it was." I clapped them both on the shoulders, and grinned at them until they returned my smiles. "You should have mentioned this sooner. Anyway, there's not necessarily a link between the bomb and the challenge. He might set off the bomb even if I win! Did you think about that?"

* * *

It was time for us to head to London. It was only Wednesday, but if we turned up nice and early for the challenge Navaroni wouldn't be provoked into any rash attempts to get my attention.

As we made our way across the fields to the car Prince Vann had driv-

en here in – we had become slightly slack about our precautions, not having seen Lettermen in the streets around here yet – I asked Prince Vann about the details of the challenge.

"He challenged you on the news, reading out a statement. The BBC bleeped it as best they could – he didn't catch them by surprise this time. The two of you will meet in single literary combat at Wembley Stadium on Friday night, in front of an audience of thousands. He said that every novelist in England will be invited, and will attend under threat of execution, in effect putting the two of you in front of a jury of your peers. Each of you will then write a short story. The audience will watch as you write, then judge the winner. If you win, he says he will stand down his men and leave the country forever. If he wins, it won't make much of a difference, other than to somehow legitimise this whole thing in his eyes somehow."

"I don't see a problem with any of that," I said, with slightly more confidence than I actually felt. "After all, that's probably why Theaker organised this challenge."

"You knew?" said Prince Vann. "He said as much in his text message to me, but I didn't want to mention it. I thought you might think it was a set-up."

"Oh, it's a set-up alright, but Theaker is one of the few people on this planet who has read every word I've written, published and unpublished. He knows how hard it is to stick me in a situation from which I won't wriggle through, somehow. I have a knack. So we're playing this game like the England football team on a bad night – hoof it up to the front as if the pitch is a pinball machine and hope we get lucky. It's desperate, I know, but things usually work out well for me. Unlike England, we don't have the ability, right now, to do anything else. Theaker's done what I wanted – he's shoved me as close to Navaroni as possible, so that whatever trouble I cause might do some good."

* * *

There was no point in trying to sneak down to London. We took the car to the nearest train station, took a train

to Birmingham, and two hours of magazines later – would they be the last batch of magazines ever written in this country? – we arrived at Euston Station. We hopped onto the Underground and came out at the British Library without being accosted.

I waved goodbye to my two friends, since there was no point in them putting their heads into the lion's mouth along with me, and went up to the entrance. They watched from a distance.

The guard at the door shook my head as I approached. "You're not staying here, chum," he said. He turned and whispered into his walkie-talkie. "Okay, back down to the road. A car will be along to pick you up in a minute."

I looked back at my friends, shrugged and followed the instructions I had been given. They casually walked over to join me.

"What's going on?" asked the prince.

"I don't know. They don't want me there. A car's coming for me."

A few minutes later a limousine pulled up beside us. The driver got out and opened the door for us.

"Do you mind me asking where you're taking us?" I asked.

"Not at all, sir," he replied, not skipping a beat, as if he picked up amnesiacs every day of the week. "You're going to the Carlton."

"The Carlton, eh? Not bad."

I got inside, and my two friends joined me. A well-stocked minibar opened, from which I poured each of us a finger of whiskey.

"Looks like we're going to be put up in luxury until the big day," said Abernathy.

"Looks like it," I replied. "I don't know what Navaroni's game is – perhaps he thinks I can be turned as easily as Theaker. He says the challenge is to the death, but spares me to show his munificence and asks me to join the team. He's looking for love, acceptance, respect – all the things people get from their families. I didn't get that from my family, and neither did he."

"But you get it from being in a band," observed Prince Vann.

"Correct, and from my association with Silver Age Books. We've seen

from the very beginning that Navaroni is aware of the bond I share with my publisher, even when we are at loggerheads – we're like brothers, brothers of the head. He went to great lengths to break that bond, in order to break me. He failed, and now perhaps he has grown to envy it, if he did not already."

"Perhaps we can use that against him," said Abernathy. "He's obviously a sensitive man, deluded and megalomaniacal as he is. And if we cannot, anything that gets us a two-night stay in a five-star hotel is fine by me. And the first thing I'm going to do in there is have a bath. Those bunker showers kept me clean enough, but they left me feeling cold through and through."

Prince Vann and I gave our urgent agreement. A warm bath sounded unbelievably good right now. Friday would probably see us die, and would almost certainly leave me permanently bereft of my creative faculties, but the rest of Wednesday and the whole of Thursday would see me relaxing like a cow on an Indian train track. I would put on the snuggliest robe I could find, turn on the TV and order up room service.

My Enemy, My Mirror

On the day of the duel, I woke gently, my eyelids brushed with the golden rays of the dawn sun. I washed and dressed, deciding to wear an unbuttoned white shirt over a pre-faded Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife replica t-shirt, with a pair of black jeans. I had ordered them in via the hotel the previous day. It wasn't the smartest I had ever looked, but then this wasn't a day for a dashing look. Today I would be sweating, working and quite possibly dying. I didn't want my last thoughts to be about how uncomfortable my suit was around the armpits.

I went downstairs for breakfast, to find Alec Abernathy and all the mem-

bers of the Saturation Point waiting for me. J,J,T,L.M and the Mountain Drummer had joined us the previous evening, their missions completed. We hadn't discussed their efforts: it was only too likely that Navaroni was monitoring us. Even the hotel staff couldn't be totally trusted, since for one thing he was paying for our stay and for another he was entirely capable of taking, say, the concierge's family hostage for the week.

"Hi everyone," I said with a friendly wave. "We'll chat in a moment – I'll just get something to eat."

Prince Vann shook his head. "Don't be foolish, Howard. This would be a perfect moment for Navaroni to poison you in some way – some slow-acting but debilitating venom that would leave you incapable of winning the challenge."

"I thought you were certain I was going to lose?"

"You convinced me you had a chance. I want to maximise that chance. We picked up some croissants and pain chocolat from a nearby bakery, and tea from McDonalds." He pushed a plate piled high with French patisserie in my direction.

"Fair enough," I said, then winced. That was one of Navaroni's catchphrases, repeated maniacally after every death threat as if to show how reasonable he was. "Ooh, it's catching, isn't it?"

I sat down and began to eat.

"We've got a bit of a surprise set up for you in the lobby," said the Mountain Drummer.

I raised an eyebrow, my mouth too full to allow me to speak.

Everyone laughed.

The rest of my breakfast done, I took the tea with me into the lobby. I could not have been more pleased. Our band equipment was all there and set up, ready for us to play: the drums, the keyboards and computers, the guitars and the bass.

"You guys, this is fantastic."

"We thought we'd give it one last go," jangled J,J,T,L.M. "If I'm the only one in the band still able to play tomorrow, I'll give it my best shot. I'll try to keep your dream alive. I'll grow as many appendages as necessary. But I want something to remember us by, something fabulous. I don't

want my last memories of the band in action to be those nasty squabbles we had before you travelled down to Wales.”

“Neither do I,” I said enthusiastically. “Have you cleared it with the hotel?”

The Mountain Drummer nodded. “In fact, and don’t let this put any pressure on you, it’s going to be televised by the BBC.” He pointed to the camera discreetly watching us from one corner. The cameraman gave us a little wave. “They’re covering the entire day, as if you were playing in the FA Cup. Officially they have to stay neutral, but I think you know whose side they’re on.”

“So one last blowout, then,” I said. “One gig to show them what we can do, before we forget how to do it forever. Alright, then, let’s do it. Let’s show the world how the Saturation Point rocks, and let’s show Navaroni what he has to face! We’ll send him scurrying back to the USA like the rat he is!”

We went to our instruments, while Alec took a seat and pinned his ears back.

For the next hour we rocked hard. We took no risks: improvisation was impossible, given the ante-effects of the creativity bomb. So we played the tracks we had developed most fully: “World Behind Your Eyes”, “The Twisting Envy”, “My Dear Space-man” and “Sanity Towel”. We felt it was going well, so then we went straight on to a half dozen cover versions on which we had practised our sound in the past: “Where Are You Baby?” by Betty Boo, “Dreams Burn Down” by Ride, “Windowlicker” by the Aphex Twin and “Home and Dry” by the Pet Shop Boys, ending with “This Town Ain’t Big Enough for the Both of Us”.

I had such fond memories of Sparks performing that last song on The White Room with Bernard Butler, a performance I had watched a dozen times, partly for the brilliant combination of electronics and wailing guitars, but also for the exquisitely sexy expression on the lady percussionist’s face. She had seemed to derive physical, sensual pleasure from banging those chimes (I think

they were). Hence the song always made me feel tingly.

The other songs we played were all from English artists, something we did to celebrate our country’s now-fading creativity, but we made the exception for the Sparks track, given how apposite the chorus was to our plans for the day.

* * *

Unfortunately, though it did wonders for our morale, and indeed for that of every English man and woman not working for the enemy, our gig hadn’t sent Navaroni packing. We arrived at Wembley to be told that the challenge was very much on. Prince Vann stayed with me as my trainer, while the others headed for the Royal box, to watch the proceedings from the best possible vantage point.

I watched them go with a heavy heart. Getting the band together had been so much hard work. It was heartbreaking to think of it all going to waste. The only consolation was that our impromptu performance of the morning had been broadcast and recorded. If the creativity bomb went off, at least I’d still be able to appreciate my past achievements. Well, I hoped I would. When we listen to music, how much does our appreciation of it depend upon the creativity of our own ears and brains, the way we make sense of the sounds we hear? I remembered the first time I used Music on my PlayStation, and learned how to build up beats and tracks – one of my earliest musical experiences, not having previously played an instrument since an abortive attempt to learn the violin as a twelve-year-old. It had ruined electronic music for me for years, since I could now hear the blocks and beats and phrases that made up the tracks, whereas I had up until then fondly imagined (on an emotional level, without having really applied conscious thought to it) someone like the Aphex Twin to have a million fingers and be capable of playing every note on the keyboard simultaneously. My love for electronic music soon returned of course, but that was because my brain settled back into hearing the music rather than the craft.

Goodness me. If the creativity

bomb left me unable to listen to music, as well as unable to make it, my friends would soon be dealing with their second funeral in the space of twelve months.

Prince Vann and I were shown to the away team’s changing room, which I supposed made sense. Navaroni was at present living in London, and we were from Birmingham. Or should we have stayed in the home side’s changing room, since we represented England? I don’t think Navaroni saw it that way: with any luck he saw it as two champions fighting it out to rule a tribe. Theaker had been smart, for once. In a straightforward battle with Navaroni and his flunkies I could not have won. I probably wouldn’t win this battle. But at least I’d get close enough to do some damage.

As a matter of fact we already knew that Navaroni himself didn’t even plan to use the changing room, other than as a hangout for the guards. We had learnt from the BBC’s coverage of the build-up to the event that Prince Vann’s supposition about the teleportation device had been correct: one now stood on the pitch, from which Navaroni would doubtless emerge when the time was right.

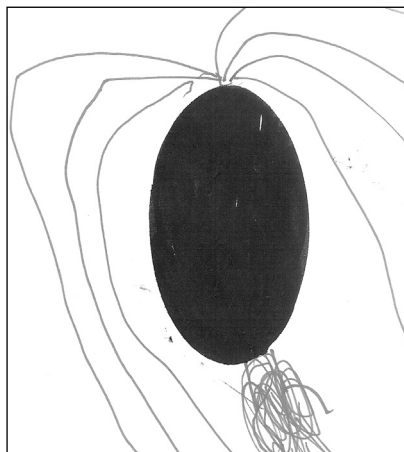
Prince Vann got me to sit down on a bench. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Not too great,” I admitted. I had carefully avoided any attempt at writing since the challenge had first been made. I knew already how hard it would be: there was no point in convincing myself I would fail before I even got to the stadium.

“Just focus on the job,” he said. “You’ve got your [EMP device] into the stadium. That’s the main thing. From here I’ll take it into the [under-pitch heating tunnels]. I’ll [get it close enough to affect the teleporter] and then get back upstairs to watch your battle.”

I’ve placed some of what he said in brackets because that was how I understood what he said, rather than the words he actually uttered. If you had been listening in on us, as no doubt Navaroni’s men were, this is what you would have heard:

“Just focus on the job,” he said.



"You've got your brains into the stadium. That's the main thing. From here I'll take it into the hot zone. I'll set it to boil and then get back upstairs to watch your battle."

I nodded. "Sounds good."

"Right, Howard, time for our pre-flight checklist. PDA?"

"Check."

"Fully charged, and synched with keyboard software?"

"Check!" I had run into trouble with that in the past.

"Foldaway keyboard?"

"Check." I loved that keyboard. Every time I opened it I was transported back to my schooldays, tapping away on my black Spectrum+, writing my first significant stories and poems in Tasword 2.

"[Remote control?]" Our eavesdroppers would have heard him say, "Magic wand?"

"Check!" I had it concealed in my sleeve, ready to hit the button at the right time, if one ever presented itself.

"Brilliant. Okay, keep your composure and we'll have a chance."

He clapped me on my shoulder, slung the backpack over his, and disappeared. I got to my feet and set off down the tunnel.

I emerged into Wembley Stadium alone, but the cheers that greeted me made me feel like the most-loved man in the universe. Tentatively, I waved to the crowd. It was so immense that I couldn't make out individual faces. My brain kept telling me to look for repeating patterns, so that I could work out where the effects trickery had been used to simulate the presence of so many people, as happened in movies, TV shows and com-

puter games. But of course there was no trickery: they were all here to see me take on Navaroni. It wasn't completely full – the unfinished construction made that impossible – but there must have been over fifty thousand people in the stadium. I thought of all the authors in amongst the rest. Would they be willing me on, or scoffing that I had been chosen to represent them? I could not blame them if they were. If a true literary champion of England had been needed, my choice of an instant would have been Alan Moore. Not just highly-regarded, not just the best writer in his field in the present day, but the best writer the *world* had ever produced in his field. And a bit of his magic would have come in handy. I wondered if J,J,T,L.M had managed to make contact with him in Northampton. Help from Glycon would be very welcome today – anything to remove the weight that now crushed my mind like the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak! I hadn't even asked it to start writing yet, but my mind knew that it was on the cards, and was letting me know what it thought about the prospect.

In the centre of the football pitch was a stage of the type they would usually drag out for European Cup winners and the like to pose on. It covered most of the centre circle, with the teleportation equipment squatting behind it. A half dozen Lettermen stood around, confident within their force field. Two BBC cameramen watched them with the careful eyes borne of days on the battlefields of a dozen countries.

The roar of the crowd drowned out my thoughts of failure. In the past I had fought for these people in secret. Now I was doing it in public. It felt pretty good to get credit for a change. We all have our little vanities.

I took my seat upon the stage, the force field being dropped for a second to permit my entrance. I unfolded my keyboard and plugged my PDA into it. I wriggled my fingers theatrically, waited for Navaroni to turn up, and tried not to think about how hard it would be to write anything.

Eventually the transportation device crackled into life and a pair of

wooden doors appeared in it. Two more of Navaroni's Lettermen came through, and then came Navaroni, accompanied by Theaker, who nodded almost imperceptibly in my direction. I studiously ignored the motion, to avoid giving him away. As the teleportation device closed, I cursed. Theaker had not been able to tell us whether Navaroni would have the creativity bomb with him or not. I hadn't wanted to detonate the EMP until I knew for sure that it was here – if I learnt that it was not here, we would need to use the teleportation device to get back into the British Library and get it before anyone had a chance to let it off.

One BBC man approached me and took up a position behind my right shoulder. The crowd cheered as my tiny, scratched black and green PDA screen appeared on the huge monitor at the far end of the stadium. I smiled and leant back – it would actually be easier to type using that huge blow-up than to use my actual screen, especially now that night was coming on. I looked up at the moon, shining away in a cloudless sky. Would I feel tomorrow what I felt for it now? Would I even be able to understand what I had once felt?

Navaroni came over to me and smiled. "Hello, Mr Phillips," he said, with all the charm of a snake's rotten corpse. "I think we've both been waiting a long time for this encounter!"

"Oh, yes," I said. "Yes, oh yes."

"You might be interested to see that I have raised the stakes." He took a small controller from his pocket. It had a big red button in the middle, so there was no mistaking its intent.

"What's that?" I asked, trying to seem uninterested.

"I call it the writer-wiper," he replied. "But some call it the creativity bomb. This isn't it," he said quickly, waving it around as if the fate of all Britain didn't depend on that button not being pressed. "This is just the remote."

That meant I would have to take a chance. I would wait until he restarted the transporter and hope that I could fry the release mechanism of the virus container while frying the rest of his base. I had no way of

knowing whether it would work. The creativity bomb could have been in Trafalgar Square for all I knew. But we had to take the chance we had.

Navaroni sat down to the table, and put a laptop upon the desk, an oily grin upon his face. The other BBC cameraman took up position at his shoulder, watched closely by the Lettermen.

* * *

At this point there should be a substantial section about the duel between Navaroni and I, but the memory is so painful, that it is reduced to mere sentences. (I'll add more for the paperback edition, if I am able.)

* * *

In summary: Navaroni could write crap with little or no effort. He had been doing it all his life.

For me, even writing crap was a struggle. As floods of tears fell down down my cheeks I had to let go of my pain, let go of my fear, and let go of my self. I achieved a zen-like state in which I didn't care that what I was writing was rubbish. I removed myself – literally my *self* – from the equation and let my subconscious do the writing automatically.

Every letter I typed drew a cheer from the crowd.

Each cheer built the madness in Pacione's eyes.

As the madness rose his fingers started to twitch.

As his fingers twitched he lost the ability to write.

As he clenched his fists and ground them into his forehead I pushed on, through letter, word, paragraph and page.

In short, Navaroni and I fought. And I won.

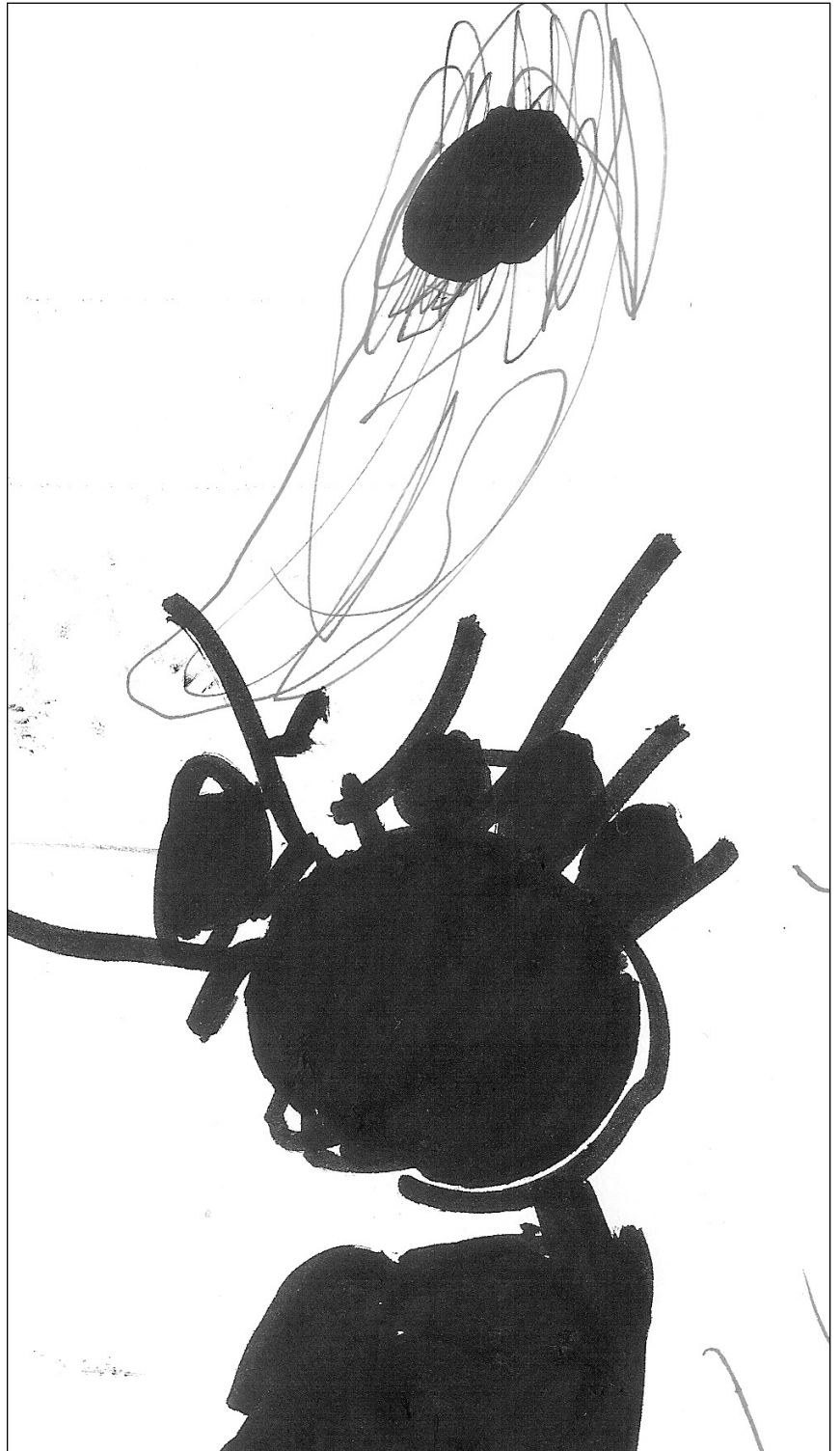
* * *

Navaroni turned away from the crowd that was chanting my name, his brow twisted, his face sweating, his mouth ripped into a snarl.

He put his hand over the release switch.

"You can't release the bomb yet!" said Theaker, running forward to stop him.

"Why not?" asked Navaroni. "It's ready."



"But it was supposed to go off at Halloween."

Navaroni looked at him oddly. "I don't know how you know that. That was the original plan. But I can't let Howard Phillips win this challenge. The bomb goes off now."

"He's already won," said Theaker desperately, gripping his arm. "It's too late. Live up to your end of the deal."

Navaroni was obviously tempted

to slap him away, but feared the embarrassment if the attempt failed. He waved one of his men towards Theaker and another towards me. I was kicked to the ground, while Theaker was knocked unconscious with the butt on a gun.

Navaroni looked back at me. "If I don't kill the two of you now, it's just because I want to see you coming to beg at my feet for medication. Desperation will force you to bend your

knee to my literary genius." He looked up at the crowd as his words echoed around the stadium. "All of you will. Every writer. Every musician. Every painter. Every dancer. Everyone who wants to cook a fancy meal or walk a funny walk. You'll all need me."

He slapped the switch, and began to laugh. "It's almost a relief to do that. Part of me didn't want to do it, but it's better to be strong, isn't it?" He shook a fist at the crowd. "No one will ever write a novel in England without my permission!"

He nodded to one of his Lettermen and they fired up the transportation device. As the double doors swung open, I gripped the remote control in my pocket and detonated the EMP.

* * *

As the shields at the British Library fell, the army and the police went in, assisted by a smattering of MI:5 agents, and altogether their numbers were overwhelming. Navaroni's men had an advantage in that they didn't care about any damage done during the fight. Every bit of damage done would cement their shameful place in history. The armed police tried not to concern themselves with collateral damage to the books, but it was difficult.

Nevertheless, Navaroni's men were few in comparison to the brave souls of the Metropolitan Police, and they soon capitulated.

Once the base was captured, it was just a matter of waiting for the men and women in the Literary Enforcement buildings to give in. They were able to switch from one building to another, but that was it. They had no obvious way out, nowhere else to go. Many just let their shields down and turned themselves over to the police. Others skipped from base to base like madmen, hoping to find one that was not surrounded by police.

With the British Library back in the hands of the authorities, England's literary heritage was safe. But what would become of its future?

* * *

Navaroni turned to me, scowling. "I don't know how you did that. But

you've just stopped me going back to my base. No one in England will ever write again without my help. You haven't changed a thing." He took a rifle from the hands of the closest Letterman and pointed it at me. "Actually, I take that back. It did change something. It made me want to kill you."

He raised the gun to point it at me.

From where I lay on the floor there was nothing I could do to stop him. Rolling away would be pointless, and there wasn't time to get to my feet. But fate handed me a few moments more of life – the unarmed Letterman was muttering intently into his radio, distracting Navaroni.

"What is it?" shouted Navaroni.

"Sir, the shields at the British Library have been knocked out. Everything in the building is on the fritz. They think it was something to do with what happened here."

Navaroni shot him in the chest, and turned back to me.

"You think you've won? The Chaste will never let you win, Howard. Not in the end. They won't let any of us win." Once more he raised his gun to shoot me.

Then, from the corner of my eye I saw something going on in the audience.

"Wait, Peter. Look at the crowd. Look at how ineffective your creativity bomb was."

Every member of the crowd had a single piece of paper, and they were lifting them up.

On each piece of paper was a single word.

Individually they were meaningless, but there were fifty thousand people in the crowd. The crowd was holding up a novel. It was the most incredible sight of my life. The TV cameras had been knocked out by the EMP, but the next day's newspapers found photographs from somewhere: there must have been at least one cameraman in the stadium whose camera didn't get fried.

"You'll never stop us writing," I shouted at Navaroni. "If it takes a million of us to write a novel, we'll work together and do it. It's been a long time since this country has been conquered. You did a good job. But it couldn't hold. We'll fight you with

pen and paper, we'll fight you with computers and keyboards, and if we have to we'll fight you with chalk and slate. You can't win. You can't ever win."

He looked around the stadium, looked at me, looked at his Lettermen, and looked at the gun.

This time he didn't point it at me. He pointed it into his own mouth and pulled the trigger.

Blood splashed out of the back of his head and up into the sky. For a moment, the moon seemed to weep red, red tears of blood.

A Slap-Up Dinner!

I ran over to Theaker, and gently shook him awake.

"Are you okay?" I asked as his eyes opened.

At first they swam, the pupils wandering like snowflakes in the wind, but then both focused upon me and he nodded.

"Great," I said with true joy in my voice. "Now let's hope the EMP stopped the virus being released."

Theaker swallowed, and then found his voice. "There's an easy way to check. Go over to your keyboard and try to write."

He was right.

I went over, sweat pouring from my brow, and sat down before my PDA.

I put my fingers upon the keyboard and began to type.

It all began the day I met my dead friend.

The raucous cheers from around the stadium surely matched any that had ever greeted an England goal! Either the balance of probable futures had shifted and the creativity bomb was now unlikely to ever be released, or we had stopped it forever. Whichever it turned out to be (and, in fact, it was the latter – the police discovered the device following their raid on the British Library, and based upon the information we had provid-

ed took extreme care in disposing of it safely), I knew one thing: I could write again! And so could everyone else! The future of English literature was assured!

In the weeks to come, some mysteries remained. When Navaroni died, we lost our chance to discover where he had acquired the technology that had made his reign of fear possible. I had my suspicions, given his mention of the Chaste, but that counted for little, since I knew absolutely nothing about them. Their motivations, their origin and their nature were all absolute mysteries to me, as they were indeed to everyone I had ever asked about the matter (or at least so they said). None of his Lettermen knew a thing, and if they did they were probably only going to admit it to the secret service after weeks of friendly interrogation, the results of which I would be unlikely to ever learn. From what the papers said, it seemed that the transportation devices had been shipped to the UK, but no one could say from where. There was no record of the ships on which they had been carried, no record of them passing through customs. It was as if they had simply materialised inside the trucks that had delivered them to the branches of Winterstones.

* * *

Since Theaker had played such an important part in this adventure, I thought it only appropriate to end it in the way he ended all of his novels (the downbeat ending of *The Fear Man* excepted): with a slap-up dinner!

Everyone met up at the Australasian Bar. It seemed the right place to go, if only because it was a good place to remember the friend we had lost, and all the people who had died during that horrible, horrible year.

After I finished placing my order, the waitress asked for my autograph.

"No problem," I said. Reaching into my jacket pocket for a pen I felt the sharp edge of something scratch my hand. I signed the autograph and then took it out: it was the keycard with which Laura had entrusted me all those months ago. I held it out to her.

"Your keycard," I explained.

"Here's hoping you need it again soon. Thanks for trusting me."

There was some doubt about what would happen to the Winterstones buildings. Navaroni had bought them legally: they formed part of his estate. There was some talk of the government nationalising them, but that would take time.

Then my half chicken and fries arrived, pushing away all maudlin thoughts. I tucked in.

* * *

My readers might have noticed something unusual about this book. So far it is the first in which I have not made any progress in my quest to create the perfect band – or so you think!

After dinner was over I took Alec Abernathy to one side.

"What is it, Howard?" he asked, concerned.

"Don't worry, it's nothing bad," I replied, smiling. "Look, my experience is that my adventures usually bring me into contact with someone who will join the band."

"The band? Band of what?"

I was rather incredulous. "You didn't know that we're a band? Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point? You saw us perform at the hotel, for crying out loud!"

He smiled. "Sorry, Howard, I didn't realise you were a proper band. You have to remember that I'm fifty-nine years old, you know. I'm not up to date on pop music. I just thought you were like Doc Savage or The Shadow, gathering together a group of likely lads to help you out in your adventures."

It was my turn to smile. "Well, I'll admit they have a dual purpose! But in our day jobs, J,J,T,L.M plays bass, Prince Vann plays guitar and the Mountain Drummer... well, you can probably guess that one."

"And you want me to join? I don't play any instruments, Howard. And to be honest, it seems like you guys lead pretty dangerous lives. I've got little Abernathy grandchildren relying on me for book tokens every Christmas, you know."

I was crestfallen. Maybe I had missed the musician I needed. Perhaps it was Navaroni himself – could I have saved him? But I doubted I

could ever have tolerated his presence in the band. I tried to think who else I had met, but no one of obvious musical talent sprang to mind. Perhaps it should have been Cornelius Gilligan? But even if he was still alive (vague as that term was in regard to his existence), what band could function with a member who drifted in and out of reality in that way?

"Oh well," I said, resignedly. "Maybe I put too much faith in this whole band thing. I've always assumed I was being led into these adventures somehow, but maybe the band has just been the way I've made sense of and coped with what would otherwise have been terrible and inexplicable events."

Abernathy was thinking. "I used to play around with a science kit, making the odd sound here and there," he said, trying to offer me a bit of encouragement. "You can get some pretty weird-sounding stuff out of a circuit board, you know."

I looked up at him with renewed hope. "Tell me more about this weird-sounding stuff!"

We headed for Maplin Electronics to buy a circuit board and a bunch of electrical components. It had been such a key location in these events – if Theaker had died there, right at the beginning of Navaroni's attack, the outcome would have been so very different.

As soon as I had heard Alec at work on his circuit board it was all decided. Those sounds just had to be part of the Saturation Point. We agreed that he would not tour with us, once we were up and running, or adventure with us (unless we absolutely needed his help), but he would stay at home and tinker with his electronics, providing us with sounds and gadgets that we could incorporate into our sound. He would be the Brian Eno to our U2, the Dave Fridmann to our Mercury Rev, the James Ford to our Klaxons.

Where would our next adventure take us? Only time would tell – oh, and next year's novel!

HOWARD PHILLIPS WILL RETURN IN:
LIFE AND DEATH
ON A SPHERICAL SPACESHIP

Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown: You Can't Beat City Hall

John Greenwood

Having become addicted to a mysterious game hidden in his spaceship's on-board computer, Newton Braddell, diarist and man of reason, becomes an unwitting exile on the oddly Earth-like planet of Kadaloor. While travelling with his android servant Eunos in search of a cure to a brain disease he has contracted through drinking infected water, Braddell and his robot friend find themselves stranded in a narrow, rubble-choked gorge.

I waited. For a long while nothing happened. Then something did happen, but it was not what I had expected. The rock did not lift into the air atop Eunos's mighty shoulders. Instead, a perfect circle of yellow light appeared on the boulder's surface, and a round door slid back to

reveal a hitherto unsuspected passageway within. From the doorway an attractive young woman wearing a silver boiler suit poked her blond head out.

"Come inside, quickly!" she said, beckoning to us both.

I looked to Eunos, astonished, but he was already clambering into the port-hole. Fearing that the door might suddenly close leaving me stranded, I rushed over and hoisted myself up into the boulder.

The young lady smiled winningly. "Right this way!" she said, and began to stride down a twisting corridor.

Recent misunderstandings led me to suspect that I might well be trapped inside a delusory universe conjured up by the microbial passengers in my brainpan. But our circumstances, however surprising, had an intangible quality of the real, a solidity that my nightmarish fantasies had lacked. If that were not enough to convince me of the tunnel's reality,

Eunos was present too, and seemed to accept the existence of this hidden world without hesitation.

"Where are we?" I asked him in a low whisper as I tailed behind him through the smooth-walled, circular tunnel.

"About a hundred yards northeast of the river gorge," was his reply.

The tunnel's diameter expanded as we progressed, so that within a few minutes we no longer needed to hunch over. I passed the palm of my hand over the surface of the wall, and realised that this was not the work of primitive chisellers, nor was it remotely possible that we were in a natural passage beneath the mountain. Some powerful machinery had been at work here, and I was reminded of my stricken ship, the *Tanjong Pagar*, and the monstrous drill that had been fitted to its nose cone by the well-meaning Bird People. No doubt all that remained now was a rusting hulk lost in the desert wastes.

During the time it took to reach the end of that winding passage, I had plenty of time to speculate about the nature of the humans who were able to carry out such a piece of engineering with such flawless results. At every point the walls of the tunnel were perfectly smooth, reflective and cold to the touch like marble, and although I did not take measurements, I had no doubt that the shape of the tunnel was uniformly circular. Air-conditioning, from vents hidden to the eye, warmed and refreshed me, and I felt my blood thawing slowly as we tramped along, dripping rainwater onto the floor. Illumination was provided from some unseen source through a tiny fissure in the ceiling which ran the entire length of the tunnel, allowing enough light for us to see exactly where we were going, even if we did not know what we would find when we got there.

Whoever had built this underground labyrinth, they were a thousand years distant from poor Marsiling, with his archaic superstitions and uncouth habits.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen!" announced a lugubrious, baritone voice from my Dover and Somerset. A man wearing the same reflective boiler-suit uniform, and a neatly trimmed and waxed moustache, stepped forward to greet us, as Eunos and I emerged through a hatch into a small, narrow room resembling an airlock. A further half dozen silver-suited compatriots brought up the rear, looking slightly awkward and apprehensive.

In retrospect it seems disrespectful to the memory of the man whose body we had only hours previously sent on his final journey, but in that moment I was overjoyed. At last! Here was a real human community, a society of my intellectual equals, technologically advanced, well-mannered and sanitary! I had feared that Marsiling was the best we could hope for, a sorry pinnacle of human achievement on Kadaloor. But the sight of these attractive, smartly-turned out fellows, snug in their underground realm, was a considerable relief, and for a moment I forgot all about my own transgressions against the rules of all decent human cultures.

But why had they opted to live out their days underground? Were these refugees from the war against the Punggol?

Our rescuer, who we now learned was called Miss Lavender, introduced us to the rest of the welcome party. Mr Orchard was the moustached chief of the group, and he took it upon himself to allocate us quarters within the underground city itself. Mr Orchard's moustache proved of moderate interest throughout my time in his company: from day to day it seemed to change shape and direction depending on his mood. Today each waxed bristle was pointed upwards in an auxiliary smile on his upper lip, above his real smile, which was curled slightly in amusement, perhaps at my own strange appearance. The hardships of our journey had taken their toll on my standards of personal grooming. By contrast, Mr Orchard was exquisitely turned out, his jet black hair slicked back from his tall, grand forehead, and his bushy eyebrows shaved into gentle, undulating curves, a fashion I found faintly unsettling.

Our new hosts all exuded that same air of graceful poise. From their appearance alone there was little else I could surmise about their origins. It was obvious enough that, from the small sample we had so far encountered, none bore any resemblance at all to the unmistakably oriental cast of Marsiling, or Eunos, who had been deliberately moulded to blend into the society he served. Were they of European descent? I could not say so with certainty. So few human faces had passed before my eyes in the preceding months that I no longer trusted my own judgment. Nor did it particularly matter, only I could not help but wonder how closely these silver-suited people, who smiled and shook hands as I did, were my kin. Were they even of Earthly origin? The riddle continued to pester me.

"I hope these guest rooms are adequate," said Mr Orchard with a deep bow as we were shown two identical chambers, the walls of each draped in intricately embroidered tapestries, and strewn with soft, irregularly shaped furniture that resembled nothing more than beanbags made by a

modern artist. Given the weeks I had spent cooped up with Eunos on board the hover car, and later our wretched camping expedition into the mountains, our new accommodation seemed the reward of heaven everlasting. Eunos, of course, given his nature, had no need for such luxuries, but I thought it easier to accept both rooms for the time being. The opportunity to explain Eunos had so far eluded me, and the android himself had become peculiarly taciturn since our encounter with the delightful Miss Lavender.

Sleep was my first priority, and it was many hours before I had sated myself with that precious commodity. When I was fully rested, and had instructed Eunos to remain discreetly in his quarters until otherwise advised, I decided to take up Mr Orchard on his promise to give me a fully guided tour of City Hall. For it was not only the mountain itself that bore that name: the inhabitants of City Hall were proud of their heritage, and that afternoon Mr Orchard treated me to a comprehensive history of that most fascinating human settlement.

Some of my presumptions were proved right: the city was indeed a masterpiece of civil engineering, which the Citihallians had built as a safe haven from the encroachments of those bellicose purple spheres, the Punggol. Here then was Kadaloor's Macchu Picchu, a whole culture hidden away from the depredations of unwelcome colonists. But the founding fathers of City Hall had gone one step farther than their counterparts in Peru, for their sanctuary was not merely hidden amongst the mountains, but inside the mountain itself.

Mr Orchard and I were admiring the colossal geo-thermal steam turbines down in the very bowels of the city, when I asked him how City Hall had come to be so named. At first he gave me a dumbfounded look, as though he could not believe someone of his own species had remained ignorant of such things. I had let the Citihallians believe that Eunos and I were explorers from distant lands, and this was true to a degree. They knew of my quest to locate the Red Hill Clementi, but not of my extra-terrestrial origins, nor had they yet

surmised that Eunos was more than he seemed.

"Well, of course City Hall lies beneath the ruins of what was once the greatest ancient civilisation of Kadaloor," Mr Orchard explained. "This whole continent, for miles around, was under the human yoke, and the mountain above us bore the seat of government, called City Hall by our ancestors after the building, known to all the world for its splendour, which was both its beating heart and its symbol. In later centuries the locus of power shifted elsewhere within the human territories, and City Hall became no more than a provincial capital, although one with an unrivalled architectural history."

"Do any of these structures still stand?" I asked

Again Mr Orchard eyed me curiously. I told myself that I would have to be more circumspect with my questions in future, at least until I knew I could trust these people with the secrets of my arrival from Earth.

"The war," he said simply.

"The Pung destroyed everything?"

He nodded sadly. "Not a trace remains. All that the Pung bombers could not raze, our forefathers tore down themselves, to disguise our presence here. They did not want to attract any undue attention, and nor do we. Any evidence of the Commonwealth is buried beneath many layers of rubble and volcanic ash."

"The Commonwealth?" I asked, startled by the translation provided by my Dover and Somerset. "Yes, of course," I added quickly. "The Commonwealth." The words held a fascination for me. Now the lost human civilisation of Kadaloor had a name. It became, in my mind, an alien Athens, the legendary ancient source of philosophy and science. As I was to discover later, in this I was partly mistaken. The subject seemed a sore one for my guide, so I let it drop, and allowed him to explain the workings of the steam turbines, which gave him far greater pleasure.

In short, the entire community of City Hall was powered by the heat from the millions of gallons of magma that boiled and swirled just metres below their streets. Natural caverns in the depths of the complex had been

purposely flooded, and the steam that boiled from their surface was the life force of the entire city.

Try as I might, I could not recall any similar method of harnessing the energy of the planet's core being used on Earth. It seemed at first glance a foolhardy venture, given the unpredictable nature of geothermal activity. But perhaps the men and women of Kadaloor had outstripped their Earthly cousins in this field of knowledge, and had tamed this awesome force of nature. I put the question to Mr Orchard as we strolled among the gantries high above the turbines, giant tapering towers of some silvery alien metal, veined with miles of black wiring and pockmarked with dials and control panels.

My guide smiled an odd little inscrutable smile and paused for a moment before replying. "You ask whether it is absolutely safe to live so close to the heart of a volcano," he said, measuring his words carefully. "And, of course, the answer must be no. Nothing is absolutely safe. There is always the risk of catastrophe, in all our endeavours."

His reply seemed to me evasive, and I pressed him on the matter. "But surely somebody must have weighed such a risk, before building City Hall," I countered. "Thousands of lives depend on the safe operation of this power plant!"

"You are right," said Mr Orchard, gazing out over the field of gleaming towers. "The smallest eruption, the least crack in the rocks that separate us from the magma, and all those thousands of lives would be snuffed out, vaporised in mere seconds. But as to calculating the risks of a catastrophe? The founders of City Hall had no data to go on, and were on the brink of extermination at the hands of the Punggol. There was no choice: Mount City Hall was the only viable location within a shrinking island of human territory."

I was appalled at the rashness of City Hall's founding fathers, but held my tongue. Mr Orchard guessed my objections.

"You are wondering whether the volcano might suddenly decide to enter an active phase," he said, stroking his moustaches with a slightly

amused curl of his lip. "The truth is that it could do at any moment. But in all of the surviving histories from the ancient period, all the anecdotal evidence and legends we have gathered, the volcano has remained dormant, for twenty four centuries together. That is the best guarantee of your safety that we can offer, Captain Braddell. I apologise if you find it insufficient."

I stiffened slightly, embarrassed at the thought that I was only concerned with saving my own skin. Naturally, my own safety, and that of Eunos, entered into the equation, but these considerations were far outweighed by the idea of thousands of people living their lives with the threat of a fiery death hanging over them. What astonished me yet more was the cheerful serenity which seemed to characterise the attitude of the Cithallians. How could they laugh and go about their business, knowing what they did? It demanded explanation, as did I.

Mr Orchard smiled again, as though to himself. "Are we not always mere inches away from death?" he replied. "Even for those who do not live inside the belly of a volcano, their doom is always waiting around a corner. A careless hand on a blade, a foot placed incautiously on the crumbling path, the unseen and unknown infection festering within..."

I winced inwardly at this last comment, acutely aware of my own nearness to oblivion.

"Indeed I am little surprised that the question should come from you, Captain Braddell," continued my guide, "One who arrived here clinging to life by his fingernails, having cheated the snow and wind. You of all people should be aware of how narrow a gap separates us from the hereafter."

I shrugged. "I suppose you're right," I said. "I suppose the philosophical implications of my survival have not yet struck me. I rarely allow myself the luxury of such metaphysical speculations."

Mr Orchard tutted and wagged a finger in mock disapproval. "You should not call it a luxury," he chided me, "but an absolute necessity of life. Philosophy is the very heart of our

communal life here in City Hall. We are all philosophers and psychologists here, of one kind or another.”

This was news to me. A whole city of psychologists? How had this come about? Mr Orchard was only too willing to clarify. When I had first set eyes on the man, I had assumed that he was the leader of the community, but this was not exactly true. Mr Orchard held the title of Chief Orientation Officer, and it was his responsibility to make sure that any humans who managed to gain entry to the interior of the volcano should be properly looked after, and helped to adjust to life within City Hall. As he explained to me, most of the stragglers who turned up at the various hidden entrances to the volcano hailed from widely diverse communities. Some were traditional tribal societies like that of Marsiling, others practised bizarre or cruel customs that were incompatible with the guiding philosophy of City Hall, and these visitors were encouraged either to change their way of thinking and living, or else leave.

“I hope I don't embarrass you when I say that you are one of the easiest cases I have been given so far in my career,” said Orchard as we strolled out of the power station, and began touring a large area of rooms that he referred to as the Therapy Block. “It has been a genuine pleasure to work with you.”

I blushed, but was delighted by his compliment.

“Some of the people I have to deal with...you have no idea!” he exclaimed. “But Mr Eunoz and yourself have both been very quick to understand our Citihallian ideals.”

Smiling to myself at the notion that Mr Orchard still considered Eunoz to be a flesh and blood human being, I asked, “What exactly are those ideals?”

In this delightful way we passed most of the rest of the afternoon, walking and discussing, exploring the farthest reaches of City Hall and pursuing an ever deeper understanding of this unique civilisation. Not wishing to strain the reader's appetite for suspense, the ideals which Mr Orchard referred to were, in summary, the abolition of war and its concomi-

tant emotional disturbances. Knowing as I did a little of the hostile relations that had existed between humans and Punggol for many centuries, it came as little surprise to me that the Citihallians had decided to espouse peace as the noblest of goals. War had brought humanity close to extinction, and even my former Punggol hostage, Bukit Paiyang, had told me that the Novena wars had been a tragedy, and a cause of deep remorse for the whole nation of Pung. However, in my limited experience of their ways, the Pung had taken no practical measures to curb their belligerent instincts. They were still a mistrusting and cruel species.

The humans, those on the losing side of that conflict, had done considerably better in their journey towards a warless society, at least if the Citihallians could be judged representative of their species. In that regard, the founding fathers and mothers of City Hall had focused their philosophical attentions on the individual, in an attempt to cure him of aggression. Warring nations, they argued, and their descendents continued to maintain, were merely an aggregation of individuals whose conflicts over resources had failed to reach a negotiated settlement. The cure for this aggression was, in the words of Orchard, self-knowledge, and to this end all Citihallians were enrolled in a lifelong course of psychotherapy. As a natural consequence of this overriding preoccupation, almost all of the citizens of City Hall were qualified psychologists and psychiatrists, therapists, meditators, counsellors and philosophers, or else educated in these subjects to an unusual degree. The lowest menial worker who swept the corridors of City Hall could have rivalled most Earthling Doctors of Psychology.

The sceptic might imagine such a society intolerably smug, but such was not the case. Most Citihallians were notably phlegmatic, optimistic, unhurried in their daily lives and at ease in their own skins. They did not, as might be thought, hurl nuggets of pop psychology at one another in displays of vulgar intellectual one-upmanship. They were content, but not

complacent, energetic but not zealous.

Newcomers to the community were encouraged to begin specialised courses of therapy suited to their specific background and the cultural baggage they brought with them. Therapists of an anthropological bent existed for this very purpose, all specialists in the various diverse human societies that had thrived before the outbreak of the war. I wondered to myself what they would make of Eunoz and I, an extra-terrestrial and an android. If androids existed in City Hall, I had heard no mention of them, and nobody had so far suspected Eunoz's mechanical constitution, so perfectly did he imitate the human form. Was this technology unknown to the engineers of City Hall? Had their intellectual labour been so concentrated on the life of the mind, that they had neglected other areas of scientific endeavour? Such speculations did not give my new hosts their due: to have built a habitable environment within the bowels of a volcano was an achievement far beyond the reach of Earthlings. It was perhaps fairer to say that the Citihallians had different priorities, and who was I to doubt them? Had any society on Earth ever come close to eradicating the scourge of war? So far as I knew no Government had even considered it a possibility, and yet here were men and women putting these principles into practice.

All the while, and so far without mishap for close to two hundred years, City Hall had remained Kadaloor's best kept secret. The Punggol intelligence agencies, Mr Orchard reported proudly, had never entertained the faintest suspicion of what lay beneath that smoking cone of ash and rock their surveillance craft glided over on a regular schedule.

“But surely you don't imagine that the Punggol still harbour resentment against you?” I asked my guide. I proceeded to relate the story of my capture by those perfidious purple spheres, and my subsequent escape. The reader will no doubt recall that the Punggol had refused to believe me a member of the human race, despite my close resemblance to the

memorial statue of Outram Park that stood proudly in their capital. To their minds, all anthropoids looked alike, and they were more inclined to accuse me of being one of the Bird-People.

That the statue of Outram Park depicted no living human at all, but was in fact a likeness of the android Eunoz was beside the point. What struck me most forcefully, and what I now pointed out to Mr Orchard, was that far from wishing to extinguish this last remnant of human society on Kadaloor, the Punggol had shown wholehearted remorse for their actions, and now looked upon humanity as a race of vanished sages.

Mr Orchard shook his head sadly. "The Punggol may have repented," he said, "but they do so with words

only. Their hearts are still full of bloodlust."

"But surely a reconciliation is worth attempting," I countered. I could tell from Mr Orchard's expression, his drooping moustaches and the sudden furrowing of his handsome brow, that my arguments would not be heeded, and indeed seemed to cause my host some pain.

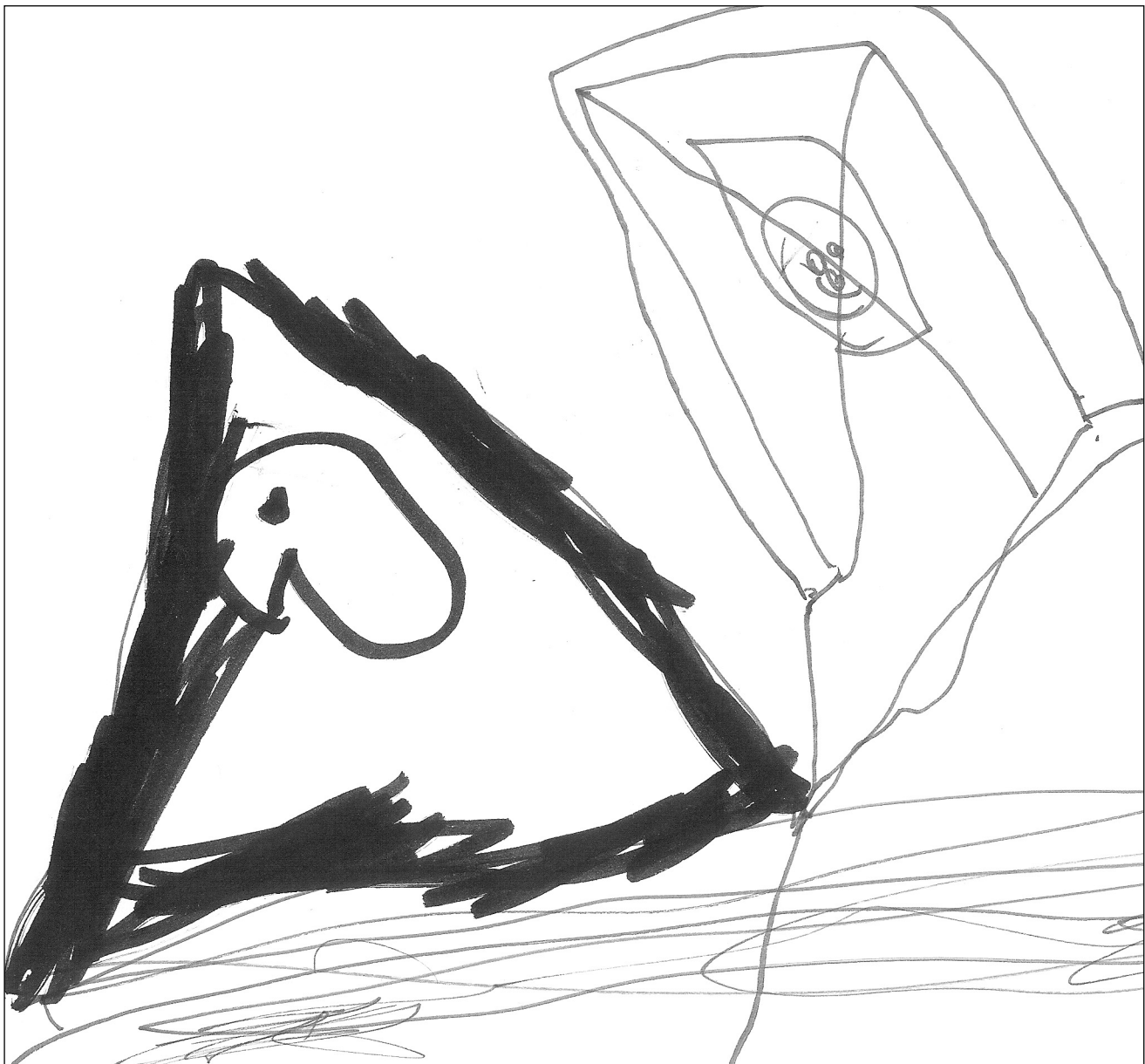
"It is not yet time," he said, shaking his head sadly.

For a people endowed with such optimism, such an attitude jarred against what I considered the prevailing mindset. Were some kind of rapprochement to be attempted, all of Pung would no doubt regard the Citi-hallians as saints returning from the grave.

Mr Orchard smiled, but it was a

smile that hid conflicting emotions. "Conquest of the Punggol is not on our agenda, Captain Braddell," he said, and with that the subject was effectively closed.

The Therapy Block thus thoroughly explored, Mr Orchard returned me by a series of high speed elevators to my guest room, where I discovered that Eunoz had been taken on his own guided tour of the city, accompanied by Miss Lavender, a fact which I found unaccountably irritating. The two of them having not yet returned, I retired to my quarters to sleep, and found myself entangled once again in unpleasant dreams, in which Marsiling's bloody corpse confronted me and demanded retribution for my crimes.



The Hungry Apples: a Tale of Tiana

Richard K Lyon &
Andrew J Offutt

The war of Tiana, Caranga and the wizard Pyre against him called the Owner was long. This is but one of the battles.

High carnival ruled the golden city of Palanigh of the kingdom of Orvar, that isle set like a great jewel on the bosom of the green Erindinian Ocean. Every mind and body devoted itself to the Festival of the Lesser Turtle. During the heat of the day the Islanders had disported themselves on beaches of pure white sand, or passed the time wagering on the turtle races. Now, in the cool of an evening soft as black velvet, was the time for love.

Couples made wanton in the mazes of well-tended shrubbery that were golden Palanigh's parks, filled with private nooks and grassy nests. Their bare bodies were caressed by the ocean breeze and by each other, while their laughter filled the parks like the songs of birds at courting time. They were poor, aye. But may happy folk in truth be called poor?

While they thus amused themselves, the wealthy in their great villa-houses did feast on tender island

pig boiled in butter and sweetbreads baked in honey, did drink great quantities of pungent wine from golden melons, and did, of course, make great orgy. Thus did the wealthy seek elusive happiness.

Palanigh fair reeked of happiness and sensuality.

Thus the commons and the nobles; and what did the royal folk do?

In the palace, King Vemani was prodigiously busy. Not even he was exempt from the law of the land, which stated that a man might keep only so many wives, and concubines, and mistresses as he could satisfy on this one night of nights. As all in the household of Vemani were determined to be begotten with royal children this auspicious night gave way to dawn, my lord king had little time for other matters. Pity the labours of those whose heads droop under weighty crowns!

If Vemani gave thought to his kingdom at all, it was to assume that everyone was as pleasantly busied as he. Never in his wildest royal dreams did my lord king suppose that any

spent festival night waiting for an enemy to come aslaying!

One on Orvar Isle did just that.

Palanigh rose up out of leafy jungle: a realm wherein only death ended the constant cycle of hunter and hunted. Within the frond-deepened dark of that jungle, in a hut a league or two beyond the city, a man waited for those who would be his murderers. His patience was worthy of the Simban warrior he had been, silent and moveless and nearly invisible.

A single entrance gave way to the hut's two rooms, one behind the other. The pirate had chosen to sit in the rearward chamber, where the moonlight was brighter. He was a motionless statue of jet among shadows and moon-paled darkness. His ears appraised and recognised every faint sound carried on the night breeze.

The hungry apples made no sound.

By day, those black round objects he had found hanging in the trees of the jungle gave off little buzzing sounds while they quivered. If the perch to which an "apple" clung was not satisfactory, it would roll along the underside of that branch until a

better site was found. The hungry apples of Orvar sought locations such that men and animals would pass beneath. The hungry apples were always hungry.

The reformed cannibal who waited in the dark had gathered the hungry apples that afternoon. The delicate process required the cutting of branches bearing "apples" from the very trees. Next he meticulously placed the branches within the hut so that the balls, invisibly black against black by night, hung poised above doors... and the single window. The last two he had contrived to hang from the ceiling of the chamber wherein he sat, invisibly black against black of night.

He sat silent. The hungry apples hung silent. He waited, as did they.

Having prepared for the advent of the expected assassin, he waited. His eyes, blacker than night, in sclera slightly yellowish, sent their gaze roaming continually around the room. His night vision was as excellent as his sense of smell – and taste, for he was also a superb taster and identifier of poisons. Still, he knew that any two of the apples were his superior, for they could see in total darkness. They saw the heat of a body, whether human or beastly.

Man and apples waited.

From the jungle came a small scream of agony. An owl had caught his dinner. The waiting man did not twitch, though his muscles were going ever so slightly stiff. Once again he went through his statue exercises. Without moving or making a sound, he worked his muscles until they grew limber.

For all his alertness, a small portion of his mind wandered.

He remembered the hot words he had exchanged with his green-eyed, red-tressed daughter – foster daughter. Tiana of Reme had told him of King Hower's message and the dire peril into which her recklessness had plunged them this time. The waiting man sighed. His lips moved, forming silent words: He often worried about his wilful piratic daughter; how could Tiana possibly survive when he was no longer present to save her?

For I, Caranga, am truly without fear, he reflected, with perfect seri-

ousness, this once-cannibal who had taken up the more honourable business of piracy and raised his adopted daughter to join the family business.

Still, bad as it appeared, the present situation was... manageable. All the world was enemy to that one called the *Owner*, and great as that King-Demon's powers might be, they were surely incapable of staving off and manipulating all the world. Caranga deemed it a safe surmise that the Owner's repeated attacks on Tiana stemmed from fear; fear that she might somehow expose a hidden vulnerability. Already the abandoned duke's bastard daughter Caranga had raised from infancy had ranged half the world and laid low one great sorcerer, ridding all humankind of the menace of the demon in the mirror. Now – if only she and her foster father could learn more about the Owner!

That problem, Caranga thought as he sat motionless in the hut, might well be solved were he able to capture and question one of the Owner's servants... one of the Nightwalkers.

Earlier this day, Caranga had gone about Palanigh playing the role of wines bibbing boaster. By mid-afternoon few did not know that he claimed to possess certain knowledge concerning the Owner. Now he awaited the result. The enemy was unlikely to send a large force to investigate such a rumour, spread by a lurching man with considerable silver in his black curls; if that happened, Caranga would hear their approach well in advance of arrival. He'd simply fade into the jungle that had been his home long afore he walked the planking of a pirate craft. More likely they'd send but a man or two, and –

A little crackling and snapping arose outside, and Caranga congratulated himself on having sown the earth around the hut with seashells.

The pirate recognised the sound of a single set of footfalls disturbing his alarm system, and yet the sound was strangely... blurred. Though he also recognised that sinister sound and knew his doubled danger, he did not move. The sound of footfalls ceased, and Caranga ceased breathing.

The enemy was just outside, before the invitingly open door. From

there, only the empty front chamber could be seen, and that dimly. Caranga waited. After a moment he heard a single very quiet footstep – and immediately a *fump* as from the impact of a small falling object. Cries that were surely curses arose in a language unknown to Caranga. Little matter; the angry exclamations soon changed to wordless screams of anguish. Caranga's ears were able to follow the sound of breaking seashells, from the door. First the shells were cracked and shattered by running feet, and then by feet on staggering legs. Caranga heard the gratifying thud of a falling body, followed by widespread crackling as a man writhed on the ground. The screaming reached a hideous crescendo.

After that silence returned like a great black cloak thrown over all.

Caranga waited. A hungry apple had done its work.

Through it all, the pirate had neither moved nor made a sound. Nor did he move now, in the returned silence. No noises came now save those sounds of the never-sleeping jungle; the wind moaning in the trees and the distant humming roar of the sea.

Caranga sighed – quietly. Time never passed so unconscionably slowly as in the hours close before dawn. It was no easy feat to do nothing while eternity seemed to exist and pass, eternally.

In this sort of small war, the chief foe was not the enemy outside but the one within; nasty little ghosts of self-doubt that crept from their hiding-places and banishment to attack the mind, seeking to blur the attention. Those spectres came. Was he not ageing? Were not his powers declining? To protect his foster daughter he had insisted that this task be his. Was this the folly of a man with grey amid the jet of his hair; an old man's folly?

If I am slain, won't Tiana take suicidal risks in her quest for vengeance?

Aye! (She'd better!)

What if she were in danger at this instant? She had a knack for it, that so-shapely pirate captain only he dared call "girl". What if he were a foolish old man sitting alone in doom-thickened darkness, deluding

himself that a deadly enemy was nearby and vulnerable to his brain and physical prowess – while elsewhere his truly heroic daughter was in prodigious peril?

The night dawdled on, dragging feet of unbroken darkness.

At last, when dawn approached with the colour of pearls and fading fire, Caranga decided that the time was right.

To his right rose the straw wall that divided the hut into two rooms. He lifted his sword slowly, silently. He reached out as far as his long arm permitted. He set the point of the cutlass on the soft earthen floor of the hut, so that it touched at a spot two feet from the wall and six feet from where he sat. He twitched his wrist. The sword-blade scratched the ground with the smallest of sounds.

Immediately a spear crashed through the wall and slammed into the ground.

For an instant the long leaf-shaped blade and haft stood quivering in the earth, less than the breadth of two fingers from where Caranga had scratched. Then the weapon was drawn back. Before the blade had reached the wall to be drawn through, a stroke of Caranga's cutlass bit the haft in twain. Caranga's knees did not pop as he rose, fluid as water. He took a silent step.

From beyond the wall a voice spoke: "Well, Caranga, we meet again."

"Since you know me, you were fool to think I wouldn't know the disguised sound of two men carefully walking with one tread! I've been waiting for you. If we're old friends as you indicate, why not come in so we can talk over old times?" Again, silently and fluidly, the pirate changed position.

"And pass under another of your hungry apples? No no Caranga, that task I leave to my expendable friends."

As the Nightwalker spoke, Caranga's ears picked up another sound, nearly covered by that of the voice. "I waited all these hours," the Nightwalker said, "waited for you to make the first move and provide a target for my spear. You cheated me. How did you know I had a spear?"

"It was logical that you would bring a weapon to let you kill without facing me. Your kind has little stomach for a real fight."

"We seem to be at stalemate." Again beneath the assassin's voice came the faint second sound: a cutting? What was the devil cutting? "Tell me, Caranga, do you remember the last time we met? Do you recognise my voice?"

"Familiar, aye – but I place it not."

Caranga studied the wall. It was not a single piece, but many sections bound together. Aye, that accounted for what he heard. He stepped back and to the right. Now one ceiling-hung apple lurked between him and the cutting sound.

"When last we met," the Nightwalker murmured in a voice of contemptuous amusement, "you told me your name, and I promised to remember you when I came again."

Caranga knew the voice, then. "LIAR!"

So he shouted, but he knew it was true. His nape prickled. Though he feared no natural enemy, this was nighted madness and horror. Long and long ago he had done death on a man, knowing naught about the fellow save that he needed slaying. Caranga did not flinch from the words: he had done murder. He and the victim were the only witnesses. And the Nightwalker knew of it – and spoke with the voice of that dead man!

"Naturally," the voice from the grave continued, "when you appeared in Palanigh, I volunteered to come for you. I want your heart; I hunger."

Caranga shuddered. The slicing ceased. The wall that divided the hut was made of panels lashed together with thongs, several of which had been sliced. One tall panel wavered, tilted, and fell in. Caranga saw the assassin.

The Nightwalker was an uncertain form in the moonlight. Its only distinct aspect was the glittering knife in its fist. The blade's glitter blurred toward the point, and Caranga knew that something coated the point – doubtless venom. The figure's hands and face were an uneven pale grey, as if smeared with mud or grease. A dull steel helmet protected the head and

the body was covered with blackness that was not skin. It had the shape and form of loose clothing, but it was not the blackness of cloth or Caranga's body; he was looking at blindness and the pit.

The man-shape came half a pace forward. Caranga saw the eyes, eerily grey and calm to the point of near-lifelessness. They were without pupils. The moonlight was treacherous, he sought to convince himself; this was merely an illusion of uncertain light... But no. It could not be denied: this was the man he had killed so long ago. In unholy, horripilating nightmare, the dead had returned. I hunger, it had said – for Caranga's heart! Caranga fought for control of his own mind. Time later to consider such horror; now he must battle his enemy – his ancient enemy – be it man or lich or demon.

For all his resolve, his mouth was dry and his hands wet.

The horror stepped through the opening in a cautious move. *Trying to guess where I concealed the hungry apples*, Caranga thought.

The Nightwalker smiled, and that was more horror. "I expected some sport. But look at you! Naked to the waist to blend with the dark – do you recognise my clothing?"

"Aye," Caranga said dolorously, "you wear dragon silk."

The stuff he named was lamentably rare, and commanded fabulous prices, for dragon silk could not be cut. A man in such clothing might be crushed by the blow of a heavy weapon, but he could be neither slashed nor stabbed.

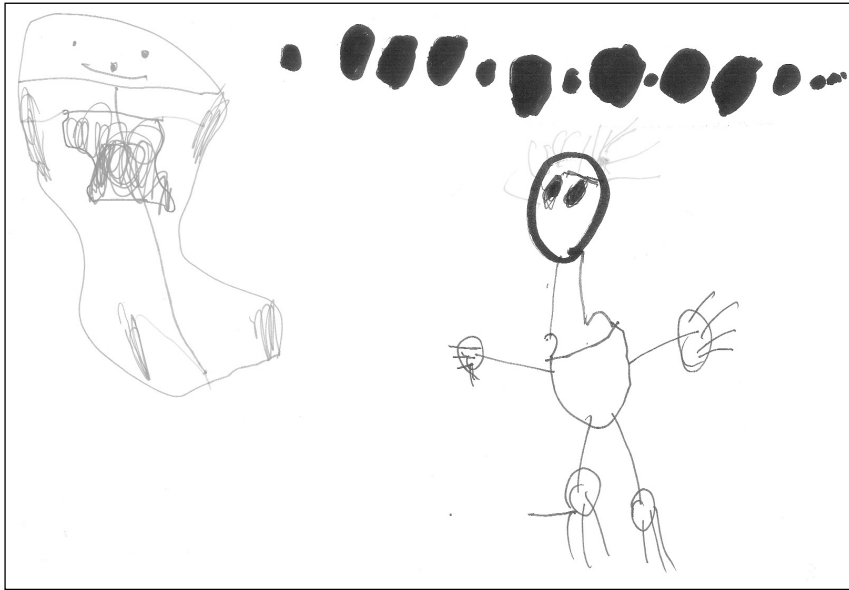
"You have gone to a lot of trouble to have yourself slain, Caranga. Why?"

As he spoke, the lich moved a pace toward Caranga. Another step and it would be beneath the hungry apple, silent and invisible near the hut's ceiling.

"I want to ask a few questions of you," Caranga said, and shifted leftward to place the apple between them. "Mayhap once you're my prisoner, you'll do some talking. Just a little chat... old friend."

"So you thought."

"So I thought," Caranga said, and struck.



For all its suddenness, the attack was carefully planned. Caranga's sword passed beneath the apple; his hand and arm did not. The cutlass edge caught the assassin's arm – and slid off the silken armour. A blow with a cudgel would have been more effective, for at least it would have struck solidly. Any fool could see that the stroke was clumsy as well as useless; now his guard was down. Nothing easier than for the Nightwalker to lunge forward and stab his enemy.

So Caranga had planned, for such a lunge would place his foe directly beneath the deadly globe hanging in the darkness above.

The Nightwalker began that lunge – and checked himself. He sprang back. His eyes scanned the ceiling. Though Caranga gave no sign, he cursed inwardly. A carefully set trap had failed and his enemy knew the location of one of the hungry apples. While he – or it – could not know where hung the other one, logic would apprise him that in a chamber of this size there would be more than one of the deadly balls.

The Nightwalker circled the apple and Caranga shifted to keep it between them.

Like two jungle cats they slow-danced the battle, a pavane of movements and threats and feints without the ring of steel against steel. The Nightwalker had only to scratch his opponent to slay. Caranga's targets were his enemy's bare hands. Their blades flashed in the room's pallid moonlight as they lunged at each oth-

er, black hands on black arms whipping from black bodies that dodged and twisted. More than once, each missed what should have been an easy hit, because of the ever-hungry third foe: the apples. They were enemy to both opponents.

The assassin paused to stand still before the pirate, while he tossed his long knife from hand to hand. The temptation to knock the weapon spinning was great – but the apple hung over the space between them and the distance was too great by a hand's breadth.

Dragon silk did not rustle when the Nightwalker dropped to stab left-handed at Caranga's right foot. The cutlass sped at the other hand. Wielded too swiftly, the knife failed to bite into the old leather of Caranga's boot, hardened by salt water and the blood of others. The sword grazed the Nightwalker's right hand. It left a stripe of blood without inflicting real damage.

The pirate had drawn first blood.

It was a trivial victory, psychological only. His enemy was fast, too fast. Bit by bit, the Nightwalker was forcing him out of position. Caranga knew that when the menace of the apple no longer separated them, the fight would change. Only the apple made useful the longer reach of the cutlass; at closer quarters the knife would swiftly claim his life. Clearly, Caranga faced an opponent who was faster, more skilled and, for a fight within a hut, better armed.

The choice was simple: Caranga must die or cheat.

No choice at all, the pirate thought.

Rather than directly between them, the apple was now a foot to the right. A good broad cut would endanger Caranga's sword-arm, no matter how fast it was moving. In moments his swift opponent would force him completely off position and slay him.

The second apple was three paces behind Caranga. He retreated, with the Nightwalker pursuing. Pirate struck at lich with the full strength of his arm. The blow staggered the assassin – and the cutlass's blade snapped against the dragon silk. Holding a ruined sword, Caranga took a swift pace back and another to his right. The second apple was *not* between them. Caranga tried to look as if he were trying to look helpless. In truth, he was.

In the act of lunging, the Nightwalker arrested himself. Caranga's bluff had succeeded! The assassin began to circle the spot above which he surmised the second apple to be, while Caranga shifted to keep the same invisible – and totally harmless – spot between them. He could have been slain at any second. The Nightwalker shifted, shifted... was almost beneath dangling, awful death...

He stopped, looked directly into Caranga's eyes, and smiled.

"Clever," the damned clever lich said in a murmur. "Very clever."

Stepping around the space beneath the apple into which Caranga had almost manoeuvred him, the assassin advanced with poisoned blade held to gut. Now he knew the location of the apples as well as the unarmed pirate, who had no place to hide and no defence against death. Oh, of course he might well destroy the other even as he was stabbed, or scratched – but that scratch would envenom its wound, and he would be dead in minutes.

"I am faster than you," the Nightwalker cheerfully said. "That means that without a weapon... you are dead, Caranga."

Caranga knew that was true – and from the edge of his eye he saw that which the Nightwalker had completely forgotten. The pirate dived for it.

As the other lunged for him,

Caranga rolled up off the floor with his hand clamped around the truncated haft of a spear. Spearhead and knife clashed together in ringing, scraping clangour – and the knife went flying through the air.

“I assume that this too is poisoned,” Caranga said, and drove at the creature’s face.

The disarmed assassin sprang back; Caranga was up and after him. While he retreated, the Nightwalker flapped his arms in an ever-shifting pattern of dragon silk, against which the spearhead would break. Then, for an instant his defence was holed, and Caranga had only to lunge at him. “Die again, lich!”

With his arm just starting to uncoil like a steel spring, the pirate’s instinct stopped the stroke in a way that would leave his muscle cramped. His whole body quivered with the effort of arrested violent motion. The Nightwalker had very nearly tricked him into stepping under one of his own apples!

Again they glided that weird dance around the death-ball’s space. Now Caranga was on the offensive, and slowly he forced his opponent off balance and away from the apple’s protection.

“Congratulations,” the voice from the grave said in a tone of amiable mockery. “I must concede defeat.”

“I am accepting no surrender.” Caranga’s tone was flat and deadly.

“Oh, I offer no such. I merely said that you have bested me. Beating my Master is a different matter.”

With that he pounced backward, swung, and started into the night. At once he became part of the darkness. Caranga stared at emptiness. One moment a solid enemy had stood before him in battle; the next the lich was faded, gone. The knife lay on the floor as proof of –

The knife rose to come floating at Caranga.

The knife stabbed at him; dodging, he spear-thrust at it. The spearhead shattered against empty air and Caranga, over-balanced, fell. An invisible foe stood above him with envenomed blade held high. It stepped toward him – and under the second apple.

It dropped.

Leaving the ceiling as a solid black sphere, the deadly ball struck as a soft blob that spread rapidly like a strange liquid pouring itself over invisible contours. In a heartbeat it became the outline of a naked man, a statue whose medium was black dots on empty air and perfect in every detail: eyes, face, arms, legs, genitals.

Despite the man-thing’s screaming, the buzzing was clearly audible. The hungry apple was a colony of thousands of tiny blood-sucking insects. They swarmed and bit and sucked, and the envenomed dagger fell from nerveless, invisible hands.

As Caranga rolled out of the way, the figure fell squirming to the floor.

The pirate rose and coolly kicked the dagger away. He stood watching the Nightwalker, now a visible man. The insects gorged themselves.

After a few moments the convulsions ceased and the Nightwalker lay slowly writhing and moaning. Caranga stood over him and felt triumph and pity – and knew he could afford neither. This was but a small battle in what would be a long war. An overly close battle! Had his enemy realised that the apple could see the heat of the body of even an invisible man...

“Belay your whining, dog,” the pirate snapped. “I once fed one of those sweet things, and it’s nothing a strong man can’t endure. After a day or two they get enough and drop off you. I’ve medicine hidden nearby that will ease you considerably. The price is low: answers. To begin with, why is this cursed skull Tiana has so important to the Owner?”

From clenched teeth came the answer: “Slay me.”

“What, and show the weakness of mercy? Nay; answer! Think not to lie, for I already know more than half the answer.

The Nightwalker made no reply. He stopped breathing.

A logical tactic, Caranga mused. A strong-willed person could hold his breath until he lost consciousness – at which point breathing resumed, automatically. In such a manner one might keep himself semi-conscious and, to a degree, protected from pain.

The Nightwalker, however, did not resume breathing.

Was he turning blue? In the moonlight Caranga could not be sure. There was no mistaking the spasm, though, that shook the fallen assassin, or the stillness that followed. It was final. Man or lich, he had held his breath until he died!

(Again?)

For a moment, Caranga was too surprised to curse. He had failed. And that failure revealed something most unfortunate indeed: the Nightwalkers might be slain, but not captured! Dying to avoid being taken was logical and practical, for those who had indeed come back from death... and might again.

Damn! Tiana had a talent for finding trouble, but enemies like this...

* * *

When he emerged from the hut, carrying a hideously bloody knife, Caranga found the Nightwalker’s “expendable friend”. The nondescript man lay dead on the ground. The insects had not slain him; indeed, there was no discernible cause of his death and already those creatures making up a hungry apple had departed him. Somehow even such unnatural events did not notably surprise the pirate. From the little he had seen and experienced of the Nightwalkers, he knew they were not the sort to leave loose ends that someone else might tie together.

In no good mood, Caranga marched back to the city. Its habitants had exhausted themselves in revelry while he had striven at great risk – and learned nothing of real value. Why was it that not all heroism was to any good purpose, much less known and lauded?

The only positive aspect of this night’s labours was that at least Tiana had remained aboard *Vixen*. At least that’s what she had promised to do...

No! He’d asked for such a promise, Caranga realised, but now that he thought on it... she said only that she wouldn’t interfere in my plans! Damn!

Caranga quickened his pace, despite his weariness. His red-haired, green-eyed daughter from among the whites, he thought, was about as trustworthy as...

As I am.

The Brass Menagerie

Aaron A Polson

Tic Toc started his life as a small pile of discarded cogs, springs, and brass fittings that had bounced around inside a wooden box for weeks. John, a watch repairman during the day, built Tic Toc, bending and shaping the metal into a silly model of the ape he had seen while watching King Kong stumble about New York with Fay Wray in tow. He had big plans for the gorilla, intending it to be a fully automatic device – almost alive. John carefully arranged springs and cogs, wires and switches to give the toy perpetual and independent motion. Despite John’s meticulous and inventive nature, the machine lacked a certain spark and remained a lifeless mass of parts.

Feeling like a failure, John built more brass animals – the rest with turning keys to wind their gears, making the gorilla one of a kind. So Tic Toc waited on the little shelf, slowly surrounded by other creatures over time. Ultimately, it was the girl’s touch that roused the sleeping gorilla. With one clumsy tap, she knocked him from the shelf, and the appropriate spring snapped into motion as he collided with the hardwood floor.

As he regarded the world with his green-jewel eyes, he first saw the hand. It was not rough or broad like John’s, but thin and delicate – although quite pink and fleshy, something to which Tic Toc would need time to grow accustomed. Her face was behind the hand, streaked and wet. Abby – John’s sister – had been

crying, something she did most afternoons as she sat and polished the brass clockworks.

The metal animals felt cold in her small, delicate hands. One by one, she turned them over, winding the cranks to watch the chimpanzees click and whirl their little hands to their eyes, ears, and mouth, and tracing the sharp horn of the unicorn with her milk white index finger. In the back of the menagerie, Tic Toc hummed gently with his green glass eyes glowing.

She put down the unicorn and sighed as the gears and mechanisms inside the chimpanzees ground to a halt. Abby pushed off the sofa, took her crutch under her left arm, and limped to the window leading to the fire escape and back alley of the tenement. She glanced out the window, up at the evening sky mottled with smoke, and said, “Sometimes it’s so lonely...”

In her memory, she replayed the quiet evening not so long ago on which her left foot was crushed under the wheels of a runaway flower cart, and left smashed and useless. If the crushed foot wasn’t enough, a dozen of Mr Malvolio’s Magnificent Blue Roses leapt from the cart that day, embedding their sharp barbs in her left leg. Abby hadn’t been the same since, and she rarely left the small apartment she shared with her brother.

Behind her, on the menagerie shelf, all were quiet except for Tic

Toc. The gorilla hummed slightly louder, almost recognisably clicking the words, “So lonely.” His cogs worked a certain kind of inevitable logic, but the picture was incomplete.

The door whispered open, and John stepped in, pulling off his heavy black overcoat and hanging it on the rack just beside the door. John was a large man, a few years older than Abby and broad in the shoulders.

“Abby, I’m home,” he called. His nimble fingers slipped a small sheet of paper from the coat and shoved it into his pants pocket. The small gorilla watched, marvelling at his creator.

She wiped her eyes quickly, turned, and forced a smile for her brother.

“You’ve been crying,” he said.

“Just dreaming. How was the shop today?”

“The usual. Broken watches – gears and cogs all day, my dear.” John turned his dark, lined face toward the menagerie. “How are our little friends?”

Abby sent up a half-mast smile. “Just fine.” Tic Toc quietly straightened on the shelf. He felt decidedly better than fine. Awake, he determined, was much better than cold and motionless.

“Look, I’ve invited this colleague to dinner tomorrow. His name’s Peter, Peter Archer. We call him Pete.” John held Abby’s thin shoulders with his long hands. “He’s a really nice fella. Does sales down at the shop.”

Abby turned away and tried to

squirm out of her brother's grasp. "John, really. I'm... I'm..."

"Look, he's just a guy from work. I thought maybe you'd like to meet him, that's all." Tic Toc watched while the words "so lonely" played through his lightly humming gears.

"Thanks, John. Dinner's almost ready."

"I'm going to catch a smoke before we eat." Tic Toc watched as John squeezed through the window to the fire escape. John pulled a small silver cigarette case from his jacket, flipped it open, and withdrew one slender cigarette. With the cigarette in his mouth, he lit it, took a few puffs, and blew out slowly. The sky above hung like a black sheet, obscuring any glimmer from the stars. He reached into his pocket and produced the small bit of paper, a worn handbill he'd been carrying for weeks.

John looked into the dark sky, took a long drag from the cigarette, and sighed as the smoke tumbled out of his mouth. "Aw, hell. I'll never get out of here," he muttered into the black alleyway.

Tic Toc and the other clockwork animals sparkled from the polishing Abby delivered earlier in the afternoon. She bustled around the flat as fast as her limp and crutch would allow, tidying for John and Peter's arrival. At half-past six, with the odour of roast and potatoes hovering in the air – dinner resting in a warm oven – she finally collapsed on the couch.

When the door opened ten minutes later, John and Peter, a thin but handsome man with light complexion and hair, swept into the small apartment. Abby pulled herself upright, twisting to hide her crutch. She quickly brushed mousy hair from her face and tucked a few rogue strands behind her ears. Tic Toc stamped lightly on the shelf, responding to his mistress's anxious behaviour.

"Abigail dear, this is Peter Archer. He works for Mr Solitz down at the shop." John gently patted Peter's shoulder, and the thin man smiled.

"It's nice to meet you Abigail."

She blushed and offered her hand. "Likewise, Mr Archer."

They ate well, talked much, and laughed some. Tic Toc watched and listened, as curious as a clockwork gorilla could be. His logic still whirred, following pathways and flipping small, spring-loaded switches. John was first to push away from the table, and he glanced at Peter as he did. "Wonderful, Abby dear. Simply delicious. If you'll excuse me." John stood and reached into his jacket for the cigarette case. "Pete, join me?"

"Certainly, Abigail – if you don't mind." Pete looked into Abby's eyes, and she nodded.

The small gorilla, having seen the smoking routine before, dropped from the shelf and ambled across the floor to wait just beneath the window. He tilted his metal head in preparation to listen to the men. His small jewelled eyes glowed, pulsing a deep sea green. Inside his smooth, brass chest, gears and cogs clicked and whirred.

Peter followed John's lead through the window onto the fire escape. Neither noticed the small toy on the floor. Once outside, John handed Peter a cigarette and lit both in silence. The men stood smoking for a moment before John coughed and broke the quiet.

"So, what do you think?"

"Nice place. Sort of small. What's with the crazy little animals?"

"Oh. Those are all wind-ups. Clockworks – the little gorilla is supposed to be an automaton of sorts, but I couldn't seem to get him to work. I built them for Abby... like a collection... to give her something to do. They all do tricks, move. That sort of thing." John puffed on his cigarette and blew out a thin, white stream of smoke. "I have plans for others. Maybe even a clockwork man someday. If I could find the parts."

"A man?" Peter blew a fat smoke ring. "That would be truly fascinating."

John looked into the night and asked, "So... what do you think of Abby?"

Peter leaned back against the black iron railing and tossed his smouldering butt over the edge. "Oh. Look...

she seems nice. I mean, she's intelligent – witty. Pretty too. I just... well, I just don't feel ready to be, you know, tied down. I'm an able-bodied man... I don't want to be shackled to... well someone who can't, um – keep up." He glanced sidelong at John. "I want adventure, you know?" He pulled out a folded handbill and passed it to John.

John read the words "Men needed to serve on freighters bound for Africa" aloud and passed the paper back to Pete. "Yeah, I know." John flicked his butt against the brick wall. "I know. I picked up the same handbill, buddy."

"I thought your friend was very nice, John." Abby leaned back on the sofa after Peter left, forcing a smile and trying not to show the stiffness and discomfort in her leg.

John cracked his knuckles while pacing across the small room. "Yeah. Pete's just great." He dropped into a chair near the window and rubbed his face with one hand. "Look, Abby..."

"You don't have to tell me, I know." Her head dropped, and as her eyes descended to the floor, she caught a slight shimmer – just a glimmer of brass in the lamplight. "John... is that Tic Toc by your chair?" Her finger extended to the small mechanical gorilla resting on the floor just under the window. Caught away from his shelf, Tic Toc remained motionless and dimmed his green eyes.

"Huh?" Twisting in his chair, John found the clockwork and scooped it in his hand. "Yeah. How'd he find his way over here?"

"Tic Toc's been acting a little strange lately, but I've never seen him move." She sighed. "Look, I'm going to bed. Do you think you could take a peek at Tic Toc, see if anything is wrong?"

John stood to help his sister from the sofa. "Sure Abby. Sure."

Later that night, John bent over a small desk in his bedroom, squinting under a lamp with delicate instruments, poking at the cogs and dials inside his first creation. The small

brass gorilla sat on the desk, breastplate open, and listened to his creator.

"A little oil... then you should be fine." John squeezed a small tin container, forcing a shiny bead of machine oil into Tic Toc's chest cavity. He wound the gears with a small metal probe, spreading the oil inside before snapping the brass case shut. "There you go. Good as new."

He turned away from his work, accidentally knocking a folded piece of thin paper to the ground. "Whoops," he said, reaching to the floor to snag the stray paper. John leaned back in his chair, smoothed out the folds, and regarded the drawings within for a moment. "Clockwork man... that's a pipedream, eh?" He chuckled lightly and set the plans next to Tic Toc.

John brought his gaze level with the desktop and studied the gorilla

from only a few inches away. The machine regarded the man with curiosity and the best affection brass could bring. "Oh hell, if only someone could be here for Abby, I'd be free," John muttered. He sighed and pushed back from the desk, looking at an old photo of two young people on their wedding day. "I'm sorry Mom and Dad, I wish I hadn't made that promise. After the accident, well hell – it's been hard for both of us. I don't know if I can stay here – I have dreams, ambitions. I want adventure." The small metal animal clicked twice. "Heh... I don't know why I'm talking out loud. Not like they can hear me, is it?" He bent to look closer at the toy again. "Not like you can hear me either, huh?"

With a slight chuckle, John picked up the gorilla, carrying it gently back

to the shelf. "Goodnight all," he muttered to the brass menagerie before retiring for the night. The other clockworks rested, their keys unwound. The gears inside Tic Toc alone turned, generating something quite like thoughts inside his metal case.

* * *

Near three that morning, a dark, listening quiet floated over the flat. On the menagerie shelf, one small brass gorilla hummed awake. Under the aquamarine glow of his eyes, Tic Toc clicked and popped around the shelf, winding cranks and pushing levers, bringing his brothers and sisters to life. Within minutes, the shelf danced – a whole moving circus of strange metal creatures.

Tic Toc addressed the troops, speaking in clockwork click, buzz



and whirl. In the ranks of small metal animals, heads bobbed up and down, small brass feet and hands tapped the shelf, and the whole group seemed to rattle an agreement to Tic Toc's commands.

Finally, the cacophony subsided, and Tic Toc hummed, "Someone here for Abby." At this the crowd moved, jerking and lurching off the shelf, and toward the window. Once outside, they dropped or shimmied down the fire escape before marching in separate directions. The whole flickering mass seemed to buzz a chorus of "someone here for Abby". Tic Toc alone shambled into John's room to procure a peculiar folded paper from his desk – the plans he'd seen earlier for a clockwork man.

Within an hour, the strange band of jerking automatons met at the foot of the fire escape. A chimpanzee carried a small glass bottle as he rode on top of the elephant. Another chimp, astride the giraffe, held a white handkerchief. The third chimp hopped from the back of the unicorn, handing a scrap of paper to Tic Toc. Other members of the metallic collective brought bits of twine, copper wire, and some small bits of metal – cogs and the like – from Mr Solitz's shop. A certain stiff hippopotamus arrived with a black leather bag in tow.

The gorilla seemed to study the scrap of paper, his eyes smouldering intensely, and then hummed and clicked to the group once more. "Someone here for Abby." Then he spun and marched into the damp alley, leading the menagerie behind him.

* * *

Using twine to create makeshift pulleys, cords, and platforms, the group clicked its way through hazy alleyways, up one creaking fire escape and onto the back windowsill of Peter Archer's apartment. Following Tic Toc's clear commands, clockwork monkeys scrambled up the edges of the window, thrusting small metal hands into screws surrounding the window lock, and cranked the mechanism free. Once the creatures raised the window, the whole lot dropped

clattering to the floor, righted themselves, and processed with pops and whirs into Peter's bedroom.

Utilising the twine as they had on the fire escape and window ledge, the menagerie worked its way, one member at a time, to the top of Peter's bed. Tic Toc scrambled on top of the sleeping man and snapped orders to the other beasts. The elephant, hippopotamus, two bears and the unicorn each took a flap of quilt and pulled the cover down below Peter's knees. With another metal bark, Tic Toc directed the chimpanzees to open the small glass bottle, soak the handkerchief in its clear fluid, and hold the rag beneath Peter's nose until his breathing slowed and he was surely sedated. Toiling as clockwork Lilliputians against Peter's Gulliver, various brass toys gently trussed and tied his limbs to the corner posts of the bed frame, looping stout twine around the dark wooden spires on his headboard and footboard.

The chimps then tugged the small black bag to Tic Toc's side. The gorilla shuffled down Peter's left leg, and waited at the knee. Tic Toc reached into the bag, brass arms snaking inside and producing a small pair of scissors. Awkwardly, he manipulated the handle, cutting a slit in Peter's pyjamas. For a moment, Tic Toc examined John's plans for a clockwork man – tracing the line of his leg and scrutinising Peter's knee. He thought too, of what it meant to be a clockwork gorilla, and what would happen in the morning.

Once satisfied with the plans, Tic Toc turned to the wind-up unicorn which stood so dutifully beside him. He grasped the sharp horn with his strong brass hands, twisted, and pulled it from the unicorn's head. Turning the tip upside down, pushing gently into Peter's flesh, right below the knee, Tic Toc buzzed, "Someone here for Abby." With one swift push, he thrust the horn into Peter's leg, sending a quick spurt of blood. The chimpanzees whirred approval, and each collected a small knife or scalpel from the leather bag and set to work on other parts of Peter's body.

* * *

In the morning, Abby limped into the

parlour and opened the blinds, allowing heavy rays of sunshine to swell in the room. Her eye caught the menagerie, and she hobbled closer, sensing something amiss. Most appeared to stand in their usual spots, but the unicorn's horn was missing.

The only missing toy was little Tic Toc. Too many blocks away to hear Abby's startled gasp, Tic Toc rested snugly in his new, warm and wet home. He would need time to learn the proper balance and care to manipulate the wires, levers, pulleys, and needles he would use to prod his new body into action. In the coming months, he would be ready to return home.

* * *

Autumn arrived in Hoboken with slightly chilly but clear skies. John finished a cigarette on the fire escape just outside the flat. He pushed one hand into his pocket and fished out a worn piece of paper – the words almost too faded to read. Smiling slightly, he folded the handbill and slid it back into his pocket. He dropped his cigarette down the fire escape, sighed, and stooped inside the apartment.

On the sofa across the room, Abby sat tending her clockwork menagerie with delicate fingers and careful touch. Next to the sofa, on the opposite side from the menagerie, a thin, blonde man – Peter Archer – slack-jawed, pale, and vacant, sat in a wooden chair.

"Either of you need anything before I go?" John asked, looking at them both.

"No, not me," Abby answered with a small, awkward smile. "Peter dear?"

"Someone here for Abby." Peter's voice rattled out of his mouth like an echo from a steel can. Abby picked up Peter's hand, and squeezed her own warm palm against his cold flesh. A slight green glow emanated from behind his eyes.

"Goodbye, then," John said, offering his own awkward smile as he stooped to pick up his rucksack. He looked once more at Peter and shrugged before slipping out the door.

The Quarterly Review

BOOKS

The Art of Warhammer

Marc Gascoigne (ed.)
Games Workshop, hb, 224pp

Each piece in itself is stunning, but over the course of a book I started to feel that they were a bit samey in their subject matter – not surprisingly, since most come from very similar sources: rules and expansion packs for Warhammer Fantasy Battle. A few covers from recent novels are included, but I think more of those would have made for more variety. The odd-est thing for me about looking through this book was that it gave me a feeling of nostalgia for something I never did. I always fancied getting involved with tabletop games, but never did: it always seemed easier to play them on the computer. – *SWT*

The Black Veil & Other Tales of Supernatural Sleuths

Mark Valentine (ed.)
Wordsworth Editions, pb,
272pp

One of the two features that first at-

tracted me to Wordsworth's *Tales of Mystery & the Supernatural* series is the breadth of material covered, which includes works from both the crime and horror genres. Their relationship is less obvious in the twenty-first century than it was in the nineteenth – when authors like Poe, Dickens, Collins, and Doyle moved freely between the two – but there are numerous parallels. The other attraction is the price, a mere £2.99 per volume, and even less if ordered online. This latest release focuses explicitly on the area of overlap between crime and horror fiction, providing a sample of writers who have used psychic, spiritual, and sceptic detectives as a method of disclosing the ghost story or weird tale. Mr Valentine's introduction is expertly pitched, and provides just enough information to place his selection in context without overwhelming the reader with too many facts or spoiling any endings.

Appropriately, the first of the sixteen short stories is "The Warder of the Door" by Robert Eustace and L.T. Meade, which pioneered the sub-genre in 1898. William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki the Ghost Finder, one of the most famous occult detectives, follows shortly, in "The Gateway of the Monster"; and then Arthur Machen's "The Red Hand", an outing for his sleuth, Mr Dyson. Another interesting choice is Eugene Valmont, Robert Barr's French detective in London, often identified as a prototype for Agatha Christie's Poirot. He appears in "The Ghost with the Club Foot" as a debunker rather than dabbler in the occult, which puts the versatility of this particular type of detective story in perspective: not all of

a supernatural sleuth's cases need involve the supernatural. Hodgson made expert use of this principle with Carnacki, whose solutions alternated between the ghostly and the criminal. Like Watson in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, Carnacki also made reference to untold tales and the collection's title comes from one of these, the mention of "the Black Veil case" in "The Horse of the Invisible". The case, written by A.F. Kidd in 1992, is reproduced here.

The compilation moves from *fin de siècle* to contemporary authors with Colin P. Langeveld ("The Legacy of the Viper"), Ray Russell ("Like Clockwork"), and Rosalie Parker ("Spirit Solutions"). I'm always wary when editors include their own work in an anthology – I can't help but feel the selection process is less rigorous – but "The Prince of Barlocco" is the best in the volume. Mr Valentine's creation, The Connoisseur, is a refined and recondite detective whose adventures have thus far regrettably been confined to limited edition publications. The tale is subtle and elusive, and the denouement inextricably linked to the lore associated with Scotland's Fleet Isles.

If I have a single criticism of what is one of the best *Mystery & Supernatural* offerings yet, it is that at least one potential contributor has been omitted: Mike Carey's exorcist, Felix Castor, is probably the most influential of recent supernatural sleuths, first appearing in *The Devil You Know* in 2006, and currently on his third adventure.

The collection is a rare treat, likely to set the standard for introductory works of its kind as readers revel in

the likes of Carnacki, Dyson, and Valmont, rediscovering some of the forgotten greats. – *RM*

The Cosmic Ordering Service

Barbara Mohr
Hodder & Stoughton, pb,
112pp

Possibly the most gleefully stupid book I've ever read in my life. Full of the utmost idiocy, the book's entire content simply adds up to this: good things will happen if you hope for them. It's really just a book on praying adapted for tastes of new age readers. Instead of praying to some god when you're sad, you should just pray to the universe. Because, you know, the universe cares about you. Forget that on a universal scale you are indistinguishable from the bacteria that live inside your gut: the universe cares about what you want and will help you get it.

The chapter on how this works is very imprecise. Apparently it's like going down the stairs instead of taking the lift and meeting a delivery man you would otherwise have missed. How that relates to the universe getting you the boyfriend you want is not clear. Who sent you the cosmic boyfriend parcel? Who received your boyfriend order? It's clear that it's just a god in disguise.

At least this god has the benefit of not wanting anything in return: no need for following any of those silly rules other religions have, like not working on Saturdays, or not eating pork, or not eating cows, or not coveting your neighbour's wife. All this great mail order god requires is that you order more, more, more! Who can't dig a religion like that? Why should religion be a chore? After all, there's a lot of competition out there – if you're going to go to all the trouble of believing in one of these fel-

lows, the least they can do is give you everything you want!

Hilariously, towards the end the author can't even be bothered to finish writing the book, and just prints her notes in bullet form!

The sources are laughable – for example entire pages of those notes are reproduced from three books by someone who wrote a letter to his god asking lots of questions and then found that – ooh! – his pen didn't stop writing at the end of the letter and wrote all the answers...

Her mention of Uri Geller is also delectably stupid. She begins by saying that she thought his spoon-bending was an optical illusion, then says that her friends corrected her. Aha, I thought, finally a bit of sense in this most daft of books, but no: her friends informed her that he simply persuades the atoms of the spoon to disperse with the power of his mind. Good grief! There's nothing mystical about spoon-bending. It's a magic trick: instructions on how to do it were published in an Israeli journal of magic in the 1960s!

You would think that having written a book about one crazy idea, the author would stick to that one thing, rather than chucking in more foolishness, but of course not: cosmic ordering can also help you to contact the dead. She tells us sagely that there is "increasing evidence" for the existence of a spirit world – oddly she neglects to provide any footnotes pointing us in the direction of this evidence. Here's the real evidence: James Randi has offered a million dollars for anyone demonstrating any supernatural abilities, such as contacting the dead. No one has claimed that money. So we must conclude that anyone who openly claims to be a psychic, medium etc is a fraud. Even if they don't need the money themselves, there are many deserving charities to which they could donate it. (If there are actual psychics in the world, they must be keeping themselves a secret. That would be quite understandable!)

If you've read Michael Shermer's *Why People Believe Weird Things*, you'll be pleased to see gathered together in one book almost every problem identified in his chapter

How Thinking Goes Wrong. In particular, scientific language does not make a science; bold statements do not make claims true; rumours do not equal reality; and, especially, after-the-fact reasoning and coincidence.

This book will appeal to the slow-witted, the extremely gullible, and anyone who wants to be told, you will get *everything* you want, all you have to do is hope – and buy this ridiculous book.

With the Office of Fair Trading taking long-overdue action against so-called psychics, hopefully it'll only be a matter of time until books like this are prevented from having "self-help" printed on the back, and are removed to a supernatural shelf, where their pernicious influence will only affect those who actively search them out, rather than preying on vulnerable people looking for help. – *SWT*

Doctor Who: Earthworld

Jacqueline
Rayner
BBC, pb, 252pp

I started reading this ages and ages ago, and got badly stuck on it – in the end I just skipped ahead to the final book in the series, *The Gallifrey Chronicles*, so I'd be up to date when the new tv series began. Now, however, with a huge and painful gap before the next full series, and my desperation for new Doctor Who boiling over, I took my Doctor Who where I could find it.

Still, this was a painful book to read. The plot is this: an Earth-themed amusement park with lots of mistakes run by homicidal triplets. It all feels very empty and silly.

However, I think it's just a good writer working with a bad premise, since the characterisation of the companions was very well done, Fitz especially. Bad as the book was, it left me wanting to read the next in the series (*Vanishing Point*), so I guess there must have been something good about it. – *SWT*

Dracula's Guest & Other Tales

Bram Stoker
Wordsworth Editions, pb,
224pp

There appears to be a difference of opinion as to whether "Dracula's Guest" was intended to be the first chapter of (or prologue to) *Dracula*, or a standalone short story. The tale is narrated in the first person by an unnamed protagonist who could very well be Jonathan Harker, but there is nothing other than the count himself to link it to the novel. Regardless of Stoker's intention, the story works extremely well on its own, as an Englishman en route to Castle Dracula relates his adventures on Walpurgis Night in Bavaria. The central image of the protagonist's encounter with a wolf in the graveyard is one so haunting that it could only have been written by the man who created the most famous vampire ever.

Twelve more stories make an entirely appropriate thirteen in total, expanding the original collection published posthumously in 1914. As with all the best horror writers, not all of Stoker's tales involve the supernatural, but are no less frightening or tense for it. "The Burial of the Rats" in particular comes to mind. In addition to being a riveting tale of the macabre, there are several comments by the narrator that show such an understanding of human nature as to raise it from the popular to the literary. The first paragraph of "The Coming of Abel Behenna" is another incredible example of an expert hand at work: Stoker revels in his talent for scene-setting by using an orchestra of colour to describe the Cornish coast in vivid, vital detail. Once again, the absence of the supernatural doesn't detract from the suspense, and the tale features an especially ingenious solution to the traditional love triangle.

Another mark of a master is the crafting of an innocuous or even trivial article as a source of fear, and Stoker does this with a domestic cat

in "The Squaw" and a bedroom window in "The Chain of Destiny". The latter is a touching love story serving as a reminder that the gothic horror for which Stoker became famous is correctly termed "gothic romanticism", itself a combination of the trappings of the medieval with the romantic concern with emotion and imagination. Stoker is also adept at the "twist in the tale", and uses it to spine-tingling effect in "The Gypsy's Prophecy" and "Crooken Sands".

The great differences between the stories is one of the strengths of the collection, and shows Stoker's talent for variety: from Count Dracula in "Dracula's Guest" to the gruesome black comedy of "The Dualitists", and the savage swashbuckling of "The Red Stockade". If there is a theme of sorts that links all thirteen tales, it must be their concern with death, and the blood that so often accompanies it – hardly surprising in the work of the man responsible for the popularity of the blood-drinking villain. At times chilling, gruesome, and funny; at others, all three at once; always entertaining, *Dracula's Guest and Other Tales* is as timeless as the Crimson Count himself. As if Stoker's writing wasn't enough, the book is priced in line with the rest of Wordsworth's Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural, at an unbelievable £2.99 in bookshops, even cheaper online. – *RM*

Earthworks

Brian W. Aldiss
Panther, pb, 126pp (1965)

An extremely depressing book – all about pollution, overpopulation, disease and mania – but none the worse for it! I found it very hard to read Aldiss when I was younger – good to find I'm now grown up enough to en-

joy his work. I'll have to try Ballard again next. – *SWT*

Enemies of the System

Brian W. Aldiss
Panther, pb, 124pp (1978)

A brilliant short novel from Brian Aldiss. Very similar in subject matter to a recent episode of Doctor Who ("Midnight"), as a small group of people in a surface train on a hostile alien planet get stranded in the middle of nowhere, and left to face both what's outside and their own natures. Though the character work is interesting, what will stay with me longest from this book are the portraits of devolved humans – a million years ago a colony ship crashed upon this energy-poor planet, and over that time their descendants have adjusted to fill various niches in the food chain. Imagine a pig with an almost human face – and then imagine eating it! – *SWT*

The Homecoming

Ray Bradbury
and Dave McKean
Collins Design, hb, 56pp

A gorgeous book, put together with great care. It only took about five minutes to read, of course, being a short story. The idea – of packaging classic short stories with superb modern artwork – is a good one, but would probably be best aimed at children. This volume does make a nice companion piece to *The Wolves in the Walls* and *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish*. My daughter loved it, but then she's made us sit through Dave McKean's movie *MirrorMask* three times so far this week... – *SWT*

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

RM – Rafe McGregor
SWT – Stephen Theaker

The Paladin Mandates

Mike Chinn

Alchemy, pb, 96pp (1998)

Damian Paladin is something of a cross between Blackhawk and John Constantine, and the six stories in this book detail some of his adventures in 1930s New York and LA.

As a Biggles fan, I was rather disappointed by how little flying there is in the book, but that's not to say the stories aren't entertaining regardless. The supernatural elements are handled well, though the surprising developments in the final tale seem to come out of left field. Talking of odd developments, the way that Leigh decides at the end of the first story to set this flyboy and ghost hunter up as a restaurateur also seemed quite peculiar. But that's incidental to the main thrust of the stories, which are exciting, suspenseful and atmospheric.

The illustrations by Bob Covington are exceptionally good, but unfortunately each seems to be slightly misplaced, with the result that they often give away unexpected developments in the stories. – *SWT*

Shadows Over Baker Street: New Tales of Terror!

Michael Reeves and
John Pelan (editors)

Random House, pb, 446pp
(2003)

As an enthusiast of both Sherlock Holmes and the Cthulhu Mythos I was curious to discover how – to quote the second, longer subtitle – Sherlock Holmes could possibly enter “the nightmare world of H.P. Lovecraft”. If pastiche is the imitation of a style so distinct as to be instantly recognisable, how can a writer

imitate two very different styles in a single story? In addition, the rationales behind the two creations are completely at odds: where Holmes uses the science of deduction to reveal the truth, madness and/or an unpleasant death await those whose curiosity takes them too close to the Mythos. The two subgenres are nigh incompatible, as these eighteen short stories show. Fifteen feature Holmes, and most use the familiar Baker Street setting as a beginning, though there has been little effort to recreate a sense of the time or place. Irene Adler (of “A Scandal in Bohemia”) and Colonel Moran (of “The Empty House”) feature in “Tiger! Tiger!”, Dr Watson endures the adventure of “The Weeping Masks” on his own, and the notorious Professor Moriarty is the protagonist of “Nightmare in Wax”.

The collection begins with Neil Gaiman's award-winning “A Study in Emerald”, obviously intended as a strong starter. Basically a retelling of Holmes and Watson's first collaboration in an Evil British Empire milieu, it is not one of his best. It's difficult to single out a least favourite because the competition is so strong, but I'd have to choose Paul Finch's “The Mystery of the Hanged Man's Puzzle”. While being no worse than many of the rest, it is far too long, and constitutes nearly a tenth of the entire volume. “The Adventure of the Voorish Sign” by Richard A. Lupoff is perhaps representative of the anthology in that in attempting to combine “The Final Problem” with Lovecraft's “The Rats in the Walls” – both excellent short stories – it fails to achieve the excitement or atmosphere of either.

There are only two contributions I can honestly recommend. The highlight of the collection is “The Weeping Masks” by James Lowder, a reminiscence of Watson's experiences during and after the Battle of Maiwand. It is well-written, entertaining, and the Cthulhu element is integral to the story. The climax is an exciting one, and the conclusion presents a neat twist that really did remind me of Lovecraft. “The Drowned Geologist” by Caitlín R. Kiernan takes the form of a letter addressed to Watson

by Dr Tobias Logan during the Great Hiatus (the period where Holmes went missing and was believed dead at Moriarty's hands). The story is a clever mix of Holmes, the Mythos, and the fascinating history of the Yorkshire port of Whitby. Once again the conclusion is fiendishly Lovecraftian, although unfortunately the dating shows a lack of attention to the chronology of either the Holmes stories or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

As for the rest, the connections to Lovecraft are often tenuous, and in too many cases rely on an offhand reference to the *Necronomicon*, as if that were enough to evoke Lovecraft's style. Many of the climaxes brought Ghostbusters to mind as Holmes and Watson battle various aliens, creatures from the pit, daemons, etcetera. One to avoid, with the exception of two stories noted, but perhaps I've missed something because it was reprinted by Del Rey Books in February 2008 and appears to be selling well.

There's no accounting for taste...
– *RM*

Sherlock Holmes and the Plague of Dracula

Stephen Seitz
Mountainside Press,
pb, 228pp (2007)

Considering how difficult it is for new authors to find publishers in the current climate, it seems not only unkind, but counter-productive to be overly critical with a first novel. The best I can say for *The Plague of Dracula*, however, is that it is a valiant effort. Mr Seitz has taken on an ambitious project, pitting two cultural icons against each other in a single volume. Unfortunately, a difficult task has been made impossible by attempting to combine the chronology of *Dracula*, a chunky novel on its own, with a host of unnecessary sub-

plots: the events of three of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short stories, Watson's unfaithful wife, Holmes' vampirism, an alternate explanation of the Great Hiatus, an alliance between Dracula and Moriarty, strategic reviews of the battles of Maiwand and Waterloo, and allusions to Jack the Ripper. Yes, really. The result is tour de farce instead of *tour de force*.

The Plague of Dracula begins in August 1890, but despite the plot unravelling over a year, there is simply too much going on for two hundred and five pages of story. Written as a Sherlock Holmes pastiche, it is presented as an epistolary novel (in imitation of *Dracula*), where Watson's reminiscences would have served as a simpler method of introducing such a complex adventure. This would also have avoided the need for the clumsy "editorial interlude" where Dracula's death, the climax of Bram Stoker's novel, is described in a disappointingly mundane fashion.

Due to inclusion of so many subplots, the settings move with astounding rapidity, from Bistruta to Castle Dracula (where Holmes performs some crime scene work worthy of a CSI episode), London, Winchester, the West Country, Hampstead Heath, and then the Reichenbach Falls. If this review appears to have degenerated into a series of lists, I hope it gives some indication of the amount of storyline squeezed in. Thankfully the remainder takes place in London, beginning with Watson being consulted by Lestrade on a possible return of the Ripper. An undead Holmes apparently meets his end at the hands of Lord Arthur Godalming in the climax, and the conclusion reveals an original twist on the true nature of vampirism.

Even the most proficient writer, with dozens of novels to his or her name, would have required a volume at least as long as *Dracula* to manage such an intricate tale. For a first-time novelist, the Herculean task has proved too great. It might have been rescued by publication as a trilogy of novellas, and for this the editor must share some of the blame, as well as for the occasional errors in the text. Like the majority of its predecessors, this particular attempt to match de-

ductive reasoning against Gothic horror fails. It would, however, be interesting to see how Mr Seitz applied himself to a less demanding task, and such a second attempt may well make a very interesting read. — RM

The Tangled Skein

David Stuart Davies

Wordsworth Editions, pb,
176pp (originally published
1992, reprinted 2006)

There are four good reasons why this novella shouldn't work. First, many Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts — surely a significant proportion of the target audience — reject the inclusion of fictional characters that don't fit in with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's originals. Similarly, many disapprove of the inclusion of the supernatural, as Sir Arthur's cases always concluded with a rational explanation. Third, the introduction of Count Dracula not only violates both the aforementioned rules of engagement, but also presents the problem of two icons of Victorian popular fiction competing for attention in a single slim volume. Finally, it is a sequel to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which brings a host of its own problems.

But the novella does work — and very well.

It is fast-paced and atmospheric: a short, sharp, rollercoaster ride from Baker Street to Dartmoor and back again; a thriller for all readers rather than just fans of Holmes or Dracula. *The Tangled Skein* takes its title from a phrase first coined by Holmes in *The Hound* and is set in November 1888, the day after Sir Henry Baskerville leaves England on his recuperative expedition. Watson reveals that the villain behind Baskerville's woes — Stapleton — did not die in Grimpen Mire, and is now alive, well, and seeking retribution. While Holmes and Watson defy his attempts at assassination, Inspector Lestrade consults the Great Detective about the brutal murder of a child on

Hampstead Heath. Once a witness refers to a "Phantom Lady", Holmes and Watson are well on their way to the eagerly-awaited confrontation with the sanguinary count as the separate strands of Stapleton and Dracula are expertly merged. Van Helsing makes a dramatic appearance when he saves Holmes from the Phantom Lady, and subsequently educates him in the lore of the undead.

Mr Davies wisely ignores most of the events and characters in *Dracula* and employs *The Hound* as a sinister backdrop rather than a case to be revisited. There are some excellent set pieces, several of which appear in pleasingly quick succession. Holmes and Watson's pursuit of Dracula's human agent over the moor is particularly gripping. A fitting climax takes place in Grimpen Mire, with an entertaining twist at the end of the action. Like so many of the most popular Holmes stories, the narrative concludes in Baker Street — on this occasion with Van Helsing joining Holmes and Watson for Christmas Eve dinner.

This is the best of the four publications that have set Holmes on Count Dracula's trail thus far (of which I am aware, at least, the others being *Holmes vs Dracula* by Loren D. Estleman, *The Holmes-Dracula File* by Fred Saberhagen and *Sherlock Holmes and the Plague of Dracula* by Stephen Seitz), and is deservedly back in print after some years. A fine example of a successful foray into the murky ground between mystery and horror. — RM

Thorns

Robert Silverberg
NEL, pb, 160pp (1977)

New bands, stuck on a promotional treadmill after the release of their first album, often look back to the way the Beatles would release a couple of albums a year in the 1960s. (I admire the Arctic Monkeys for getting their second album out so quickly, where other bands have been prevented from doing so.) How much more

stunning is it to look at the examples of these science fiction writers of the same period, who would often release four or five books a year, a remarkable achievement, even allowing for some of them being reprints of earlier magazine work. In 1967 (according to *Science Fiction: the Illustrated Encyclopedia*), as well as *Thorns* (my copy is a later reprint), Silverberg put out *The Gate of Worlds*, *Those Who Watch*, *To Open the Sky*, *The Time-Hoppers* and *Planet of Death*. I don't know if current-day authors, working away at huge trilogies (and receiving much better payment than their predecessors did, to be fair to their masters), chafe at the bit as much as bands do, but it's interesting to think of what might have resulted from some of them writing twelve different short novels, instead of just the one trilogy. One thing's for sure, lazy readers like me would have read more of their work.

So, another review of an old book from me – this might be the way of the immediate future, since I've vowed to buy no new books as long as I own more than 1,000 unread books! (I have about 160 to go.)

As with Brian Aldiss and J.G. Ballard, I found Robert Silverberg's books a bit of a struggle as a teenager. I'm not disappointed about that, because if I'd read virtually all their books by the time I was 25, as happened with Asimov, Heinlein, Moorcock, Jack Vance and so on, I would have nothing left to read now: I might even have to read new books! What made the books difficult back then was mainly their seriousness: Moorcock is as experimental as Silverberg, Aldiss or Ballard, often more so, but there are always gags in there. The closest Silverberg's 1960s and 1970s novels (or at least the ones I've read so far) come to being funny is when they evoke a wry half-smile at the awfulness of having to be a human and live among other humans – as symbolised in this book by a surgically-altered human living among us. This book is grim, serious, and reminds you of the worst things about yourself – and, yet, in spite of that, it has a sweet, romantic centre. It hardly needs to be said that, as a book by Robert Silverberg from 1967, at a

time when, as far as I can see, you could make a serious argument that he was one of the best novelists working in the English language, this is a brilliant book, but I will say it anyway. – *SWT*

COMICS

Aliens Omnibus Volume 1

Mark Verheiden et al
Dark Horse, tpb, 384pp

These stories follow on from the second film, *Aliens*. The first two stories, *Outbreak* and *Nightmare Asylum*, tell the ongoing adventures of Newt and Hicks, while Ripley turns up for the third main story, *Female War*. Unfortunately, once *Alien³* was released further adventures for Newt and Hicks were obviously out of the question. So Dark Horse decided to “fix” the problem by rereleasing the books and changing the names of the protagonists to Billie and Wilks, who just happened to have had all the same adventures as Newt and Hicks – this volume collects those edited versions. It's a very clumsy solution, and it creates a feeling of unreality throughout the book, because it's always at the back of your mind that the characters are not really who they say they are – not least when they meet up with Ripley and she talks about their special bond! I realise that Dark Horse have to go with the wishes of the licensors, but as a reader I can't help thinking it wasn't really worth all that trouble just to keep *Alien³* in continuity.

The stories themselves are good, giving us what we always expected from the *Aliens* sequels and only just about got at the end of the fourth – the aliens arriving on Earth. The results are as devastating as might be expected.

One strange thing about the aliens in the comics is that they are demonstrated to communicate telepathically, even across interstellar dis-

tances. I don't think that's something you can see in the movies, but it does give the writers the opportunity to develop plotlines more complex than “man finds bug, bug stomps man”.

Lastly, one caption in the book may be of interest to some critics of *AVP2*: “We didn't see the underlying pattern behind their evolutionary process – the way every facet of their existence was geared toward propagation. The queens matured at whatever rate their survival dictated.”

That's why the aliens in *AVP2* don't hang about inside their hosts – there isn't time! – *SWT*

Battle of the Planets: Trial By Fire

Alex Ross et al
Titan, tpb, 80pp

It says a lot about this book that while the artists of each poster page and alternative cover are carefully noted, nowhere is anyone credited as the writer. Five names are listed on the cover, including Alex Ross (only credited for covers inside), Munier Sharrieff and Dreamer Design (neither credited at all inside). Inside each issue is credited to Wilson Tortosa, Rhyse Yorke & Shane Law, with Edwin David also credited for issue one, though there's no sign what precise role any of them played.

Basically, it's a bit of a pudding.

To be honest, I only started to read this because it was hanging around the house and I was trying to whip through a few books quickly to get my number of unread books down a bit. But within a few short pages I was forcefully reminded just how much I loved this cartoon when it was first on. I don't think we ever got *Speed Racer* in the UK, or *Robotech*, or *Astro Boy*, but we got *Battle of the Planets*, and it was the most exciting thing I'd ever seen. Even now I find the concept of the fiery Phoenix illogically thrilling.

This was an reasonably enjoyable

start to a series. Three-issue trade paperbacks are so short as to be rather pointless, but it got things off to a decent start. The figure work isn't always perfect, but the unnamed writers seem to have a good handle on the characters. No sign of 7-Zark-7 yet, but I hope he'll turn up eventually. – *SWT*

Buffy the Vampire Slayer Omnibus, Vol. 3

Various writers and artists
Dark Horse, tpb, 320pp

Nowhere near as good as volumes one and two, but then those stories mostly date from the end of the comic's run, and had the added interest of showing us episodes in Buffy's life that predated the tv series, not to mention dealing with the retrospective presence of Dawn. These stories are okay, but they date from the very beginning of that run and it shows. – *SWT*

DC Universe: The Stories of Alan Moore

Alan Moore
DC Comics, tpb, 304pp

Any book that contains "Whatever Happened to the Man of Steel?" has to get five stars, straight off the bat. It's one of the greatest comics ever written, and the finest send-off a character could have (it relates the final story of the original Superman, prior to the John Byrne reboot). Since this also includes "For the Man Who Has Everything" and *The Killing Joke*, this is one of those times when five stars aren't nearly enough.

The rest of the contents may not reach those high standards, but still,

any fan of Alan Moore's work will count themselves lucky to find them so conveniently gathered together. The Green Lantern and Omega Men short stories are DC-branded Futuroshocks. The Green Arrow and Vigilante stories won't change your life, but better to find that out here rather than after paying over the odds for the back issues! – *SWT*

Ex Machina, Vol. 2: Tag

Brian K. Vaughan
Wildstorm, tpb, 128pp

I'm reading these out of order as I get them from the library (thank you Birmingham Libraries and your online reservation system – it's like a completely free version of Amazon), so I came to this having only read volume three, *Fact v. Fiction*. I'm usually fairly precious about reading things in order – it's a luxury of having had enough money to buy the things I want. But since making my boring vow to not buy any new books I've had to reappraise my way of going about things. It doesn't work out too badly – joining a series halfway through often makes it twice as interesting. You get the kick of all the interesting things that are happening now, as well as finding out all the interesting things that have happened previously – it's backstory to the max. That's certainly what finally got me watching *Stargate SG-1* for a few seasons towards the end, whereas before I'd found it interminably dull.

Mentioning SG-1 in a review of *Ex Machina* is like sticking a doughnut on top of a Viennetta, so I'll move quickly on.

In this book Mayor Hundred sees the effects that exposure to whatever gave him his powers doesn't have the same effect on everybody else. Plus, he agrees to officiate over a marriage between two men, a storyline that will, I hope, seem impossibly dated a decade or two from now, when we're

all flying around on jetpacks (just like Mayor Hundred's) and marrying whoever the heck we please. – *SWT*

Ex Machina, Vol. 3: Fact v. Fiction

Brian K. Vaughan
Wildstorm, tpb, 144pp

A lot of people noticed that Lost's dramatic return to its very, very best came after Brian K. Vaughan joined the writing team. Whether the two events were connected as cause and effect is impossible for anyone not working on the programme to know for sure, but the strength and confidence of the serialised storytelling in this book (and in *Y: the Last Man* and *Runaways*) certainly suggests as much.

I enjoyed this story of a second-rate superhero turned mayor so much that I almost regretted Vaughan having used the ideas for a comic (and I love comics), because it's only a matter of time until he's running his own tv show, and this would have been perfect. – *SWT*

Ex Machina, Vol. 6: Power Down

Brian K. Vaughan,
Tony Harris
Wildstorm, tpb, 144pp

I came to this book having just read volume three and volume two, in that order. In this one the mayor has to get to the bottom of a blackout, and we see a little bit more of what he did on September 11. I enjoyed this just as much as the previous books, but damn that sketchbook at the back for tricking me into thinking I still had lots of comics to go.

Credit to Tony Harris, though, he

deserves the space. His work on *Starman* was often spectacular, and though his pages here aren't quite so ornate, they are clear, direct and just as expressive.

A nod too to JD Mettler: his or her work here as colourist is superb. Every page looks glorious. Granted, Wildstorm use much nicer paper than their poor cousins at Vertigo, so everything's going to look that much brighter and more brilliant, but if the colouring was bad, that would only make it all the more obvious! – *SWT*

Lucifer, Vol. 1: Devil in the Gateway

Mike Carey et al
DC, tpb, 160pp

The miniseries that forms the first half of this volume is okay – very much Vertigo-by-numbers.

The opening story of the ongoing series that follows is a bit underwhelming and offers nothing we haven't seen before in *Hellblazer*. It compares very poorly indeed with the barnstorming openers of other Vertigo series – e.g. *The Invisibles* #1, *Preacher* #1 or *Y: the Last Man* #1. I enjoyed the final issue, though, which begins the story of a psychic girl detective.

Maybe Mike Carey played it safe in these issues, giving Sandman/Vertigo fans just what they were expecting. Hopefully volume two will see the series developing a character more of its own. – *SWT*

Modesty Blaise: The Iron God

Peter O'Donnell,
Romero

Titan Books Ltd, tpb, 64pp

This book contains two complete Modesty Blaise strips from the *Lon-*

don Evening Standard (running from 14 May 1973 to 9 February 1974): “The Wicked Gnomes” and “The Iron God”. They are written by Peter O'Donnell, and the art's by Romero. I'd only previously met Modesty in the first of her novels, so reading this I somewhat missed the additional insight the novel gave into her character, motivations and strategies. Still, the action, tension and excitement were all intact, and Romero's interpretation of Modesty Blaise was very nearly as attractive as I had imagined her to be. – *SWT*

Modesty Blaise: Mister Sun

Peter O'Donnell

Titan Books, tpb, 112pp

This book collects three stories: “Mister Sun”, “The Mind of Mrs Drake” and “Uncle Happy”. All three are highly enjoyable action thrillers, though for me “The Mind of Mrs Drake” was compromised somewhat by the title character being an actual psychic. (Moments like that always make me think of Magnum meeting a ghost, or of the JAG lawyer who had premonitions.) But there was a lot of it about in the 1960s, and the character is treated seriously. I suppose it's not much of a departure from Willie Garvin's tingling ears of trouble. Mister Sun is a drug lord with whom Modesty tangles; the trail takes her to wartime Vietnam. Uncle Happy is a philanthropist who raises Modesty's suspicions by staring at her current lover in a Vegas bar.

What's most striking about these stories is how easily they flow from one strip to the next. Looking at each strip in isolation, you can see how a first-time reader could follow them, but there's none of the stop-start repetition that makes, say, the old Dan Dare comics so painful to read in bulk.

Now if only I could read one of these books without “Modesty Blaise, Modesty plays, Modesty Blaise, Modesty plays!” going round

and round in my head... Thank you Sparks! – *SWT*

Modesty Blaise: Uncle Happy

Peter O'Donnell

Titan Books Ltd, tpb, 64pp

This book contains the stories “Uncle Happy”, which ran from 20 April 1965 to 18 September 1965, and “Bad Suki”, which ran from 15 January 1968 to 25 May 1968. “Uncle Happy” appears also in a more recent Titan reprint book, *Modesty Blaise: Mister Sun*, reviewed above. It's a good yarn, with memorable villains.

“Bad Suki” is short but sweet, with a twist that anyone who has ever read a story or seen a film will have seen coming a mile off, but is none the worse for it. Plus, there's a treat in this story: as well as the usual saucy shots of Modesty in her trademark black bra, we actually see her with her hair down, when she goes undercover as a hippy. – *SWT*

Star Wars Omnibus: X-Wing Rogue Squadron Vol. 1

Haden Blackman et al
Dark Horse, tpb, 296pp

The first two stories here, “Rogue Leader” and “The Rebel Opposition”, are a bit average. It was a bit of a struggle to get through them. The third, though, “The Phantom Affair”, is a huge improvement in every regard – plot, script, art, lettering, the works! All those things combine to leave it looking more like a French album than a mid-nineties Dark Horse comic.

One of the things for which I was most grateful in the third story was that it finally became possible to dis-

tinguish between the human members of the team, by both their dialogue and their looks.

If I was reviewing "The Phantom Affair" alone I would have given it four stars out of five, while "Rogue Leader" and "The Rebel Opposition" would have got two.

Finally, a curse on whoever decided to include the Rogue Squadron Handbook at the back of this volume. If it had contained spoilers for this book, that would have been bad enough, but it's full of spoilers for future volumes too (e.g. an ally from this book is included in the villains section). So watch out for that – or rather don't watch out for it, keep your eyes averted! – *SWT*

Showcase Presents Teen Titans, Volume 1

Bob Haney et al
DC, tpb, 528pp

I'm tempted to say that these were the most diabolically bad comics I've ever read, but I've a feeling that in a different mood, or maybe just in smaller quantities, I might have thought that they were the best!

In context they make sense: this is a teenage version of the Batman tv show, with all the corny dialogue and goofy villains that that would make you expect. Out of context it's appalling stuff: the dialogue is excruciating, the villains idiotic, and the whole thing intensely embarrassing.

There's a change of writers with issue 18, the last in the book. It's a rather mundane issue, but it's a relief after the previous 500 pages of hipness and grooviness.

Unless you're in the mood for a comic written by Austin Powers, I'd give this a miss.

The book does have one redeeming feature: the Santa minidress that "Wonder Chick" wears in issue 13, "A Christmas Happening". In fact, having said that, Nick Cardy's art throughout is rather lovely. – *SWT*

MAGAZINES

McSweeney's Quarterly Concern #13

Chris Ware (ed.)
McSweeney's, hb, 264pp

A stunning book, created and produced with immense skill and care. If, towards the end, I started to get a bit tired of reading about failed and struggling relationships, that's probably just because I read the book out of order and left those ones till the end. The book only deals with one narrow area of comics – independents created by writer/artists – but since that's an area that's often hard to notice behind the glare and pizzazz of mainstream comics that's easy to forgive. – *SWT*

MOVIES

Southland Tales

Richard Kelly (dir.)
US, 145 mins

This is a hard film to review, because I can't be sure whether I actually saw it. Surely something so strange and out of the ordinary must have been a dream? But then I felt the same way about Donnie Darko, by the same director, and I've heard other people talking about that movie, so I think that there's a good chance that these films really do exist – however unlikely that seems.

Released in the cinema this was a colossal flop. Watching it, it's easy to see why. It's weird, confusing and sprawling. The funny thing is, it could easily have been a huge success. The Fifth Element and Total Recall show that you can get away with a lot of weirdness if you include a bit of fighting. And strange as Southland

Tales is, with its psychics and porn stars and roller skates, there's nothing here as weird as Chris Tucker in The Fifth Element!

In this movie The Rock is almost as brave in his performance as Tucker was in The Fifth Element (though not quite as successful), but if he'd been given the opportunity to fight his way through a handful of enemies in every other scene this film might well have sneaked its way into being a hit.

A lot of people have been totally dumbfounded by the tone of Southland Tales, but as you can see from the other reviews in this issue, I read a lot of comics, and so I was well set up to "get" it. So would anyone who's read a bit of Howard Chaykin: the sex, the media, the rebels, the caricatures and the oppression – it's all here. If you've ever wondered what an American Flagg movie might look like, this is a good place to start.

Some consider the film to be badly cast, but I don't agree. For starters, anything with Sarah Michelle Gellar in is well cast, as far as I'm concerned. She's a very underrated actor, and I'm baffled by the fact that she doesn't get cast in romantic comedies, when she seems perfectly suited to them. You just have to look at how people invested in Buffy's relationships with Angel and Spike.

Anyway, gushing aside...

As for the rest of the cast, I'll get at least halfway through any Christopher Lambert film without giving up, so that carried me far enough into this movie to find my feet. Nice also to see some of my SNL favourites in the movie: Cheri Oteri and the brilliant Amy Poehler. Justin Timberlake brings the uncanny focus of the former child star to his performance as a traumatised soldier, and Seann William Scott leaves American Pie far, far behind. On the basis of this he could be well placed in a few years to fill the shoes of Bruce Willis. He wears a shaved head very well.

I haven't said much about the plot, because I don't want to give anything away. So I'll end the review by saying this: everyone says it's an appalling mess. If you watch the movie with that in mind, you might be surprised by much you enjoy it. – *SWT*