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Editorial	2
PROFESSOR CHALLENGER IN SPACE, PART II	3
Scenes Relating to an Assault on Planet 93	3
How the Assault Commenced, and the Terrible Way in Which It Concluded	8
'Bring Me the Head of George Edward Challenger!'	12
How to Get Ahead in Space	15
Flies in Honey	20
The Interstellar Battleships	23
Mrs Challenger to the Rescue	28
A Slap-Up Meal for Ten!	32
QUIET, THE TIN CAN BRAINS ARE HUNTING! PART I	36
The Message Brought by Nanotus the Giant	36
Quigg Time!	41
Travelling Through the Space-Time Continuum	45

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Editorial

Stephen William Theaker
Editor

This issue concludes the story of *Professor Challenger in Space*, and begins that of *Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!*

Originally, this second novel was to be a more direct sequel to the first, and it would have featured Malone's eyes being stolen by aliens. As a novice novelist, this device appealed to me because describing what each of his eyes saw would allow me an excuse for describing galaxy-wide events in the easy-to-write first person. In the event, I did not rely upon this crutch, but I still like the idea that the first part of the novel would have recounted what the left eye saw, the second part would have told what the right eye saw, and the third part would have been seen through a mechanical eye crafted for Malone by Professor Challenger as they battled to rescue Malone's other eyes and save the universe.

At one point I also considered revealing the Grim Thinker, who will appear in the portion of this story reprinted next issue, to be actually a far-future version of Malone himself – this idea was dropped, as was that in the above paragraph, due to Malone not featuring in the novel.

If he had appeared in it, the following scene would have been used at an early point. It is included here for completeness.

* * *

A few years following the adventure of Rarraak-Ra, Professor Challenger and I were taking a rest in the park. He was sitting beside me on the park bench, as usual, scratching away at the junction of his head and his body.

"Is it still bothering you," I asked.

"What do you think?" he asked, as if I were an idiot asking the way to his own nose... "A severed head is never pleasant."

"I imagine not," I said, taking him not at all seriously. I was not in the mood for one of his tantrums. The sun was shining far too brightly for that! "Especially when soup pours out of the joint, ha ha!"

He clouted me on the back of the head.

"Ow!" I exclaimed.

"How do you like those apples?" he asked.

"I don't like them very well at all," I replied. "Please keep them to yourself in future."

"Ha ha," he laughed.

I decided not to pursue the matter. At least he was smiling.

"Do you see much of the Mechanical Housewife these days?" he enquired, after a few moments' reverie.

The Mechanical Housewife was an extremely delightful creature with whom I had been fortunate enough to forge an acquaintance during our adventure in space. Sadly, the demands of living in different dimensions, and different eras of history, had made it difficult to continue the relationship.

"I'm afraid not, Challenger. How are things going with Anna and yourself?"

"Well, she is pretty busy nowadays," he replied. "She often has universes to save, that kind of thing... She is always back in time to cook Sunday dinner, mind."

"Well, of course," said I. "There are limits, after all..."

"If only there were," said Challenger. "I used to feel one step ahead of things, you know," he said ruefully. "I used to be the man in charge, the fellow making all the running. Look at me now, nothing to do but sit wasting the day away with an idiot like you..."

The Editor

Professor Challenger in Space, Part II

Scenes Relating to an Assault on Planet 93

Lord Roxton and his Wildies led the charge. They hurled themselves at the Raak in the guardhouse, ignoring the panicky firing of the four alien soldiers, dismissive of the imminence of death, determined to get through the gate into the prison compound. Despite the number of tribesmen who died in the process, the guards were soon overpowered. It was savage and brutal, and I turned away in horror as their throats were ripped out by the teeth of the victors.

Professor Summerlee was hot on their heels. Once Roxton and his warriors dragged the reptilian corpses out of the way, he was at the computer pad, trying to get the gate open. Lord Roxton became impatient. He pulled the professor to one side and loosed a few Winchester rounds upon the pad. The gate dropped into the ground.

‘Luck!’ said Summerlee. ‘Totally unscientific!’

The savages of Planet 93 had waited for no instructions before streaming into the compound. As we three travellers left the guardhouse and followed them inside we were greeted by the sight of the carnage they were causing. They went every time for the single weak spot in the carapace of the Raak, ripping at the tender necks with their teeth. The weapons with which we had provided them were being dropped to the ground as they fell into a mad berserker fury. Bloody as the battle was, and even if our allies alarmed us more than our foes, we knew our cause to be righteous.

The compound was open to the blood-red skies, steel cages set back into the walls and arranged

around the edge of the square where the battle was taking place. Opposite the gate, beyond the square, was a squat and ugly building from which were trickling the Raak. Rushing to the nearest of the holding pens, Summerlee, Roxton and I worked to get it open. The Ka-Marians inside were terrified, huddling against the wall furthest from us, their ear tentacles sticking stiffly into the air. They didn’t know us, but it was not that which frightened them so. It was the behaviour of their half-insane cousins.

‘Come on, get out!’ shouted Roxton to the prisoners when we finally broke the lock. ‘The Raak will have reinforcements here soon!’

‘This is your chance to fight back,’ I said to them. ‘Take it now!’

Though I expect our accents were not particularly good, it seemed that Challenger’s language lessons on the journey out from the Solar System had done the trick. They seemed to understand. One of them shouted at the others, yelling at them to get to their feet. If they felt shame at their previous behaviour, they didn’t let it interfere with their subsequent actions. Rushing out of the cage they snatched up weapons dropped by the other combatants and joined the slaughter of the Raak. One or two managed to blow themselves up while learning to use the unfamiliar technology, but the others fired with glee upon their former tormentors.

I watched with mingled horror and admiration as they entered the battle. ‘Didn’t Challenger say these people were peace-loving?’

‘There’s no contradiction,’ said Roxton as we

moved to the next cage. 'You must love peace with all your heart to be willing to kill for it.' Even if we didn't agree, now was not the time to argue.

'Any sign of Challenger?' asked Summerlee.

'None at all,' said Roxton.

The battle continued to rage around us as off-duty Raak troopers began to wake up and arrive on the scene, their peculiar clothes only half-fastened about their scaly bodies. It was a very unlovely sight, although I tried to tell myself that I should hate them for their deeds, not their appearance. Lord Roxton stood with his back to us as we tried to get the cage open, picking off any villains who came too close.

'Damnation,' said Summerlee angrily. 'This is taking far too long.' He looked around the battlefield, his quick, smart eyes searching for something. Spotting a set of electronic keys on the belt of a nearby Raak corpse, he dashed over to get them.

'This should make it easier,' he said when he returned with the keys in his hand. The other hand was holding his stomach. 'Just a twinge of the old ulcer,' he grimaced. Soon the remaining prisoners were free, and the Raak found themselves fighting a desperate battle for survival. Attempts to surrender and requests for mercy were treated with contempt by former Moon-dwellers and frenzied savages alike.

'The battle goes well,' I observed.

'No reinforcements will arrive in time to save these Raak,' said Summerlee.

'But our time is still limited,' said Lord Roxton, thumping the wall with frustration, 'and it's running out fast. Where the hell is Challenger? And why isn't he among the prisoners?'

'The Raak,' said Professor Summerlee, a few days before, to his mixed audience of Earthmen and Wildies, 'are very similar to what we on Earth would call beetles, with a touch of crocodile and tortoise about the gills.' He pointed at the partially dissected corpse at his feet. 'About six feet long and three feet wide. They have mandibles,' he said, pointing at them, but even if you break them off they will just grow a new pair at their own leisure. They eat here.' Using a crowbar from the ship he levered open the hatch that the creatures used as a mouth. 'Note the difficulty with which I am opening the orifice – the chances of your being able to do that, with the creature actively opposing you, are pretty small.'

One of the tribesmen muttered something under his breath.

Summerlee asked Roxton, 'What did he say?'

'He says they can't be killed, except by extreme measures, by twenty men hitting one of them, or by

dropping a pile of rocks on one. I hope you have something to go on, Professor Summerlee, because my men are feeling somewhat dispirited.'

I said to the two of them, 'I'm in pretty low spirits myself. Can we succeed where Challenger failed?'

'Challenger made mistakes,' said Lord Roxton. 'We have to make sure we are more careful. Come on, Summerlee old chap, did you find anything for us to go on?'

'As a matter of fact,' said the professor of anatomy with a grim nod, 'I found something rather splendid. It's just a question of picking your spot carefully.'

It was clear that if Challenger still lived, he had been held apart from the other prisoners. Summerlee called out to the nearest Ka-Marian, who came over to us. It was a middle-aged male, his hair in transition between a royal blue and a steely grey. Summerlee grasped him by the shoulders and forced out the question between gritted teeth.

'Challenger? Do you know Challenger?'

The man paused a moment before replying, giving his mind a chance to decipher Summerlee's strange accent. 'Challenger? Of course I know him. You mean the King, don't you? Are you his friends, the other Earthmen?'

'Yes,' said Summerlee eagerly, yet still with pain in his voice. I became a little worried that the ulcer he had mentioned had actually burst. Possibly the return to normal ship's food – sandwiches (with which we had been fully restocked by the Mechanical Housewife, though I must confess – without wishing any slight upon my lover – that they were not up to Mrs Challenger's standards) and whisky – had provoked an unpleasant reaction after the gentle and charming meals of grass on Zangpan's World. 'Quick man, where is he?'

The tentacles of the Moon-man drooped somewhat. 'He's in there,' he said sadly, pointing to the squat building.

We were puzzled. 'But there's nothing in there,' said I. 'Isn't it just the mess hall and dormitory for the guards? Are they questioning him?'

'Questioning? Oh no. They couldn't if they wanted to. They may have ruled us for half a millennium, but they never learnt our language. We managed to keep it from them. Sorry but it is worse than that. They converted one room for him. They've never seen an Earthman before, you see.'

'What do you mean?' asked Summerlee, the horror in his voice battling for supremacy with the pain.

'The Raak created a makeshift laboratory. They

have been testing him, doing experiments. I'm afraid it might be too late.'

The professor turned back to us. 'Get to him quickly. I'll wait here.'

But Roxton and I didn't move, our attention transfixed by the spreading patch of blood on Summerlee's shirt.

'What happened?' asked Roxton in horror. Summerlee winced, and put his hand back on the wound.

'The blasted Raak with the keys was lying doggo, and he got a shot in before I finished him off. Listen, I'll be perfectly fine – but the two of you must find Challenger!'

Lord Roxton and I looked at one another. There was a lot of blood on that shirt.

'You stay with him,' I said to Roxton. 'I'll see if I can find Challenger.'

'No!' said Summerlee, lowering himself to the ground. 'Both of you go. I've got my Winchester to protect me. And if this wound is going to kill me, it will kill me regardless of whether Roxton is holding my hand or not!'

'I'll stay here with him,' said the Ka-Marian. He shook our hands, an incongruous yet appreciated action in such difficult circumstances. He must have picked up the habit from Challenger. 'It is what George would have wanted. My name is Aikor.'

'Don't speak of Challenger in the past tense just yet,' I said. 'He's proved himself a dozen times over to be a mighty tough beggar to kill. Hang on a minute,' I said, remembering the tale of Challenger's first visit to the Moon. 'Aikor, the famous scientist?'

He nodded. 'I was a scientist, it is true, before our world fell apart, and a well-respected one. But for the last three weeks I have been nothing but another insect being ground beneath the heel of the Raak Empire.' He addressed himself to Summerlee's wound. 'I have some experience in the healing arts. Our biologies are different, but I may be able to help.'

'That would be most appreciated,' said Professor Summerlee.

Aikor smiled. 'Are all Earthmen so brave?'

'Only the stupid ones,' said Lord John Roxton. 'Come on, Malone, let's find Challenger.'

'Good luck,' I said to Summerlee, before we set off towards the ominous building. 'We'll be back for you.'

'Luck is unscientific,' he called after me. 'But I'll put my faith in friendship.'

'This is your destination,' the Mechanical Housewife

had said to us, back on Zangpan's World. 'Planet 93, one of the weaker outposts of the colossal Raak Empire: original name Ka-Mar. The Kamarian word 'Ell' simply means 'from', or 'child of'. This was their home, people. Take a look at it now.'

It looked pretty bad to all of us. The Raak had completely subjugated the planet more than five centuries ago, and they had been mining it ever since. The oceans had been boiled away to permit easy access to the sea-bed, mountains had been blasted in half to get at the jewels within, the ground had been turned over as you might fork over the earth in your garden. The entire surface was a slag-heap. Nothing would ever live a natural life there again. The Raak had returned the captured slaves there, partly as punishment for the insolent escape of their parents, partly because they still hoped to dig up a few more scraps of precious metals.

'I've only ever seen one thing more repulsive,' said Professor Summerlee. 'Challenger first thing in the morning.'

'Why you,' I said in my best imitation of Challenger's gruff tones, 'I ought to...'

Incredibly, even Challenger was laughing. 'Mrs Challenger counts herself a very lucky woman, I'll have you know!' Since his confrontation with Master Zangpan he seemed to have mellowed. If not a lot, then at least a little was better than nothing.

'Very good,' said the Mechanical Housewife, 'but enough joking already – this is a serious business.'

'We know that,' I replied. 'But we joke with good reason, you know. Laugh today, for tomorrow we may have our tongues cut out by savages or alien abominations!'

'Quite right, my boy,' agreed Lord Roxton. 'Camaraderie and *esprit de corps* can count for a bally lot in a tricky situation. I remember one time during the war, I was placed in command of the sorriest bunch of half-hearted soldiers you could ever imagine. Their previous commanding office had been a fool – naturally he'd been promoted – and as a matter of policy he had always had the first man to question an order shot. He had honestly believed that to be the best way of earning the respect of the enlisted men.'

'Is this going somewhere, Roxton?' asked Challenger with no attempt to mask his impatience.

Professor Summerlee decided to take up the story. 'Challenger, this is the inspirational story of how Lord John Roxton took a mutinous bunch of dispirited soldiers and through brilliant yet firm leadership – tempered with a sense of humour – gave them a sense of self-worth. The feeling of being part of a

team that cared about each other helped them get through the worst times together.'

I looked to Lord Roxton. 'Is that how it was?'

He shook his head. 'The professor tells a pretty story, but I'm afraid he got one part wrong. They all died a month later, the squad sent into an enemy trap by my idiotic predecessor, who was organising the war from the rear. I survived by the skin of my teeth, hiding among their dead bodies as the enemy searched for survivors. I was lucky to escape with a single bayonet wound.'

We all stared at him in amazement.

'The point is this,' he continued. 'They died with self-respect and they died like heroes. No man can ask for more.'

None of us cared to dispute the matter with him. Superficially, Lord Roxton was the most easy-going and carefree of our little group, but from time to time he revealed a glimpse of the horrors through which he had put himself. It was never a pretty sight.

The Mechanical Housewife changed the image on the screen to a tactical view of Planet 93, showing the position of the mining camps. There were several of them dotted all over the planet.

'One hundred years ago,' she said, 'after a century of planning, the Ka-Marians slaughtered every Raak on the planet. Loading captured spacecraft with the equipment they would need to build a new world they set off for the Moon, where they built Ell Ka-Mar. Now recaptured, they have been put to work in the mines.'

'How can we rescue them all?' asked I. 'There are so many bases.'

'There are two things in your favour. The second is that you needn't rescue every one of them. As I said, most of the Ka-Marians are working in the mines, but a select group is kept imprisoned – those considered the greatest threat by the Raak! If you can free them, they will spread rebellion across the world. The Raak, despite their devastating attack on Ell Ka-Mar, do not consider Planet 93 to be of particular importance, and their presence there is not large or well-armed.'

'The attack was simply a punitive example,' said Challenger angrily.

'That's right,' answered the Mechanical Housewife. 'An example which was transmitted live to every planet in the Empire.'

Lord John Roxton had been paying careful attention. 'What was the first thing in our favour?'

'The original evacuation of Planet 93 did not proceed as quickly as the escaping slaves would have hoped. As they prepared to leave they became aware

of approaching Raak reinforcement troop carriers. There was no way they could fight them off, so they created a diversion. Two thousand of their most fierce fighters stayed behind to create that diversion.'

'What bravery,' gaped Lord Roxton.

'As the majority of the Ka-Marians slipped away, those who remained fought and fought before breaking into smaller parties and hiding out in the mine tunnels. Once the Raak realised they had been duped they abandoned Planet 93 altogether, at least for a few decades. There were more valuable planets upon which they wished to concentrate their resources.'

'By scavenging in the mining stations left abandoned by their mortal enemies, the Wildies, as they began to call themselves, were able to survive. It would go without saying, if you gentlemen were not from Earth, that a good proportion of their bravest fighters were female and so the race was able to propagate. In such terrible conditions they could hardly be expected to prosper, but they did survive.'

'Then, as if their lives weren't already bad enough, the Raak returned. Not as miners, but as hunters. Planet 93 soon became one of the most popular tourist worlds of the Raak Empire, as warriors of all ages came to participate in the great hunt. Living in the darkness, avoiding Raak hunting parties, fighting when they had to, the Wildies became little more than beasts. Few kept their sanity living such a nightmarish existence – those that didn't were the lucky ones.'

'So some still live,' said Roxton.

'That's right,' replied the Housewife, nodding. 'Somehow they managed to survive all these years.'

Lord Roxton shook his head. 'There's no mystery there,' he told her. 'Hunting the Wildies to extinction would have meant the end of the hunt. They would always have allowed some to survive. I imagine they even made food available to them at times.'

'Those that survived the hunt were virtually ignored as the Ka-Marians were shipped back in. They watched their cousins being sent into the mines with awe, realising that the stories of their grandparents had been true. They have made a few abortive attempts at rescue, but they simply find the Raak too hard to kill. You must make contact and train them to fight the Raak.'

'So the Wildies are the first thing in our favour,' said Professor Summerlee. 'And the second thing was that we didn't have to rescue *everybody*. It is precious little to be going on. I'm no inter-galactic soldier, you know. I'm all for risking my life in a good cause, but not if there is no chance of success. What can the four of us do against a galaxy-spanning

empire?’

‘Your ship will contain a jamming device which will prevent the Raak on Planet 93 from communicating with their superiors. They will put the problem down to cosmic interference and by the time they realise otherwise, you will have ensured it is too late. Hopefully the rest of the Raak Empire will never know what happened there. I understand your concern,’ the Mechanical Housewife continued, ‘but you could do a lot of good on this mission. I know it sounds forbidding, but if anyone is up to the task it is the four of you!’

Challenger, Roxton and I cheered, lifting our glasses in a toast, but Summerlee was less impressed. However, he pointed out that he was no coward and that if the mission could genuinely save Challenger’s people he would accept it without hesitation. The rest of us cheered again, and Challenger, who had perhaps had a little too much whisky that day, tried to embrace Summerlee. The Professor of Comparative Anatomy gave thanks for the nimble feet that allowed him to dodge the oncoming gorillaman.

‘There is one other aspect to all this,’ said the Mechanical Housewife. ‘The attack on Ell Ka-Mar was triggered by Challenger’s journey in space, something which you would probably rather forget. However, you must remember that the Raak monitored that first trip, even though since then they have probably redeployed their surveillance vehicles. At some point the Raak will decide to investigate your little blue planet, and they’ll be there to ensure the people of Earth never grow strong enough to be their rivals in the galactic arena. If you strike sufficiently hard at them on Planet 93, if you can rescue the Ka-Marians and defeat the garrisoned Raak, there is a chance that this will cause ructions in the Raak Empire. If other worlds revolt against the oppressors, the march of the Raak may be halted, or even reversed, long enough for Earth to prepare for their coming.’

‘That’s quite a responsibility,’ I said. ‘But what a story it will make for old McArdle! I can imagine the headline now: GAZETTE REPORTER SAVES EARTH!’

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Challenger. ‘This story can never be told, except to the highest authorities. Can you imagine the reaction of the people of the world? There would be chaos everywhere, with everyone falling over themselves to no end whatsoever. What’s more, every man-jack of them would be knocking on my door, trying to buy or steal the *Rocket*! No, we shall inform the government and assist them in building escape craft for everyone in secrecy.’

The others seemed to agree with him. I shrugged and placed one hand upon my chest. ‘In that case I shall carry the happy knowledge of my heroism locked within my heart.’

‘It shall also be carried within mine,’ said the Mechanical Housewife, to the good-natured jeers of my companions.

Professor Summerlee watched the glittering object hurtle into the sky above the compound. The fighting stopped for a moment as everyone turned to discover the source of the ear-smashing noise, although Aikor continued to dress the wound in Summerlee’s belly. At first it seemed that a spacecraft was taking off in the distance, perhaps a few Raak desperately escaping to take word back to the Empire, but when Summerlee’s eyes followed the smoke trail to its source it became clear that it was in fact a tiny rocket or missile that had launched from the compound itself, from inside the guards’ building, in fact. As its flight into the sky continued he wondered as to what it might be. Most likely a message rocket, because he couldn’t imagine that it was large enough to carry anyone or anything larger than a football. It was a message, he thought sadly, which might spell the destruction of the Earth.

How the Assault Commenced, and the Terrible Way in Which It Concluded

I pulled off my imitation ear-tentacles and dropped them to the blackened ground. It was a relief to get them off, if for no other reason than that they interfered with my hearing. Often I stumbled, the stars doing little to illuminate the rocky and uneven ground. Planet 93 didn't have a moon, even though its people had had one taken away. The cuts and grazes caused when I tripped hardly showed against the mud, grime and whip marks that covered my body. My arms hung low, weighed down by the manacles I had been unable to remove. I was extremely tired, having worked the whole day in the mine before making the escape attempt. If Summerlee didn't turn up at the agreed rendezvous... well, I tried not to think about that.

Looking at the stars to check my orientation, I staggered through the shattered landscape, forcing myself onward though my every impulse was to give up. But I knew that if I gave in to fatigue and rested, I would soon be asleep and before morning, recaptured.

Eventually, after hours of that mindless trudging, the wasteland began to resolve itself into more familiar shapes. It seemed to be the place. I took off my right shoe and squeezed my second largest toe three times. If things went according to plan, that would bring Summerlee down to meet me.

I stood waiting, staring up into the sky for a sign that he was coming. There was no noise, the *Rocket* now running even more quietly than it had before the refit, but her beautiful silvery sides could not be disguised as she swooped down from the heavens towards me. I finally allowed myself to drop to the ground. I have no memory of Summerlee stepping from the ship with a hearty greeting, before alarmedly lifting me up and carrying me to the

warmth and safety of the *Rocket*'s interior. Given the opportunity, exhaustion immediately propelled me into oblivion, thus depriving me of the chance to witness Summerlee's unusual show of strength.

'I doubt I could do it again,' he said as we drank hot chocolate. 'Seeing you fall like that gave me quite a fright, and I understand many people have been known to show exceptional strength in difficult and extreme circumstances. In my youth, of course, I could have carried three of you!'

'I'm sure you could have,' I smiled from within my blanket. After having had a warm shower I was feeling much more human, although the fact that my hair was still blue might have been thought to indicate otherwise. 'So how did your side of things go?'

'Very well, I believe. I've been spreading the word among the enslaved Ka-Marians about the planned revolt and I managed to avoid any trouble. I hovered above the camps on nights cloudy with the dust that clogs the air. Tying messages to long thin ropes I dangled them by the windows of the slave dormitories. They were snatched by eager hands and I flew away into the night. How about your work?'

'Typical kind of thing you'd expect,' I replied. The chocolate was warming me up nicely and I was beginning to look forward to the next challenge. 'Disguised as a Ka-Marian, I managed to sneak into one of the largest operational mines on the planet. Working on a chain gang I earned the respect of the slaves by standing up to a bullying supervisor and sharing my food with an old man. I then let the other workers into the secret of my true identity and told them of the plan, such as it is, before leading my chain in a successful escape attempt. The ones that got out with me are heading for eight different mines, where they'll prepare the miners for the revolution

and subsequent rescue.'

'Well done,' said Summerlee.

'All in a month's work,' I replied with a wry smile.

Suddenly a light began to flash on the console. Summerlee sprang from his chair and went to examine the readings.

'That's the signal of Lord Roxton,' he told me. 'Looks like he made it too.'

The ship touched down as the first signs of sunlight began to fight their way through the murky atmosphere. Summerlee operated the console switch which opened the door and I stepped out into the early dawn, still swathed in my blanket. At first I saw nothing but the desolate surface of Planet 93, viewed from the bottom of a ravine, a savage wound in the land, but then a row of shaggy-haired heads rose slowly and menacingly above the rocks on the horizon. I retreated into the ship as I realised that each head was accompanied by a grimy hand bearing a vicious-looking spear.

'Summerlee,' I called. 'I think we'd better get out of here.'

He came and joined me at the entrance. 'Nonsense, my boy, these chaps look perfectly friendly to me! And we did receive Lord Roxton's signal, after all.'

'Perhaps they cut off his toe and operated it themselves! I don't see Roxton out there. Maybe they are cannibals! As they ate his toes one of them inadvertently set off the signal!'

'Don't be so foolish, Malone! I do believe your time in the mines has done your nerves no good whatsoever! (And in any case, cannibals eat members of their own race, not alien beings.) Now let's go and meet our new friends without any more ado!' About to step outside, he paused, then turned back to me. 'But perhaps you should try not to smile. They may misinterpret the baring of our teeth.'

Then he led the way out and I had no choice but to follow him. He was probably right about them anyway, I tried to assure myself, despite the fearsome countenances that surrounded us from the minute we left the ship. Grown bolder, the Wildies had crept down into the ravine to examine the strange invading ship.

From somewhere over the horizon we heard the sounds of a struggle. Fearing that our comrade might be in danger, we dashed through the ranks of the Wildies without a care for our own safety. Happily they elected to let us pass. If they had chosen not to do so there would have been little we could do about it, having blithely left our Winchesters aboard the *Rocket*.

Reaching the top of the ravine we were met by the peculiar sight of Lord Roxton buried beneath the bodies of seven or eight of the Wildies and struggling to get out. After we helped him untangle himself he revealed that in the face of danger the first thought of the Wildies was to protect the most important members of the tribe. Usually that would be the women, but as there were none along on this trip, they had tried to protect the chief.

'Very nice of the blighters,' said I. 'Who would have thought the savages to have such decent bones in their body!'

'Watch it, young fella-my-lad,' said Lord Roxton sternly. 'Just because these people are living in reduced circumstances does not make them any less worthy of your respect. These are strong and intelligent warriors, and our struggle will be aided immeasurably by their support.'

'I agree, Malone,' said Professor Summerlee as we began to walk back to the ship, Roxton's tribe in tow. 'Although we call them savages, that is not necessarily a signifier of their intelligence or their morals. It is in fact a signifier of their environment, of the ends to which they must use their intelligence.'

Although morning had broken, between our situation in the ravine and the poor quality of the light we felt ourselves to be in no immediate danger from the Raak – who after all did not yet know of our presence on the planet. Roxton and his tribe hunkered down outside the *Rocket* – they too had made a long journey – while Summerlee and I cooked up some hot soup for them, which we dished out with huge chunks of bread. The Wildies seemed as glad of the meal as Roxton himself.

After eating, Roxton told us of his adventure. 'It followed the usual pattern,' he said modestly. 'I stumbled across their tribe by accident, battled with their chief and defeating him became chief myself. Standard encounter procedure for tribes of savages.'

'I can hardly believe you're so blasé about it,' I said.

Professor Summerlee answered for him. 'He and Burton used to do that sort of thing all the time.'

Roxton nodded sadly. 'Good old Richard, I miss him one hell of a lot. You know, sometimes I would look to the stars and imagine him out here, exploring the galaxy. He would be so very pleased to know I'd made it out here. We used to say that when he died he would go searching for the source of the great river in the sky – maybe if I stay in space long enough I'll find it myself – and he'll be there waiting for me to catch up!'

The conversation continued to no great purpose,

other than to prevent the chilling silence that blanketed the eerie landscape from penetrating our hearts. Eventually, though, we had to face up to one unsettling fact. Challenger had failed to make the rendezvous. He had not returned from his mission to take our message to the Ka-Marians being held in prison, those considered too dangerous to be sent to the mines and those who we hoped would lead the revolt against the Raak.

We wondered whether he had remained in the prison in order to be able to cause trouble from within when we attacked, but that begged the question of how long he would be able to remain undetected. We had to consider the possibility that he had been captured.

'It changes nothing,' said Roxton. 'Challenger would not want us to abandon the fight because of his death. If he did succumb to the Raak, you can be sure that he died with courage and faith that his friends would finish the battle he began.'

I need hardly say that we were all in agreement, and so the decision was taken to commence the attack without Professor Challenger. Doubtless we would find him within the enemy stronghold, bothering them in much the same manner in which he always bothered us.

'I have another surprise for you,' said Roxton. 'I think you'll appreciate this, Professor Summerlee.' He waved to one of his tribe, uttering a command in the mutated Kamarian dialect the Wildies spoke. The tribesman grinned and got to his feet, running to the top of the ravine. A few moments later his tentacles re-appeared on the horizon, soon followed by both the rest of his body and the body of a Raak.

'He or she stumbled across us one morning,' said Roxton, 'and it soon had reason to regret doing so. We managed to get the better of it by simply clubbing away till it fell, but I had the idea that you might be able to find a more scientific way of killing them.'

'Hmm,' replied the professor, regarding the corpse at his feet with interest. 'Time to practise my trade, I believe.'

Lord Roxton preceded me into the building, carrying a fierce Wildie knife in one hand and an equally fierce pistol in the other. The Winchester he had slung over his shoulder. The interior of the building was gloomy as the exterior, the corridors narrow and the ceilings low. Though slightly larger than humans, the Raak do not share our liking for airy open rooms. They like to feel the dank walls against their sides as they walk through their slimy buildings – a relic of their subterranean origins, perhaps. It was a factor in

our favour as we fought our way through to the laboratory, because they could only attack Roxton one at a time, a situation he met with relish.

'Remind me to thank Summerlee,' he said as he sank his knife into the throat of a fourth Raak trooper. The Professor of Comparative Anatomy's expert dissection and analysis of the Raak physiology had identified the single weakness in their vile bodies.

'The neck,' he had said, pointing to a diagram for the benefit of the tribesmen, 'is the only place where penetration of the Raak is possible.' Roxton had frowned, pointing out that the neck was as heavily protected as the rest of their bodies. 'The thick black shell which covers the rest of their bodies only appears to cover their necks – it is in fact a biological illusion, which they must have evolved in response to the predators they faced upon their home world.'

'Why don't they protect it?' asked Roxton.

Summerlee shrugged. 'Arrogance, perhaps? Pride? I don't know. That's why we call them alien. Discerning the function of this unshielded area is impossible when the subject is dead, so we don't know what it is for, we don't know why it is unprotected, but what we do know is that it will let us kill a Raak in its full battle armour.'

Roxton had just repeated once more the butchering process that our injured friend had outlined back in the wasteland. The killing may have been necessary, but it seemed to me that the joy he took in it was entirely unnecessary.

Before the soldier hit the ground Roxton was kicking open a door which the murder had left at his mercy. Over his shoulder I could see the trappings of an abysmal alien science. This must be the laboratory of which Aikor had spoke, but would we find Challenger within? I fancied that hanging on the wall I could spy a pair of familiar brown shoes of a size which meant they could only belong to one man, but for the moment I quelled my hopes. A pair of shoes cannot vouch for a man's life, and besides, between the shoes and me there stood two of the Raak wearing unholy travesties of laboratory coats and bearing gifts of fire and heat.

'This is it,' said Roxton to me as he charged through the door, looking every inch the chief of the Wildies, despite the lack of ear tentacles and the decidedly red hair. It was a matter of attitude. The blood-curdling shriek he unleashed upon the two Raak within did as much to kill them as the knife which punctured their throats. I hung back as he did the dirty work, then rushed to his side as he strode

past their corpses.

'He's here,' said Lord Roxton, pointing to an ominous tangle of inch-thick cables and half-grown instrumentation at the far end of the room. 'Or at least his legs are.' Our friend was lying on a slab of steel, but we could not see his head or chest at all, that portion of his body being entirely hidden by the hideous and unclean machinery which engulfed him from the waist up. It was a terrifying sight to see the mighty explorer brought low.

'Does he live?'

'He seems to,' said Roxton, testing Challenger's pulse. 'But he isn't conscious. He hasn't spoken.' I touched a hand – it was surprisingly warm and vital. On the whole, the bottom half of his body seemed undamaged, certainly in better condition than my own had been after my spell in the mines. 'How shall we get him out?'

I frowned. 'I don't know. Presumably we could just pull on his legs.'

'Do you think that's safe?'

'How do I know? But we have to try something. This machine could be killing him.'

Roxton shrugged. We really had no other option. 'Well, here goes then.'

He went to the end of the slab and pulled Challenger's legs. There was little resistance, other

than from the natural inertia of the unnaturally-sized body. Slowly the professor was removed from the machine – his magnificent stomach, his exceptional chest and then his – his nothing.

'What the deuce!' said Lord Roxton.

He dropped the legs in horror and I staggered backwards as if hit in the chest by a thunderbolt. All over Planet 93 our plan had come to fruition. Victory was within our grasp. The Ka-Marians, both those from the Moon and their Wildie cousins, those in the mines, those in the prisons and those in the slave-camps, were rising up to kill the Raak oppressors. One by one the hated galactic warlords fell to well-placed daggers, and step by step the people freed themselves. Given time they would have done it without our help, as they had done once before, but we had provided vital organisation at a crucial time and so by the end of that day they would be free.

Despite that great and momentous victory, it was a terrible day in the history of their people, just as it was a terrible day in the history of our people (whether you knew it or not).

Our friend, Professor George Edward Challenger, the most famous explorer and scientist of his time, King of Ell Ka-Mar, the Moon and all related properties, had been decapitated.

'Bring Me the Head of George Edward Challenger!'

Master Zangpan looked on as the Ka-Marians and the Wildies filed through the portals into his World. 'We'll look after them here,' he said to Professor Summerlee. 'As long as they don't play their music too loud.' He laughed, but Summerlee still felt rather glum and didn't really feel up to laughing. Intellectually he knew that his body had been fully healed by the quasi-magical medicines of that strange dimension, but emotionally he still felt very fragile and unwilling to test his recovery.

'I'm not sure I understand,' he said. 'Will this not cause any unpleasant ramifications with regard to the time-stream?'

The Mechanical Housewife replied. 'All we know about Planet 93 is that it was completely destroyed at about this time – or, I should say, at about your time. There are no records of any survivors. As far as we know, our actions already form part of the time-stream. If they do not it is of no consequence because we have not left the Ka-Marians alive in your time, which would have changed your future and Master Zangpan's past. We have plucked them from the continuum entirely, and different rules apply here altogether.'

'At some point in the future,' said Master Zangpan, 'and by that I mean both the future of Zangpan's World and the future of the real-space universe, we may discover a point in which it will be safe to drop them back into normal space-time.'

'I believe I understand,' said Summerlee thoughtfully. 'However, what will be the effect upon points in real-space time subsequent to that in which you place them?'

'Oh, I'm sure that it will have some effect,' said Zangpan with a shrug. 'Ripples in a pond and all that, but I make a point of not learning anything about the future. I allow myself to dip into the past from time to time, if you'll excuse the pun, but otherwise I like to maintain the illusion that I am living in the early twenty-first century. Some might say I fail to take

full advantage of my powers, but it is much safer. If I knew too much of what was supposed to happen in later centuries I might end up paralysed, unable to act for fear of creating a big mess-up.'

'Take me, for example,' said the Mechanical Housewife. 'I'm from a period two hundred years ahead of that wherein Master Zangpan was born, yet he has asked me nothing of events during that time.'

'You're from *his* future?' Summerlee wondered why he was surprised. He knew himself to be a museum piece from Zangpan's point of view, but to discover that the Housewife originated from so far into futurity was still quite a shock. For all he knew, she might have lived in the twilight of the British Empire! As she nodded, a dozen questions came to mind – then fell away as quickly.

Seeing his face fall, the Mechanical Housewife smiled sympathetically. 'You understand why the Master never asks me anything?' He answered in the affirmative.

'When she arrived here,' said Master Zangpan, 'we soon realised the psychological problems such knowledge could cause her, so Klothe and Melenkius helped her to encrypt certain parts of her memory. She can access them, should she desire to, but they do not come to her unbidden.'

'Do you do that to all who come here from the future?'

'They are few in number, but the answer is no. We ask them not to talk about it, and on the whole they comply. Remember also that the universe is a very big place – most of the things they know would mean nothing to us anyway.'

'In my case,' said the Mechanical Housewife, 'I asked Klothe and Melenkius to perform the operation because Master Zangpan often sends me into the time-stream to investigate disturbances, or takes me on trips with him into his own time. It would be very difficult for me if my first thought upon meeting a person was to remember the date of their death.'

'I can imagine... feeling the pain of bereavement before even speaking for the first time. How horrible.'

The discussion continued, but soon they received word from the engineers that the last of the refugees had made it into Zangpan's World. The portals were shut down, and Zangpan's people began to educate the newcomers in the ways of their new home. Before long Lord Roxton and I were able to join our friends for some lunch. We had played an important part in persuading the Ka-Marians and the Wildies to step through the strange blue portals. Of course, it had not taken a great deal to persuade them as they had nowhere else to go.

'Did you do it?' asked Master Zangpan.

'I'm afraid we did,' said Lord John. 'I don't feel too good about being the one to blow up a planet.'

Zangpan's device would burrow down to the core of Planet 93, monitoring the solar system for the approach of Raak battle-cruisers. When it judged them to be within range it would trigger a chain reaction in the core. The planet would be utterly destroyed and the enemy spacecraft would be annihilated. It was a part of our mission which neither of us had relished, but Zangpan had made it clear that it was one of the conditions of his help – the Raak must have no evidence of other-dimensional activities. Lord Roxton had asked whether such an explosion might indicate to the Raak that something unusual had occurred, but Zangpan had said that to the contrary, planet-busting detonations were simply part of everyday business for the war-like Raak.

'Planet 93 was always a dead world,' said Master Zangpan. 'No Ka-Marian had called it by its true name in five centuries, except in stories of the days before the coming of the Raak. You simply put it out of its misery.'

'It could have lived again,' I said.

Master Zangpan began to show signs of slight irritation. 'Such discussion is fruitless, so stop bugging me about it, Mister Malone! To the eyes of the universe, the Ka-Marians chose death and glory over slavery and degradation under the lash of the Raak. Other subjugated worlds will follow their example. Some will fail and die, some will succeed and die, but some will succeed and live! Today we have struck an important blow against the Raak and you should certainly cheer up a bit!'

'I suppose so,' I said sadly. It preyed on my mind that it could so easily have been Earth we mourned that day, had the Raak turned right instead of left five centuries ago. 'How do you feel, Professor Summerlee? Has the wound healed?'

'Yes, it has,' he replied, 'the doctors here are very good, you know. Had me up on my feet in no time at all!'

The Mechanical Housewife spoke up. 'If not for the quick work of Aikor it is unlikely that you would have survived long enough to receive their attentions, Professor. You owe him your thanks.'

'You may be sure that I shall not be remiss in proffering them, dear lady.'

'My cosmic wisdom and astonishing powers of near-infinite reflection tell me that it is Aikor who shall be most profligate with his thanks,' said Master Zangpan, indicating that we should all take the weight off our feet. We followed him in placing our posteriors upon the gentle ground. The flora and landscape of the sliver from which Summerlee had watched the evacuation was, like the majority of them, not created according to the templates of Earth. The burgundy ground was covered with swaying grass of the deepest blue, the light filtered to create a relaxing and permanent dusk. Whether the sliver had constructed itself in imitation of a far-off planet or whether someone had simply fancied living in a place like that I do not know, but it was a lovely place to sit and talk, to recuperate and make plans. 'You saved his people, after all. However, despite your mighty deeds of the past you must now turn to the future. Having rescued an entire population, you must now save a single man.'

Lord Roxton, Summerlee and I nodded solemnly. The three of us were fully aware of our responsibilities in that regard.

'There is no rush to leave Zangpan's World, of course,' he continued. 'When you are ready, we shall drop you back into real-space at the same point in time from which you came here. Then you can chase after him. Before leaving ensure you are refreshed and rested.'

I looked at the others. They indicated that I should speak. 'We thank you for your advice, but we would really like to go as soon as possible.'

'I suppose that is understandable,' said Master Zangpan, 'if regrettable. Your impatience says much for your friendship, though little for your cosmic awareness. Tomorrow, now, next week, all times of departure in Zangpan's World are as one with regard to the outside universe. The difference is purely psychological.'

'We understand that,' said Professor Summerlee, 'but the fact that a difference is psychological does not make it unimportant. Logically, we could stay here for the next twenty years if we wished before stowing our walking-sticks in the *Rocket* and going

after Challenger's head – but we will never be more ready than we are at this moment! No, Master Zangpan, we must strike while the iron is hot! This is the day and this is the hour!

'Besides,' commented Lord Roxton, 'we miss the irritating baboon and we want him back in one piece.'

Zangpan saw no reason to dispute the matter with us any further, and so we were soon standing by the *Rocket*, ready to board her once again. It wasn't quite the same without Challenger around. Klothe, Melenkius, Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife were all there to see us off.

'Now remember,' said Klothe to the three of us. 'If anyone asks, you had the refit done by Publasky Porawny on Pelney's Planet.'

'We have replicated his style exactly,' said Melenkius. 'Right down to the over-torquing on the maximising delibrettofier, though it killed me to do so.'

I made a note of the instruction. I knew how important it was to keep the Raak from knowing of Zangpan's World.

'There is one other thing,' said the Mechanical Housewife, walking over to me with her hand held out.

'I know, my love,' said I, holding out my own hand. 'I shall miss you too.'

'It's not that,' she said with a laugh. When our hands met I felt something pressed against my palm. Taking it from her I saw that it was Challenger's ring, the symbol of his kingship. 'I thought he might like to see it. It might help you to bring him back to his

senses or something, should the cold loneliness of space have addled his mind.'

Master Zangpan scowled at her. 'You shouldn't have done that,' he said in an annoyed tone. 'You know my rules about interference.'

She tossed her blond curls over her shoulder. 'You don't hesitate to break the rules when it suits your purposes.'

'That's different – they're my rules!'

My two English friends were as puzzled as I by this exchange. What possible importance could her actions have had? I could not know, but the argument determined me to keep the ring upon my person. Soon Master Zangpan conceded the debate to his robotic servant. She pointed out that the ring would still have been aboard the ship, along with the finger, the hand, and the body she had taken it from, if not for Zangpan's own meddling. She had simply put the natural train of events back on the rails.

'Time for us to go,' said Lord Roxton. Summerlee nodded his agreement and the two of them boarded the ship. 'Hurry up, Malone,' called Roxton from within.

'Farewell,' I said to our world's newest friends. 'If we are successful, can you really do what you say?'

'Bring me the head of George Edward Challenger,' said Master Zangpan, 'and these two will put him back together again.'

Looking at the smiling faces of Klothe and Melenkius I really believed they could. I gave the Mechanical Housewife a peck on the cheek, said goodbye to the others and entered the ship.

How to Get Ahead in Space

Space, thought Professor Challenger, as he rocketed through the void, with a neutron booster blasting away from the point at which his neck used to meet his body, is most definitely the place. So had said a fascinating blue-skinned lady to him back on Zangpan's World, describing her ability to sail between the planets of the solar system. Travelling through space faster than a speeding star-light, he had every reason to agree with her. The universe was beautiful and he felt awe as she showed him her face. He was edging towards the belief that the Raak had done him a favour. Murdering maniacs perhaps, but they had been good enough to provide him with a little jet mounted on the side of the ship (helmet?). Its feeble power levels had no effect upon his trajectory, of course, but it did give him the ability to set the ship spinning from time to time along an axis which speared his head – thus changing the view. Soaring through the heavens, he felt that if he were to meet a Raak a minute from now he would shake it by the hand. That is, if he were able, and besides, resentment towards those who had beheaded him was growing once more in pace with the desire he had for a nose-scratching.

He had never actually lost consciousness during the process of decapitation, which had come as something of a surprise. He had at least anticipated some fainting, if not an oblivion more permanent, but the fact that he had remained alert as the deed was done was a source of some pride to him. One day, he hoped, he would be able to speak of the experience before the Royal Biological Society, if not the Invisible College itself!

Before the blade had been allowed to drop, the scientists of the Raak had hooked his head and body up to various items of machinery which in retrospect he realised to have kept him alive during the operation. The incision of note had then been made, right at the bottom of the neck, leaving Challenger to reflect that the seat of the soul was most certainly in the skull, for although he felt a sense of loss as he watched the body recede into the distance, the head being taken to a different laboratory to prepare for its journey into space, he felt that no diminishment of the essential self had taken place. It was, without doubt, a most interesting experience.

The first step in preparing the Challenger head for

inter-stellar travel had been to make it self-sufficient, and to this end a mechanical cap had been placed over the base of the neck. This piece of alien technology somehow performed such essential bodily functions as the recycling of blood and the processing of air. It enabled him to speak, replacing his lungs in that capacity too. However, that power of speech was only now returning once more – the Raak scientists had temporarily disabled it in the face of his furious invective. He wasn't entirely sure what he had been so angry about. Certainly, he had failed abysmally in his mission to make contact with the Ka-Marian prisoners, being captured before even reaching the prison camp, and of course the chances of Malone and the others rescuing his subjects without his assistance seemed pretty slim. His body had been amputated (and I was quite attached to it, he laughed to himself) and the Earth might well be heading for destruction. But was all that really worth getting worked up about when one felt at peace with the universe? From his position in inter-stellar space, Challenger wondered if he was beginning to develop the cosmic awareness of which he had heard Master Zangpan speak. Planets might live, planets might die – in fact they would all die in the end, no two ways about it, it was a done deal, so why get so worked up about one or another, here or there?

As you can tell, dear reader, Challenger was far from being himself as we threw ourselves into his pursuit. The calculations of Klothe and Melenkius had shown that if Challenger was heading for the Raak home-world, Raraak-Ra, we would overtake him with days to spare. The top speed of a head in a helmet, they told me, is high, but would easily be matched and beaten by the new and improved *Rocket*. You have plenty of time to catch up – the question is, what state will he be in when you find him? I enquired as to their meaning, and Klothe hinted of an affliction by the name of space-happiness. If he goes space-happy, said the engineer, you will have to take great care of him. He may well resent being rescued. Poppycock, I had said. Challenger would never go mad! But Melenkius had pointed out that it wasn't a form of insanity, at least within its normal context – it was an entirely rational and intelligent reaction to the infinities of space. It was the first step to cosmic awareness. In fact, they

told me, checking to see that Master Zangpan wasn't around, that was how all this came about. I didn't understand. Master Zangpan, said Klothe, had originally gone by the name of Chow Mi-Sun, a Japanese astronaut whose orbital laboratory had malfunctioned. Two of the other astronauts had been killed immediately in the accident, while Chow, preparing to leave the air-lock to perform experiments on a space-walk, had found himself out in space with no way of getting back inside. Certain meditations he then performed had opened the doors to Zangpan's World. I informed them that Zangpan had spoken to us of certain tantric rituals. They looked at each other, then smiled. The experiments, they said, had been with regard to zero gravity and zero environment sex. There had been another astronaut with him, by the name of Mai-Lee. Staring death in the face, they had elected to continue with the experiments regardless. This had led to Chow's space-happiness and subsequent enlightenment. I wondered how they had performed such a feat in the cold vacuum of space, but it had all been planned, said Klothe, the spacesuits were of a special Siamese variety. I asked what had become of Mai-Lee, did she have a world of her own too? They frowned and looked rather sad. I'm afraid not, said Melenkius.

Only Master Zangpan made it through. She died long before the Japanese rescue mission was able to reach her. That was when Master Zangpan created his rules regarding the messing-up of time, said Klothe. He takes them very seriously. Investigating the circumstances of his disappearance was a vital step for the Earth people along the road to cosmic consciousness – if Mai-Lee's body had not been found, it would have been assumed that the two of them had simply been swept away into the depths of space and no progress would have been made.

Do I need to describe the exultation on board the *Rocket* when the blip of Challenger's head showed up on the sensors? Those who can imagine it for themselves must bear with me while I describe the scene for those who are, perhaps, reading this account at the end of a long day. Lord Roxton leapt to his feet with a great cheer, dropping his cards all over the floor, and Summerlee followed suit, while I grumbled about having a winning hand.

'He's dead ahead,' said Lord Roxton.

Professor Summerlee looked askance at him. 'I sincerely hope he isn't.'

'I'll get the grabber ready,' said I to the two of them. I was referring to one of the many improvements made to the ship by Klothe and Melenkius.



The grabber was a device which would allow the user to grab (hence the name, naturally) objects from the exterior. If at that time the ship was within a hostile environment, such as undersea or out in space, the object would be brought through an airlock. My task was to use the grabber to pull Challenger's tiny spaceship inside, while Roxton and Summerlee would have to match our velocity with that of our comrade's head.

Meanwhile, Challenger was comparing the experience of travelling through inter-stellar space with certain thought experiments he had performed upon himself while lying in bed as a child. Tucked inside a bundle of warm blankets, insulated from the cold and hidden from the world, he would close his eyes and prepare for sleep. And often, waiting for the Sandman to come and sprinkle dust upon him, he would try to reorientate his perception of the room. He had always found it remarkably easy to convince himself that his bed pointed from east to west, instead of vice versa, or to north or south. In the darkness there was no real sense of direction, and being in space was just like that. Usually he thought of himself as travelling from left to right along a horizontal plane, as would a man in a car, but without gravity to provide a sense of direction there was no reason why he should not consider himself to be rocketing forever upward and away! Often he did, and with equal regularity came the terrifying times when he seemed to be plummeting into an infinite abyss. One sign that he was not himself (he was, after all, less than one fifth in fact of the man he used to be) was that Challenger permitted these periods of terror to continue, rather than struggling to bring them to an end, because he was enjoying the sensation of fear. He felt himself on the verge of a breakthrough. If he could orientate his mind in the right manner, and if he could make himself fall in the right direction, into the right dimension... It was all becoming so clear, the Zang and the Pan... Could there be a *second* Master..?

I have detailed how each of the parties involved arrived at the nexus where our two journeys intersected. Gliding serenely (most of the time) through space, the tiny drive at the back of the modified space helmet pushing him ever onward, never seeing his destination but knowing it nevertheless, Challenger never heard our approach. Apart from the fact that our ship was silent in its running, there is no sound in space – no sound, said Challenger to me later, other than a silence which is so loud it can deafen you. We came up on him suddenly and he spotted us out of the corner of his eye – imagine

trying to see what is under your feet without being able to lower your head. That was Challenger's situation, apart from the fact that he had no feet – or rather, that his feet were currently being cared for in an other-dimensional quasi-space!

If Roxton and Summerlee had not been able to match speeds the operation could not have gone ahead, but thankfully the potential difficulties of the task were eliminated by the sophisticated motion sensors which had been installed by Challenger and upgraded by Zangpan's tame engineers. Mercifully soon, for the tension was gnawing at my stomach like a bad case of Delhi belly, I was given the go-ahead. I began to manipulate the controls which sent the grabber's arm out towards our spinning spaceman. Presumably, as we were so close to him now that if he had still been in one piece his monstrous backside would have obscured the view-screen, Challenger now knew it was the *Rocket* that had come to his rescue. Yet to see the frantic gyrations of his little helmet as my grabber approached (there was little else the poor fellow was in a position to do) one would have thought us the Raak or worse. Finally the grabber-hand clamped gently but firmly about the helmet.

'Better check that we have the right head,' said Summerlee to me.

'Okay,' I shrugged. 'I don't suppose that would hurt.' I moved the arm around so that it held the helmet, face forward, in front of our view-screen. At this point the miniature spacecraft's own engine cut out, frustrated as it was in its desire to travel onward.

We all cheered as we recognised the familiar red and simian face and the bristling beard, then peered curiously at the screen as we realised he was trying to yell something at us, his face distorted with anger.

'What do you make of that?' asked Professor Summerlee. 'He seems quite distressed.'

'Perhaps he's been turned into a living bomb,' said Lord Roxton, 'and he's trying to warn us that he'll explode when we bring him inside.'

'What a lively idea,' said the professor. 'However, I am of the opinion that Challenger has probably gone doolally. We were warned this might happen, and, let's face it, he did not have very far to go!'

Lord Roxton pursed his lips pensively. 'What do you think, Malone?'

I looked into Challenger's eyes. I saw nothing to make me feel he was trying to warn us off. Rather, I felt the anger was for himself, that through the barrier of space he was screaming to be left alone. It could only be madness – I could only hope it was of a temporary variety. 'I think there is only one way to

find out what he is saying, and that is to bring him inside.'

Summerlee nodded and Roxton shrugged. 'I will go along with the majority decision,' he said. 'I was just trying to come up with a worst-case scenario, but I do not really expect Challenger to blow up in our faces – other than in a metaphorical sense, that is. Go ahead and bring him in.'

Summerlee twisted the knob on the console which opened the exterior hatch of the air-lock and we heard the whoosh of air being claimed by the void. Under my instruction the grabber tucked Challenger into the air-lock and Summerlee closed the exterior hatch. As I pumped air into the air-lock chamber the waves of sound which emanated from Challenger's ample mouth found a medium via which they could assault our ears. His voice was a bit muffled, but I made out something about some confounded idiots. I could not have guessed who he meant by that.

'I don't suppose you'd like to reconsider,' I said to the others with a grimace. 'We have yet to pass the Rubicon.' But my enquiry was not at all serious. Despite his obnoxious and unmitigatedly bad behaviour, Challenger was our friend and it was our place to assist him, whatever the situation.

Summerlee twisted the knob which opened the interior air-lock hatch. It swung open and there was Challenger sitting in the wall like a turkey in an oven. He lost no time in loosing his invective upon us face to face.

'Get me out of here, you bloody idiots!'

'Hold on, Challenger,' I said. 'We'll have you right as rain in no time. Professor Summerlee, would you like to prepare the robot body?'

Summerlee nodded and moved to unpack a trunk we had brought from Zangpan's World. As he did, I lifted Challenger and his little spacecraft from the cubby-hole. I carried him over to the foldable table which we had erected at the centre of the four comfortable chairs, and set him down upon it. Eventually he stopped swearing long enough for me to ask how to open up the helmet.

'Just press the red button,' he said through gritted teeth.

I did so and the helmet sprang open. I lifted Challenger from it and Roxton put it down beside his chair. Summerlee was still busy off in the corner.

It was a difficult moment. What should one say in such a situation? Whatever one says, one runs the risk of sounding either cruel or ridiculous. I plumped for the ridiculous. 'How are you, Professor Challenger?'

He was silent for a moment, staring at me. Then he

turned, as far as he could without toppling over, to look at Lord Roxton. I moved him a little so that we were both within his field of vision. 'This may well come as something of a surprise to you, Malone, but I am not at my best today. No, do not try to interrupt me with your sympathy or your patronization. I am completely cognizant of my position and I have retained full use of my faculties.'

Roxton and I looked at one another, remembering how Klothe had told us to handle our charge with kid gloves. Lord John spoke first. 'Sorry if we did anything wrong, old boy. Just trying to help out and all that. We have saved you, don't you know?'

Challenger's face reddened like an Englishman in the sun. 'You blasted idiots! Saved me, have you? You damnable bunch of nincompoops! I was but a hair's breadth away from safety before you grabbed me with that stupid extensible arm!'

'Of course you were, Professor Challenger,' I said in a low, gentle voice. 'Space happy,' I whispered to Roxton, before returning to the head on the table. 'But you're safe here, too, with all your friends. Here I am, Edward Malone, the journalist, and I'm sure you can't have forgotten your old friend, Lord John Roxton-'

'Shut up! Lord Roxton, be so good as to give him a clout on the head before he talks us all into an early grave!' Happily Roxton declined and Challenger paused for a moment, visibly trying to calm himself. 'I thank you for your attentions, but we must address ourselves to matters of grave importance. First things first. Did you manage to save the Ka-Marians?'

'We did indeed,' I said quietly, subdued by the violent reaction to my earlier words. 'It was quite an adventure-'

'Not now,' said Challenger in a more mild tone, even though he was still interrupting me. 'You can provide me with the details at a later date. However, I do thank you all most profoundly – from the bottom of my chin, so to speak – for the good you have done. It is good to have friends upon whom one can rely in an emergency.'

'What else are friends for,' said Professor Summerlee over his shoulder, 'if not for evacuating planets from time to time?'

'Unfortunately,' continued Challenger calmly, 'in my present state of incapacity I am forced to rely upon you once again. Malone, when I said that I had almost reached safety you said that I must be space-happy – your words were more apposite than you imagined, applying not only to your own sack-headed interpretation of events but also, in fact, to the actual events themselves. I was, before you

reached me, deeply space-happy and on the brink of a scientific breakthrough in the realm of cosmic awareness. I believe that in a matter of minutes I would have successfully managed to remove myself to Zangpan's World – an ability known to the enlightened as auto-dimensionality. Instead of which, my three good friends dragged me back into imminent danger.'

'I hope that you will not be offended, old man,' said Lord Roxton, 'if I declare that to be the most preposterous tosh I ever heard. However, I accept that the galaxy is a stranger place than I could ever know and so I shall let it slide for now. On the other hand, I am somewhat alarmed by your statement that we snatched you back from safety into imminent danger. As far as I know, you were still two days travel from the planet of Raraak-Ra. We overhauled you long before you reached your destination. So you see that either you are mistaken, or there is an element to this situation of which we are not yet aware.'

'Oh dear,' said Professor Challenger. 'You better get that robot body ready for me sharpish, Summerlee – it is worse than I feared. I assumed that at least you knew what you had got yourselves into! If I was travelling to Raraak-Ra, it would indeed have taken me another two days to get there. However, that was not my destination. I would have arrived today, in about twenty minutes as a matter of fact. Hence my determination to achieve auto-dimensionality.'

'Oh dear,' I said pitifully.

Challenger continued with his lecture. 'The message being sent was simple and required no words – simply a head – to convey it. *Earthmen have left their own system. They have interfered in our affairs and they must now be destroyed!*'

'If not to Raraak-Ra, then where were you heading?' asked Lord Roxton.

'Why,' said Challenger, 'such a communication would only be delivered to the very heart of Raak government! Therefore, until my voyage was so rudely interrupted, I was on my way to the Raak Battlefleet, currently stationed on the edge of Raraak-Ra's solar system and waiting for action!'

'Uh-oh,' said Summerlee, putting down the metal arms and legs he had been working on to respond to some flashing lights on the console. 'I think you gentlemen would be well advised to take a look at this.'

Roxton picked up Challenger and we went over to examine the sensor read-outs.

'These readings demonstrate the veracity of my previous statement,' said Challenger from under Lord John's arm, 'though I dearly wish it did not. Gentlemen, we are now situated squarely in the middle of the Raak Imperial Battlefleet, the deadliest force for destruction in all of creation. There are a thousand ships on every side, each of them packed to the brim with destructive weaponry and ferocious Raak warriors. Please consider that a single ship of this type was enough to destroy the Moon before making suggestions as to the most appropriate course of action.'

Flies in Honey

'We are in a tricky spot, there is no doubting that,' said Professor Summerlee, looking with concern at the view-screen. The Raak armada hung there in the blackness of space with a sublime malevolence. Sheer evil, just waiting for a chance to flex its muscles, looking for a bug to squash. Summerlee felt eminently squashable. He turned to watch Professor Challenger scratching his nose. Challenger stared right back at him.

'This is a seven light year itch, I'll have you know!'

Summerlee's eyebrows rose. 'I'm sure it is. Apart from that, how does the new body feel?'

'Not too bad,' replied Challenger, extending the metallic arms to their full length.

'Four metres,' said Lord Roxton. 'That is quite a reach. You could become a champion of the ring should you so choose!'

Challenger laughed. 'The Queensberry Rules probably prohibit telescopic arms, although I may be wrong!' He wore no clothes upon his body, which was approximately one hundred and eighty centimetres in height – disregarding the head which we had attached to it. Said height could be varied, since in addition to the arms, the legs (and the neck and waist) were adjustable and extensible. His body, as I said, stood naked to the world for a simple reason. Not having long to throw together a suitable prosthetic body, Klothe and Melenkius had not taken the time to create one which possessed the same capacity for certain activities which a human body would have had – therefore there was no need for modesty. Some lady readers may be shocked by this nudity, but consider this: you do not dress a kettle or your pots and pans! When you cloak a teapot in a tea-cosy it is simply to keep the tea within warm, not for the sake of modesty! Cloaking Challenger would have served no purpose. Also, if I may be so bold as to say so, Challenger's new body was rather spectacular and it would have been a shame to conceal it. Silver and bulky like a suit of armour, articulated at the joints and possessed of its own power source, it was a fitting replacement for the original.

Now he had a body with which to do so, Professor Challenger began to take control of the situation. 'The Raak have surrounded us,' he said. 'But as yet I believe them to be ignorant of our presence.

Fortunately our engines were off when they approached. I shall now cut down on other energy use to try and ensure that nothing gives us away.' While saying this he moved to the controls and switched and twiddled virtually every knob. The lights dimmed and the tea-maker installed by the considerate Melenkius ceased its brewing. 'Only life support systems remain in operation,' he said with a nod. 'That should keep us safe for a while.'

'If they are on patrol and they have not seen us,' I said, peering at Challenger through the gloom, 'there is no need for us to act, is there? If we lie doggo long enough they should continue on their own sweet way, leaving us free to travel back to Earth.'

He came back from the console and joined us in the comfortable upholstered chairs before speaking. 'I should be careful not to tear this,' he said ruefully. 'With my copper bottom I might as well be sitting on a rock as on this delightful piece of English furniture.'

'I shall thank you not to speak of your bottom, copper or not,' said Professor Summerlee, to the approval of Lord Roxton and myself. 'Such talk revives memories of our journey to Planet 93 and your unhealthy reaction to the Dra-wak-ooan Metelburbs!'

Professor Challenger laughed at the memory of the nasal agony he had caused us. 'When next I build a space-craft I shall be sure to include in the design air filters adequate to protect the fragile noses of my companions!'

When we stopped laughing Lord Roxton held up a hand to attract Challenger's attention. 'What say, old man, we take the time to have a glass of whisky! I know we are in a rum situation and all, but if the situation is not too urgent I believe a swig or two of the golden stuff would help us all!'

I stuck an elbow into his ribs for his tactlessness. For a second I thought he would break my arm, but then his intellect over-rode his instincts and he took time to consider his previous words. 'Oh, I see,' he said after a pause. 'Sorry, Challenger old chap! In the darkness your predicament sort of slipped my mind. No harm done, eh?'

'None at all, Lord Roxton,' said the unoffended party. 'Though I thank Malone for his concern, I am perfectly able to consume food and drink. The neck

attachment simply breaks it down and uses it for power. As for your suggestion, I agree that though the situation be rum, the drink must be whisky! I'll be hanged if I'll let the blasted beetles stop me enjoying a gentleman's comforts!

He went to the rear of the cabin and poured a glass for each of us, stretching his arm out to hand us the drinks from where he stood. Lord Roxton called it a neat party trick, and Summerlee made mention of fossil-hunting trips in the Andes when such an ability would have been more than useful. Pleasurably soon three of us were relaxing while the golden pools in our bellies warmed our souls. The fourth member of our crew took extra time to relish the taste upon his tongue.

'To return to Malone's earlier suggestion,' said Challenger from the murk. 'It would be lovely if all we had to do was hold out and keep quiet until they went away. Sadly that will not be enough. One objection to this is a matter of political morality, in that such an approach rarely works with aggressors and conquerors, whereas the other is a question of physics. I am afraid that as the fleet passed by – and remember that we are talking about a substantial number of ships with a very substantial sum total of mass – we were swept up in their gravitational pull. Result: we are slap bang in the middle of them with

no way of getting out!'

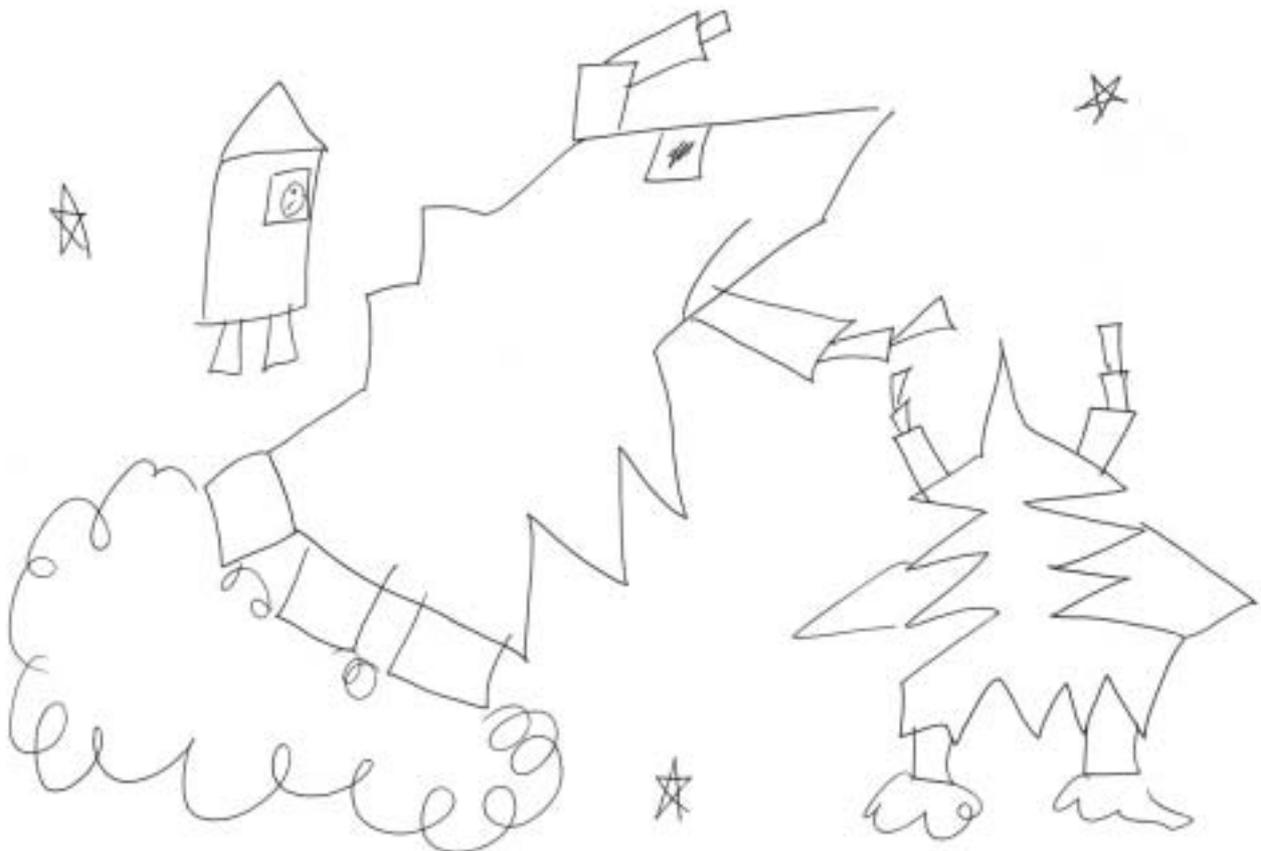
'That does not sound good,' said Professor Summerlee. 'But from the relatively cheery tone of your voice I deduce that our position is not hopeless. I suppose you expect us to beg the mighty Challenger to enlighten us once more. Well, consider the begging done! I am a proud man, but do not confuse the justifiable pride I have in my achievements with the kind of pride that gets men killed because they do not recognise that they are out of their depth.'

'There is, as you have surmised, a spark of hope,' said Challenger. 'If we could create a distraction large enough to interest the Raak, the *Rocket* could sneak away to safety!'

'What a brilliant concept!' said Summerlee. 'The reasons for which they call you a genius are manifest! Now if we can only think of a suitable distraction, stuck here in empty space!'

Though the darkness prevented me from knowing, I imagine that Challenger glowered at Summerlee as he replied. 'Keep your flippancy to yourself, old friend! I have a plan which could save the three of you, and I shall be the one putting my life on the line!'

Professor Summerlee was not cowed. 'What a fine idea. We chase half-way across the galaxy to rescue you and now you are going to sacrifice yourself so



we can get away! I look forward to describing our successful mission to Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife!

Lord Roxton interrupted him with a polite cough. 'The mission will have been a success if the men and women of Earth still wake next week to a sky that is blue, if their choice is not between slavery and death, and if the Raak Empire still believes us to be a bunch of harmless midges not worthy of their attention. What I am trying to say is this: we must escape or die, and those that do not escape must ensure that their death leaves an unrecognisable body.'

'Thank you for explaining things so bluntly and succinctly,' said Challenger. 'You will no doubt be pleased to learn that my plan involves the strapping of explosives to my body.'

'I like it already,' said Professor Summerlee, before Challenger outlined the rest of the plan. None of us were wild about his proposal, but then none of us were able to offer anything better. We agreed to go along with it, though every one of us expressed regret that he could not take the place of brave Professor Challenger.

'That is very courageous of you all,' said our friend. 'Believe me, I would not hesitate in entrusting this part of the plan to any of you – in fact I would be more than happy to do so, my reasons being partly selfish and partly a recognition of the fact that none of you, to the best of my knowledge, has a wife awaiting your return – but unfortunately I am (again, to the best of my knowledge) the only one of us with detachable body parts.'

He began by enlisting the aid of Professor Summerlee in effecting some redesigns upon the space-helmet that had carried him so far into space. Picking it up from beside Roxton's chair he wiped a few drops of whisky off it with distaste.

'I'm sorry, Challenger,' said Lord Roxton. 'It must have happened when you told us about the plan. The part about blowing up the Queen-Ship startled me.'

'I do not mean to be over-fussy,' said Challenger in return. 'But you should bear in mind that if by chance I do not make it back to the ship, this helmet could be my home for a considerable period of time.'

The next step was to disconnect his head from his new body. As the joint was a push-fit connection this did not prove problematic. Returned to his position on the table Challenger continued to instruct us, while sucking whisky through a straw. A condemned man's hearty breakfast, he said with grim humour.

We then proceeded to throw Challenger's body out of the ship. One by one his limbs were placed in the air-lock's cubbyhole before being ejected into

space, and then his torso, heavy with bombs and explosives, took the same route. Caught up in the same gravity trap as the *Rocket*, all of the mechanical attachments kept pace alongside us. A peculiar aspect of the slightly gruesome situation – it felt oddly like we were disposing of a corpse – was that the motion of the prostheses and our ship was not immediately visible to our eyes. It seemed as if we were at rest in the void with Challenger's body parts floating beside us. This effect was produced by the speed of the *Rocket* being identical to that of the prostheses and, indeed, to the objects in space which provided our frame of reference: the battleships of the malignant fleet. It was only when one looked beyond the ships that crowded the view-screen that one saw how the stars were gently turning to the right. The Raak were apparently patrolling a simple circle with the sun of Raraak-Ra at its distant centre.

Once all the other bits and pieces had been ejected, it was time for the head to follow. First we replaced him in the helmet, the drive of which had now been shifted so that it protruded from the back of the head, rather than the bottom. This would allow Challenger to use the airtight helmet and its neutron booster while still hooked up to his new body. The mechanism which had carried the memory of the miniature spaceship's original destination had been shorted out, and so Challenger would now be able to control the drive himself via the controls mounted on the front of the helmet.

Finally the time had come for Challenger to go.

Professor Summerlee lifted the helmet and placed it in the cubbyhole, asking him, 'Are you ready?'

To which Challenger replied, 'There is no preparing oneself for such an experience. My chances of survival are low, yet in the worst eventuality, if I do not make it to the rendezvous, be aware of the possibility that I have arrived at Zangpan's World before you.'

'If you manage to achieve auto-dimensionality; I know,' said Summerlee. 'But it would take us three or four weeks to get back to Zangpan's meeting-point on the Moon – that is a long time to worry about the fate of a comrade. Do your best to get back to us in one piece.'

'I shall try,' said Challenger before the hatch swung shut, 'though you should make allowances for the fact that being already in seven or eight pieces I begin the mission at a disadvantage.'

The three of us looked sadly at each other once he was out in space. We held out little hope for his survival. Trying to put such thoughts aside I addressed myself to the grabber, with which I put Challenger

back together again. That we had to operate at the lowest possible power levels made it a painfully slow process, as did the fact that I was learning for the first time how to handle objects in zero gravity, but perseverance told in the end. Challenger scooted round to the front of the ship and gave us a cheerful wave through the view-screen – we waved back, even

though the composition of the window prevented him from being able to see the symbol of our good wishes. We knew that the blackness of the screen from his position would not prevent him from knowing that we waved – and that was not a matter of cosmic awareness, but of simple friendship.

Then off he flew into the night.

The Interstellar Battleships

‘I don’t know about you,’ said Lord Roxton to the two of us, ‘but I could really use a shot of whisky right now.’ He went off to the rear of the cabin before we had even had a chance to reply. It seemed that Lord John was developing a fondness with the spirit of the north that stretched perhaps to over-familiarity.

‘Do you think that is particularly wise?’ asked Summerlee with more than a hint of concern. ‘What if Challenger sends the signal and we are all asleep in our cups?’

Lord Roxton shrugged and said, ‘It will be all right, professor. Don’t worry so much. Sometimes a man gets something of a thirst and I’ve got one right now.’

Professor Summerlee was not in the mood to back away from an argument – in any case there was little else for us to do while Challenger was off on his mission. ‘Lord Roxton, tell me, do you know the meaning of the word *alcoholic*?’

‘I think I do,’ said Roxton as he returned to his chair with a full glass of whisky in his hand. ‘It is a word which indicates whether a drink is worth the effort it takes to drink it, old chap.’ With that he gulped down half the contents of the glass.

‘In your case,’ replied Summerlee, raising his voice, ‘it describes a man who is unusually dependent upon the consumption of alcohol. Someone who finds it hard to face a crisis without a drink in his hand! Lord Roxton, I believe you are very near to alcoholism!’

‘Steady on, Summerlee,’ I said, trying to defuse the argument. ‘All of us have drunk our share of whisky on this trip, yourself included. Nothing sinister about that!’

‘On the contrary,’ said Professor Summerlee, ‘I am beginning to suspect there is something very sin-

ister about this indeed! You saw the secretive conversations between Roxton and Mrs Challenger back on Earth.’ There was obviously more to his words than he was willing to say explicitly, and I thought he was about to continue. However, thinking better of it he pressed his lips together and said nothing.

‘That,’ said Lord Roxton darkly, ‘is a place you do not want to go.’

‘It isn’t?’ answered Summerlee sharply, his anger reaching its peak. Whereas the temper of Professor Challenger was akin to a volcano, a violent explosion which might or might not be preceded by warning rumblings from the deep, Summerlee’s ire was more like a man climbing a mountain, with a steady progression from the base to the summit. Having reached the upper limit, his anger now fell away. ‘No, I suppose you are right. You may be drinking too much of the whisky, but we are still comrades and it is not befitting that I should impugn your honour.’

‘That is more like it,’ I said. My journalistic instincts screamed at me to encourage their bickering – there were secrets here simply begging to be unearthed – but my *better* instincts told me that they might well be secrets I would rather not know. ‘Let’s not forget that we are all friends here.’

‘However,’ resumed Summerlee, doing his best to stare Roxton in the eye despite the darkness in the cabin, ‘should I learn at a later date that your honour was not worthy of my trust, I shall demand satisfaction.’

‘And you shall receive it, my fellow, one way or another,’ said Roxton bleakly.

Challenger, while all that was taking place, was enjoying his jaunt through space. The sensations were much the same as they had been during the flight from Planet 93, though they would probably

have differed had he been sporting his original body. The temporary mechanism provided by Klothe and Melenkius was wonderful in many marvellous ways, but without Challenger's head actually being present during its construction they had been unable to calibrate it fully. It monitored his brain-waves to discover his intentions, translating them into actions with a speed which made his old body of flesh and blood seem positively sluggish, but it was unable to transmit in turn its own sense impressions to his mind. The result of this was that in space his only awareness of the body came as a result of the drag created by its trailing behind the helmet, unless he actually looked down at himself.

In the cabin he had found himself forced to conduct himself in the manner of a leper – constantly keeping watch on his extremities for fear of them hitting something and causing damage. Of course, where a leper would damage his own nerve-damaged body tissue, Challenger's steel hands could have broken or injured the cabin's contents; the instruments, the furniture or the people.

Out in space he was free from that constant worry, and if he did not start to throw his extensible arms and legs about like a screwball cross between a acrobat and an octopus, that was only because it might have alerted the Raak to his presence. He glided smoothly through the proverbial emptiness of space (which from his position, he reflected, amongst the ten thousand ships of the Raak Battlefleet, was not half as empty as he would have wished), giving every ship the widest possible berth, but heading inexorably toward the rear of the armada.

As he moved away from the centre of the gravity trap a modification of his method of travel became necessary. When he had first been re-assembled outside the *Rocket* his velocity and direction had been determined by the velocity and direction of the fleet. At that point he had been able to regard the fleet and himself as at rest, the gravity trap holding their relative positions constant – other than when he made use of the helmet's drive. However, towards the rear of the fleet the effect of the gravity trap was lessened and he had also to use the drive to keep up. Gradually the situation changed so that instead of being a bird flying among very ominous clouds, he became a cowboy racing after a speeding train. The chances of detection increased in direct proportion to the additional power being used.

The one way in which that last simile was not accurate is that Challenger was already ahead of the train. He now had to slow down so that it drew level

with him, though every ounce of his brain screamed the message, 'Leave! Leave!' Unfortunately, he told himself, there are times when a hero must do things such as this, like it or not. Some people would find no solace in the fact that though they died, their name would live on. Challenger was not to be numbered among that breed of snivelling cowards and selfish buffoons (though I must confess that I, personally, am). He knew that if the very worst eventuality became actuality, I would record his story in writing for the people of Zangpan's World. My readers may be confused by this: that while they have heard of Challenger's injunction against Earthly publication, they do in fact hold a copy of that very same story in their hands. I assure you that this matter shall be resolved.

Coming ever closer to the dread battle cruiser that brought up the rear, Challenger bid farewell to the stars as, one by one, they were blotted out of existence. Whatever the faults of the Raak, he thought, they certainly know how to build bloody big space-ships. To say that the size of the ship dwarfed him would be an understatement. It reduced him to the size of a pea, then a pinhead, then an atom. Approaching it inspired him with awe, but also with disgust, that such evident scientific and technical ability as the Raak obviously possessed was being perverted to such disgraceful ends.

Although the ship was large and impressive, do not be deluded into thinking that it was beautiful. Big is not always beautiful, in my humble opinion, and, in fact, large is often grotesque. For every pyramid of the pharaohs there is an Eiffel Tower! I believe my assertion is also supported by the example of Challenger himself, a far from handsome specimen, but one of indubitable size. The Raak battleship was designed in a manner intended to cast fear into their enemies, similar in many aspects to the horrifying appearance of their individual selves. Challenger said to me at a later date – but what is that plaintive noise I hear from beyond the pages of my account? You are unhappy, my faithful reader? As an author I do try to be responsive to the sentiments of my audience, and I am always delighted to hear your comments. You say that you are disappointed by the accidental and altogether casual revelation of Challenger's survival? Come now, you should have guessed that it would take more than fighting the most destructive force in the universe to send Professor Challenger to the funeral parlour! (Perhaps I should say the *second* most destructive force in the universe, having been one of the unfortunate few to have shared an enclosed space with the professor

after a meal of sausage, egg and beans.)

To continue with my tale: at a later date Challenger told me that in his opinion the battleships of the Raak resembled nothing so much as a pair of the beetle warriors themselves engaging in, ahem, *intimate* relations. (Though my plain-speaking friend used more colourful phraseology!) From the distance at which we stood from them no details were visible. Silhouetted against a backdrop of stars they looked like shiny black rugby balls, bristling with spikes like a porcupine. Each enormous spike was a horrendous gun, each of a differently awful breed, any one of which had the ability to incinerate London. All too soon I would have the unwished-for opportunity to examine the largest of the ships at close quarters for myself.

One hand operating the controls upon his chin, the other removing an explosive device from one of the many straps around his body, Challenger negotiated his way between the spines to reach the outer hull of the ship and land on it with a clang which he hoped had not carried into the atmosphere inside the enemy ship. The sound made his ears ring painfully, being conducted along the length of his metal body and passed into the atmosphere within his helmet, but that would be the least of his worries should the Raak detect him. He judged himself to be close enough to the back end of the ship to suit the purposes of the plan, and so, activating magnetic elements in the base of his mechanical feet to hold him fast and steady, he switched off the helmet drive. The most difficult part was over – at least with regard to this ship.

He literally bent to his task, fixing the explosive – one of Klothe and Melenkius's patented planet-busters – securely to the hull. He armed it and instructed it to explode two hours later, synchronising his pocket watch with the bomb's timer. (The pocket watch was an interesting item, brought from Earth by Challenger and discovered upon his body as Melenkius took measurements for the robotic replacement. After a certain amount of prodding from Melenkius, Klothe had built a compartment for it into the chest of the new body. Melenkius had rejigged the insides of the watch, providing it with a variety of new functions – although he neglected to provide Challenger with a manual to explain their use – and a energy battery to power it which would outlive us all, and making it space-proof. One would almost have thought, from such details as the watch and the copious amounts of explosives stowed aboard the ship, that Zangpan and his friends had been expecting us to come up with a plan like this.)

Happy with his work, he disengaged himself from the hull and blasted over to another ship.

Working in this way along the length of the rear of the fleet, randomly choosing which Raak would live and which would die, he used up the majority of his explosives, all of them programmed to go off within five seconds, plus or minus, of the first he had set. He was lucky enough to escape trouble, except for a minor skirmish with an engineer working to re-align one of the big guns. A foot telescoped out in a flash and the poor creature's head was knocked into space before he had a chance to bring the fury of the fleet to bear upon Challenger.

When bombs and time began to run low he started to head back toward the centre of the fleet, casually dropping off the odd explosive here and there. These were programmed to go off a little later than the others, the delay period progressively rising as he headed for the Queen-Ship, the most massive and horrible of them all. As he touched down on that alien vessel he checked his watch. Ten minutes before the explosions would begin. He rubbed his metal hands with glee and placed the final three planet-busters on the Queen-Ship's dark exterior and set them to go off in seventeen minutes time. After standing back up he twisted off one of his fingers. Pressing hard on the knuckle, he then released it and watched it fly away (in our direction).

'I think I had best be leaving,' he said to no one in particular before taking flight himself. In accordance with our plan he headed in the direction of Sirius. The theory was that travelling in the same direction we would soon be able to find each other. Of course, we were not relying on making visual contact – Challenger's new body contained a more powerful version of the transmitters which we had carried in our toes during the Planet 93 mission.

When the finger knocked upon the view-screen of the *Rocket* the scene within turned from one of tired and angry silence to one of eager energy and life. The three of us sprang from our chairs like gazelles – it is unlikely that in the long and winding history of mankind three men have ever shown more haste to remove themselves from such comfortable arm-chairs.

'There's the signal! Roxton, make ready with the power,' I said, taking control and giving the orders for once, seeing as they were hardly talking to each other. We all knew our parts perfectly, so of course there was no real need for anyone to give any orders. However, during our many adventures we had come to the conclusion that it was often morale-boosting to have someone take charge – especially for the person

giving the orders. In this case, though, it was the crewmen who needed to be pepped up.

'Summerlee, keep your hands on those controls! Prepare yourselves for action!'

Suddenly a shudder ran through the ship, all the lights came on and the engine started to turn over. My heart filled with horror, I saw every city-sized battleship on the view-screen turn in our direction. A million guns pointed at a single point in space – the one we occupied. If all had fired at once it would probably have been enough to blast a hole in the very fabric of the universe.

I looked at Summerlee and Roxton. 'Which of you did that?' There was no expression in my voice, events had moved beyond the need for displays of emotion.

'Don't look at me,' said Summerlee, turning off the engines. Trying to use them now would be suicide. 'It must have been Roxton. What was it, John? Your hands shaking from the way you drowned your brain in whisky?'

'No,' said Lord Roxton. 'It wasn't that. But I know what it was. And I am to blame.'

'You can't have -' I did not complete the sentence. I could not suspect him of treachery.

'Come to the back of the cabin,' said our aristocratic colleague. As no other potential actions of interest presented themselves, Summerlee and I did as he requested. Halfway across the deck the *Rocket* began to shake again. This time it did not stop and the silhouette of the Queen-Ship began to grow larger on the screen. Roxton shrugged, commenting that being captured was better than being annihilated. 'If levels of Raak alertness follow a normal distribu-



tion, and I imagine that they do, we should have at least one chance of escape before being executed.'

'That's a relief,' I observed. 'So what gave us away, Lord John?'

He pointed at the whisky dispenser.

I didn't understand what he meant, but Summerlee did. 'Oh my word!'

'You remember how proud Challenger was with regard to his whisky during our first stay on Zangpan's World?' I nodded. Challenger had steadfastly refused to accept that any whisky could be finer than that produced by his own distillery, despite all evidence to the contrary provided by Master Zangpan. Suddenly the source of our predicament became clear.

'Klothe and Melenkius refitted the whole ship, but they didn't touch the distillery. They didn't want to affect its authentic flavour. It's still rigged up to its original power source, isn't it?'

'That's about the long and the tall of it,' said Roxton. 'All the whisky I drank left the dispenser empty and it cranked up the mobile distillery. Hey presto, young fella-my-lad, one carefully laid plan ruined by too much drinking. Not an unusual occurrence in my life, you know.'

'I must say that I would rather not bring this up,' I said to them as we dropped ourselves back into the armchairs, possibly for the final time. 'But didn't you say something, Lord Roxton, about those who failed to escape having to die by their own hands?'

Roxton pushed his bottom lip hard against the upper and frowned. 'I suppose I did, young Malone.' He looked at Professor Summerlee, who looked the other way. 'I'd had a few shots of the old whisky back then, and I wasn't quite myself.'

'But you said that allowing the Raak to take us alive would place the Earth in terrible danger!'

'So it would, so it would. On the other hand, if none of us lives to warn our fellow Earthmen of the danger posed by the Raak Empire, they'll die anyway in the end. Let's just hang on for a moment. Where there's life, there's hope. Challenger is still out there, after all. He's our ace in the hole, so to speak.'

The *Rocket* was now so close to the Queen-Ship that little else was visible. The mouth of the gargantuan beast gaped like the gateway to the inferno. I compelled myself to bravery and did not scream, though I gripped the arm of the chair so tightly it splintered. Just before we fell between the mandibles (or loading cranes?) Professor Summerlee got up from his chair and walked to the console, where he consulted the ship's chronometer.

‘They may have come too late to save us,’ he said over his shoulder, ‘but I suppose that we should still watch the fireworks Challenger set up for us, don’t you think? Things should begin to happen within the next twenty seconds.’

Lord Roxton and I got back up from our chairs and went over to stand by the view-screen. Because the Queen-Ship greedily dominated the view, we were forced to virtually press our noses up against the glass to see anything else. It was worth it, though, as when the chronometer ticked off the sixteenth second since Summerlee had spoke there was a flash of light (which would blinded us save for the protection of the new and improved screen, which darkened in response to the flare) and an almighty explosion at the rear of the fleet. Then came another, and another, all quickly following in succession. They were pretty large bombs we had been using and they had quite an effect, blowing the ships chosen by Challenger into a billion flaming pieces. Then ships closer to us began to explode and others began to spin around to chase the attackers. The last thing we saw before being swallowed by the battleship was that our attempt to simulate a surprise attack upon the rear of the fleet had worked. The ships scattered, trying to escape the strafing runs and raking guns of imaginary foes.

Challenger had obviously not been able to plant bombs on every ship in the fleet, but it was clear that he had done a darn sight more in two hours than I would ever have considered possible. What’s more, he had concentrated his efforts upon the largest of the ships, and as these now careened and careered all over the place they created more chaos than any man could imagine ere entering the realm of Beelzebub.

Everything had gone according to plan. The fleet was in chaos and no Raak would be looking out for a ship the size of the *Rocket*. They would assume that only a truly mighty power would dare to attack them so forcefully. In all the confusion it would have been so easy to slip away into the depths of space. We would have been home and dry.

If only the mobile distillery had not switched itself on.

Instead, within five minutes we had been dragged from the cabin of our cosy little space-craft and taken to the bridge of the Queen-Ship. We watched the Raak with interest and amusement as they tried to locate the invisible assault upon their rear, but wondered to ourselves how many of the seven minutes were left before the planet-busters attached to *this* ship would explode.

Mrs Challenger to the Rescue

There are doubtless among my readers many who, seeing the title of this chapter upon the page of contents, surmised it to concern that happy moment following our return to Earth when Mrs Challenger would save us from the twin dangers of hunger and thirst with roast beef dinners and mugs of tea all round! I offer no criticism of those readers, as perhaps they have seen little in the story so far to indicate that she would have any other role, but nevertheless, they should prepare themselves for a shock or two.

Standing on the bridge of the Queen-Ship, waiting for the bomb to blow us to atoms, I realised why Roxton had previously prevaricated on the subject of suicide. We would soon be destroyed, long before the Raak had the time to make the connection between their three captive Earthmen and the surprise attack currently devastating their fleet. In all probability, there would not even be time for them to identify us as Earthmen. For some reason at once incomprehensible and essential to the human spirit, understanding that Lord Roxton was not a coward made me feel slightly better about my imminent death.

The interior of the ship was architecturally similar to the Raak base on Planet 93 which Roxton and I had invaded – dank, dismal and highly conducive to claustrophobia. A strange construction which I had taken at first to be some kind of aquarium for monstrous alien fish revealed itself to be a tactical three-dimensional map of the ‘battle’, computer-generated models swimming in the tank representing the panicky state of the Raak fleet. As far as I could tell the ships of the armada had completely switched direction, having wheeled about to pursue the enemies which they imagined to have struck and then fled. Our beetle-like captors scuttled around the map with frantic haste, often dropping to all-sixes to move more rapidly, while we Earthmen three, tied up together to one side and guarded by Raak that were ugly even by their standards, struggled to maintain our stiff upper lips. (It has to be said that Lord John was quite magnificent in this regard, years in the British Army having given him plenty of practice in stoical reserve.) There could not be more than a

minute to go, I told myself, until the moment of my death.

The explosion came. I braced myself against its fiery touch, then wondered where I had found the time to do so. By rights I should have been dead before having the chance to notice the explosion. The room filled with billowing smoke, obscuring our view of the affected area, but from what I could perceive the damage caused by the blast seemed quite minimal.

I turned to ask the others, raising my voice above the noise of the alarmed chitterings of the Raak, ‘What do you make of it?’ I felt quite jubilant at having escaped death’s grasping hands, even though the logic of the situation, had I time to think it through, still dictated that my end must still come soon, one way or another.

Lord Roxton speculated that one of the planet-busters might have malfunctioned, while Professor Summerlee wondered why the atmosphere in the bridge was not being sucked into space. Such an explosion must surely have created a hole in the hull.

Our rapid discussion was brought to a rapid end as action overtook the bridge. Suddenly the fish-tank began to display the lights of shoals of new arrivals in the vicinity, coming up from the direction in which the fleet had previously been travelling. It was clear that a new player had entered the game. Needless to say, this threw the control room into confusion – the explosion they had virtually taken in their stride, believing themselves to have caught a hit from one of the invisible attackers. Now they found themselves under attack, or so they thought, on two sides. To be trapped in a vice was an unusual and shocking experience for these conquerors of the galaxy, but they had not reached their dominant position through being cowardly or weak-willed. The confusion would have lasted but a moment, as they pulled themselves together and began to issue orders to the other members of the fleet, but for a new and shocking event.

At first I thought Challenger had come to our rescue, but it was not he. From out of the smoke of the explosion strode a man; the kind of man, let me

say, who would always be described as having strode, or swaggered, never as having just walked and most certainly never as having ambled. Though I desire to convey the impression that he was an imposing figure, do not assume that therefore he was a tall man, for he was not, being no more than five feet in height (or so he would claim – independent analysis had indicated that the true figure might be closer to four feet eleven and a half). Nevertheless he had a presence and a charisma that would have been the envy of many of Earth's very tallest men. Of course, the fact that he had just stepped from the void of space onto the bridge of the Raak Queen-Ship did much to enhance our opinion of him. Frankly, though, he did not resemble a man who gave much for the opinions of others. He looked reasonably human, though for some reason I doubted he originated from Earth. Oddly enough, for a man in his position, he carried no weapons, and wore only a red suit – that is, red trousers, a red shirt, a red jacket and a red tie – over his doughty body. He was almost completely bald, save for a smartly cropped strip of black hair around the base of the skull, and his eyebrows were thin and lacquered, extending an inch beyond the sides of his head.

As one might expect, when the Raak became aware of the intruder on the bridge they sprung to attack him. Paying little heed to them, he strode over to our side. We watched in amazement as the beligerence of the Raak seemed to carry them to within two metres of the newcomer, and no further. At that point they seemed to meet an invisible barrier which proved impervious to their assaults.

'Hello,' he said, untying us. 'Just made it. Bomb to explode, three seconds, mark!'

I began to ask the obvious question, in view of two salient facts of which I was in possession – one, that the bomb had already exploded (I later realised that the earlier detonation had been created by our rescuer to allow him ingress to the bridge), and two, that if the bomb was about to explode, I was about to die. 'What do you me-'

I was interrupted by the explosion of the three planet-busters. Using three bombs, each of which was powerful enough to destroy an entire planet, to destroy a single spaceship might have been considered overkill on Challenger's part, but it certainly made for an impressive explosion. Protected by the force-field of Milo the Assassin, I was able to watch the fireworks from the very centre of the conflagration. Most of it happened too quickly to register, but there was an impression of a massive flash, the hull crumpling inwards and the Raak being crushed. For

a fleeting second we found ourselves within a two-metre sphere, the walls of which were formed of squashed beetle and mangled machinery, before it all flew apart to leave us standing, upon a section of floor which, like us, had been protected from the blast, in space, surrounded by tumbling debris.

The vast distances involved in space combat meant that we were unable to see much of the battle with our naked eyes, but the day clearly belonged to the newcomers. The question was, who were they? To whom did we owe our miraculous survival? A number of moments passed before Professor Summerlee, Lord Roxton or I found our tongues. Astounded by the nature of our rescue, somewhat dismayed by the destruction of the Raak (though it was by our own hands, we would not have chosen to experience it at such close quarters), none of us felt ready to speak, while Milo the Assassin was busily tapping away at a mechanism strapped to his wrist. The three of us regarded each other, not yet quite ready to believe what had happened, and tried not to think about the way in which we were hanging in space, apparently exposed to the vacuum.

In the end it was our rescuer who spoke next, in the same brusque manner he had previously used. 'You wonder who I am. Milo the Assassin, sent to save you. Used force-field, only one of its kind. Unique. You should be glad.'

We expressed our gratitude, before Professor Summerlee asked, 'Who sent you? And who is attacking the Raak?'

'The Challenger sent me, of course. I thought you'd have known. The Challenger leads pan-galactic alliance against Raak. Looks like victory, thanks to you.'

'You didn't do such a shabby job yourself,' said Lord Roxton. 'So Challenger sent you, eh? But where did the old goat find the time to rustle up a pan-galactic alliance?'

Milo seemed to stop breathing for a moment while he looked at Roxton. His stance changed from that of a man who had completed his mission to that of a man who was all set to go to work. Upon Roxton. 'Shouldn't call the Challenger old goat, if I were you. Not advisable. Will cause upset and hurt. Upset to me. Hurt to you.'

Lord Roxton was hardly flustered, but he was a little surprised. 'Hey, settle down, old chap! No need to get one's knickers in a twist, what! We are Challenger's oldest friends, you know. It's just friendly banter – helps the action go down smoothly, you know!'

Milo seemed hardly mollified, so I tried to change

the course of the conversation. I said to Milo, 'Where is Professor Challenger, Milo? How did he manage to arrange an alliance?'

Milo looked surprised. 'He? You mean George Challenger?'

Summerlee and I laughed, while Roxton began to look decidedly uncomfortable. I said to Milo, 'Well, of course George! How many Challengers are out here in space?'

'George Challenger is half-way to the Dog Star by now. I'm here under auspices of the Macabre and Ibis.'

'You mean,' said Lord Roxton who seemed, despite the bafflement of Professor Summerlee and I, to at least half-understand what Milo was talking about, 'that Mrs Challenger sent you!'

Summerlee and I exclaimed in unison, 'What!'

'You a member too?' said Milo to Roxton, holding out a hand. The English Lord took it and they shook. 'Always nice to meet fellow agents.'

'Likewise,' said Roxton, although he was obviously still rather shaken.

Professor Summerlee interrupted their greeting. 'Hang on a minute, you two. How about providing Malone and I with a modicum of information? Would that be too much to ask? What's this nonsense about Mrs Challenger leading the attack on the Raak?'

The Assassin indicated that Roxton should speak first. 'It is rather hard to explain. I should say first that I had no idea Mrs Challenger was operating in space – that is as new to me as it is to you. Do you remember how Anna and I spent time talking together when I returned from Africa?'

We both nodded, Summerlee saying what I could not. 'We suspected the two of you of conducting a love affair.'

Roxton showed no reaction. 'I suppose we should have been more sensitive to the impression we created. Well, chaps, the fact is that my work in Africa, dealing with a few rather unpleasant big game hunters, was done on the orders of Mrs Challenger. You saw me delivering my report. She is the head of Ibis, an organisation dedicated to the fighting of evil all over the world. She recruited me after the episode of the Poison Belt. Ibis is an acronym, the letters standing for the International Bureau of Investigation and Skulduggery.'

'Um,' said Milo the Assassin, 'that's the *Interstellar* Bureau of Investigation and Skulduggery.'

'Ah yes,' said Lord Roxton. 'I suppose it is.'

I finally found my voice to ask, 'What is the

Macabre? If that doesn't sound too foolish.'

This time Milo answered. 'Mrs Anna Challenger's Association for the Bringing-together of Rogues and Eccentrics. If *that* does not sound foolish.'

'That is also what I thought,' said Lord Roxton, 'although I did not know that any of my fellow members were of the alien persuasion!'

'Quite possibly they were not,' said Milo. 'I do not know the extent of the Challenger's organisation on your planet.'

Now more curious than shaken, Lord Roxton asked, 'Is she human? Only Challenger thought he was the first man on the moon, and he would be terribly disappointed to find his wife had beaten him to it!' Professor Summerlee and I laughed rather nervously – we were still finding it hard to adjust to this new perspective on events.

'I am unsure how much to disclose,' said the red-suited agent, 'but I suppose no damage will be done by informing you that Mrs Challenger is indeed human. In fact, to my knowledge this is the first time she has left planet Earth. From what I understand – and you should understand that I may be as wrong in this belief as you were in yours – she had set up the Macabre as an agency on Earth whereby she could bring together certain men and women who she would employ upon various tasks. The previous head of Ibis, the great Hallius Dohander, badly wounded in an encounter with the Raak, was slowly dying and he knew it. As the seconds of his life slipped away, Ibis agents brought word of the organisation they had discovered on Earth – the Macabre – and the genius woman who ran it. Hallius, in his wisdom, commanded his lieutenants to take him to meet her. Before dying he passed on the torch of leadership, entrusting her with his communications equipment and the keys to his spaceship. However, she chose to stay at home in London, where she juggled the twin tasks of housewifery and organising the galactic resistance. She changed the two organisations radically. The existing Macabre group was reformatted as a branch of Ibis, with agents given training appropriate to their activities on Earth. It was the Challenger's decision to keep her agents on Earth ignorant of the big picture, and they never knew that the people training them originated from another planet.' Lord Roxton seemed particularly surprised by this. 'On the other hand, seeing the value of its informal and friendly structure, she expanded a new Macabre outwards into the galaxy, setting up safe houses and meeting places, becoming the means by which agents became friends. She used her organisation there as a template for improving our communi-

cation skills throughout the galaxy. She had managed to run an incredibly efficient bureau of investigation and general skulduggery on a world where, if you'll excuse me saying so, the natives were barely out of the iron age. She had a lot to teach us. At her base on Earth she prepared everything, meeting ambassadors from allied worlds, negotiating for ships and troops, and preparing a strategic plan. When the day of the climactic battle came – today – she got in her spaceship and rushed to lead us. We followed the signal sent by the ring in your pocket.'

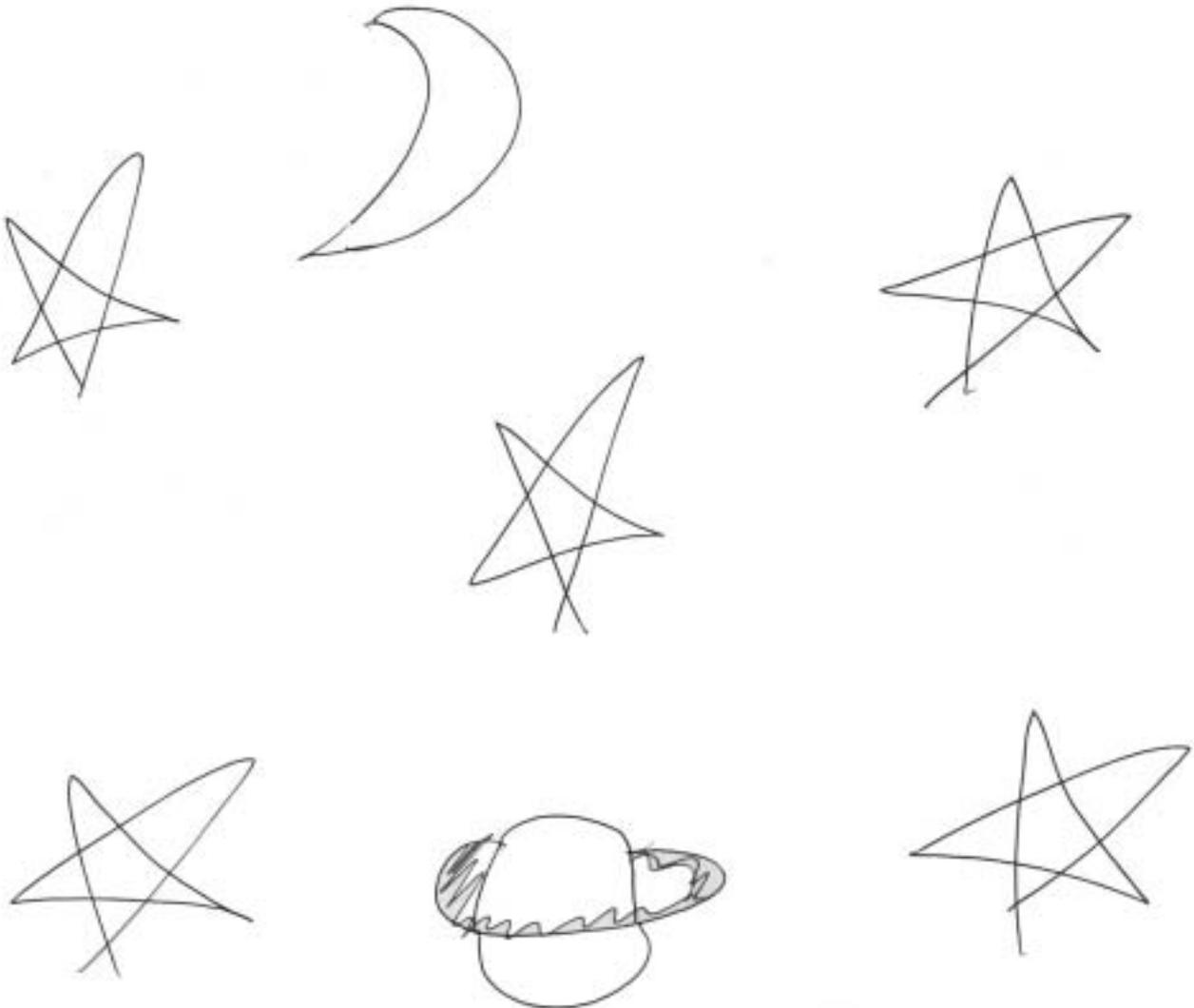
I'd forgotten all about the ring since the Mechanical Housewife told me to take it. I made a mental note to thank her – but for the way in which

she had bent the rules, I would have been incinerated in the very hour of our final victory.

'You can certainly be loquacious when it suits you,' said Professor Summerlee to Milo.

The Ibis agent looked at the machine on his wrist. 'Battle is won. Professor Challenger has been picked up. They'll be here soon.'

'Jolly good,' I said with a happiness that was very nearly boundless. 'This has been a very tiring day and I would really like to settle down with a steaming mug of hot chocolate. I wonder if Mrs Challenger can take time off from saving the universe to cook us all dinner!'



A Slap-Up Meal for Ten!

I stopped Professor Quigg as he exited from Challenger's bedroom, asking, 'How is he, sir? Did you find anything amiss?' As I spoke I noticed that the brain specialist was rather red in the face and that he did not look at all happy.

He harrumphed a couple of times before drawing himself to his full height and saying, 'That is the most outrageous and obnoxious man that it has ever been my displeasure to treat!'

I smiled, thinking that in that case Challenger could not be far from his usual self.

'But how is his health?'

'I wish it were worse,' he said, calming down. Removing themselves from Challenger's presence seemed to have that effect upon people. 'His reflexes seem to be fine, and I can discern no mental slowness – quite the opposite, in fact, to an exasperating degree. I find it difficult to understand why you saw fit to require my services, because he seems perfectly healthy, although a phrenological study indicated that he should have been either a madman, a criminal or a simpleton!'

'Interesting,' I replied. 'Perhaps he was just lucky.'

'Possibly. I must confess that phrenology is beginning to seem a little foolish to me – although I stress that Challenger did not have to point out its failings quite so rudely.'

'It's the only way he knows how.'

'Anyway, as I said, his mental faculties seem unimpaired by whatever problems led you to call upon my services. I presume it was something related to your excellent, if rather incredible, article in the *Gazette* this morning?' He began to button up his coat as he spoke. He was referring, of course, to the truncated account of our adventure of which I have already made mention.

'Let's just say that he lost his head in a crisis, and he wanted to make sure that there were no after-effects. As for my article, I shall tell you in confidence that I left out ninety-nine per cent of the most incredible events.' He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

'Perhaps you will share those events with the world sometime?'

'Possibly, possibly, if the time is right. Are you sure that you would not like to stay for dinner? I

assure you that you would find the company most stimulating.'

'Maybe some other time. It's a very kind invitation, Mr Malone, and I have heard tell far and wide of the meals created by the marvellous Mrs Challenger, but I am afraid that tonight the no less marvellous Mrs Quigg awaits my return.'

'I understand completely, professor. Let me show you to the door.'

He thanked me, and I led the way down the stairs to the peculiar lobby of the Challenger home. He put on his hat, taking it from the top of the totem pole, and picked up his umbrella from where it rested (within an urn which had once contained the ashes of a Teutonic Knight), before saying, 'There was one other thing, Malone, if I may beg your indulgence?'

'Certainly, sir.' It was a pleasure to meet an academic who was so polite! What a contrast to the irascibility and sarcasm of Challenger and Summerlee! Perhaps on our next adventure I would contrive to bring Professor Quigg along, just to have someone around who would make pleasant conversation from time to time! What with Challenger's suspicion of the Mechanical Housewife, Summerlee's needling of Challenger and Roxton, and Lord Roxton's alcohol problems, I was beginning to feel it would be nice to have a new face around!

'For the life of me I cannot imagine why Challenger is wearing that metal band around his neck. I tried to ask him, but... well, you know him better than I.'

'Indeed I do, Professor Quigg. I can imagine his reaction. If anyone asks, he is wearing it in sympathy for the downtrodden peoples of the world. Between you and me, he had a serious accident. It is a revolutionary type of brace to support the neck.'

'I see,' he said, nodding. Assuming a brisker tone, he said, 'Must be off then! Keep in touch – who knows, perhaps one of these days I shall have a story or two for you!'

I bid him goodbye and let him out. He hailed a hansom cab and was driven off into the night. I closed the door and turned to see Challenger glowering at me. Smiling, I asked him, 'How does it feel to have your old body back?'

He peered at me suspiciously. 'Do I have any reason to be angry at you?'

‘Do you need one?’

‘The body feels fine, but the metal one had its uses.’

‘Then I expect that you are glad to be able to keep it.’

‘I am,’ said Challenger, standing down now he realised I was not in the mood for a fight. ‘One thing about this body, though, Malone. It makes me feel terribly belligerent all the time.’

What could one say in the face of such self-knowledge? I opted to say nothing.

‘It may be a chemical thing,’ he speculated. ‘Shall we join the others for the meal? Even though my head no longer needs food, the body does. It was good of Klothe and Melenkius to re-arrange the access and everything.’ Before re-connecting his head to his body, the two engineers had used a molecular displacer to open a gap in the cap on his neck to allow food and drink to pass into his body. It also allowed him to use his own lungs for speaking again. However, his head was still detachable.

‘I wonder how they are enjoying the food,’ I said as we walked through the study in the direction of the dining room.

‘My patience,’ said Challenger with half a smile (which was fifty per cent of a smile more than he usually displayed), ‘would be sorely tried if they did anything but love it. However, that is not to say that I believe they should pretend to enjoy it just because she saved the universe. Far from it. Her food should be enjoyed on its own merits.’

‘And you really didn’t know about her activities?’ I chose that moment to ask as he seemed a little gentler than usual – more likely to respond with something other than a punch in the face. ‘You had never heard of the Macabre or Ibis?’

Challenger replied ruefully, ‘I knew not a jot. Amazing, really, but I suppose that I have neglected her somewhat. I suppose she had to occupy herself during my long journeys around the world. A man should pay an interest in the hobbies of his wife. In any case, there are worse things a wife can get up to in a husband’s absence than saving the universe!’

‘So you are not bitter?’

‘Oh no. Far from it, Malone. It has simply gone to demonstrate the wisdom I showed in choosing such a fine wife! Now let us make the most of one of her many talents!’ But before entering the dining room he stooped to pick up a medium-sized package from where it had sat beneath our four comfortable chairs, now returned to their place in the study.

London has often been said to be a cosmopolitan city, but I doubt that it has ever played host to a more

varied range of guests than it did upon that day. Seated around the Challenger dining table were, as one might expect, Professor Summerlee and Lord Roxton, with places set for myself, Mr George and Mrs Anna Challenger. Less expectedly, at least to a casual observer, would be the other guests who were in attendance. Master Zangpan was there, in his silver shirt and a pair of purple pantaloons, levitating pieces of roast chicken into his mouth. The Mechanical Housewife was there too, seated between the moustachioed mystic and myself. Dressed in elegant black velvet and her head a bare silver, the blonde curls left on Zangpan’s World, she looked more beautiful than ever. She sipped a glass of oil, glancing at me as we entered, but otherwise paying me no special attention. Klothe and Melenkius sat side by side, as ever, apparently engaged in a race to consume the larger proportion of the food. Milo the Assassin had declined to attend, his day job apparently requiring a journey to the far side of the galaxy, but Aikor had accepted the invitation with joy, having never before been permitted to visit Earth, despite its proximity to Ell Ka-Mar. He was dipping a large chunk of bread into some thick Scotch broth, excitedly telling Lord Roxton of his imminent marriage to the handmaiden Jula.

As Challenger entered, everyone there present, myself included, let out a mighty roar, clapped their hands and shouted hurrahs! ‘Hip hip,’ said Lord Roxton, to which came the inevitable reply, ‘Hooray!’ The two of us took our seats to the strains of ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow!’, and Challenger accepted the celebration with good grace.

‘Thank you all,’ he said with a happy smile, and after placing the string-tied parcel beneath his chair, he held out his hands to indicate us all, ‘and you should all thank yourselves, because success would have been unattainable had any single one of you been absent!’

And because quite a bit of wine had been drunk (except by Lord Roxton, who had decided to see if the world seemed different when not seen through an alcoholic haze – and in any case, now that he was no longer keeping secrets from his closest friends he did not feel the same degree of motivation, or compulsion, to hit the bottle) we all began to shake hands and clap each other on the back. We may have acted foolishly, but we had the right to do so after the pressure that had been upon us in the previous weeks and months. Reader, you know by now that the dark secret of which I previously spoke was the possibility of an attack on Earth by the Raak. Although we had scored a decisive victory against them and

shaken the very foundations of their Empire, there remained as yet the chance that a single Raak cruiser might survive the Battle of the Invisible Fleet and make its way to Earth. Hence, I did not publish the full tale until now, when we are certain that no such threat remains. Hence also the fact that we were almost desperate in our merry-making that night, for we knew that on the morrow we must once more be vigilant.

'As vital as all of you were,' said Challenger, raising his voice above the general hubbub, 'I think we are all agreed that one other played the most vital role in this escapade.' He waited for a moment before continuing, as he was drowned out by the cries of 'Hear, hear!' from around the table. 'Not only did she provide the sandwiches which fuelled our initial expeditions to the Moon, she also worked tirelessly and selflessly here in London over a number of years to put together the mighty fighting force which annihilated the Raak! And if I am not mistaken, here she comes now with a trolley full of food! Ladies and gentlemen, I give you – Mrs Challenger!'

The commander-in-chief of Ibis came through the door to such acclaim that one would have thought us a bunch of starving street urchins eager for a good square meal. Her achievements were in no doubt – she had done what not even her illustrious predecessor had managed. She had scored a victory against the Raak which would safeguard the galaxy for the next century! Additionally, the food on the trolley was so aromatic and mouth-watering that not even noticing that Zangpan had brought one of his speaking trolleys could detract from my appreciation.

The evening progressed as one would expect, with much celebration and jubilation, and a lot of singing and joking. At one point Challenger had to be dissuaded from dancing on the table, on the double grounds that he was too heavy and that we were all still eating. I found time to speak to the Mechanical Housewife about our relationship, and although she pointed out that there were difficulties to be considered, she agreed to spend some time in London with me while we made our decisions. Mrs Challenger was the centre of attention, every guest was interested in her covert activities and they all vied to tell her all about themselves – although Challenger had sketched out his adventures to her during the return from the Raraak-Ra system. She was fascinated to learn about Zangpan's World, something of which her organisation had no information.

'The nature of Zangpan's World,' she said, during one of the more serious moments of the party – for such moments always come (usually about an hour

after the alcohol has run out, although not in this case), 'solves a mystery which had both puzzled and distressed me greatly. When the tracking device I installed in the ring stopped transmitting after your landing on the Moon, I had assumed the four of you dead, destroyed by something or other. I knew the Raak had been there, although I had known nothing about the city of Ell Ka-Mar.' Professor Challenger tried not to meet her eye, thinking of how easily we could have dropped in on her before travelling to Planet 93. 'By the way, Aikor, I so greatly regret not having visited your world. I wish this had all happened soon enough to save the place you called home.'

'That is all right,' replied Aikor, displaying no ill feeling. 'Ell Ka-Mar will live forever in our memories, our poetry and our art. And we have you to thank for hearing how our original home, the ravaged and scarred Planet 93, took a score of the abominable Raak battlecruisers with her when she finally died. There is sadness for the past, but that does not cloud our joy for the future. Our new home is a wonderful place. Perhaps you will visit us there sometime.'

Before Mrs Challenger was able to reply, her unruly spouse was getting to his feet, tapping a wine glass with a spoon. We all laughed after he hit it too hard and caused it to crack.

'You have our attention,' said Lord Roxton. 'No need to break anything else.'

Challenger pushed out his chest and grasped his lapels with his hands. It was his dreaded speech-making position. 'Some time ago, Master Zangpan was kind enough to take four weary travellers into his home. I responded with suspicion and violence, making him unhappy. This has preyed upon my mind, and so, upon our return to London last night, when Malone went to drop his report off at the newspaper, I gave him a substantial sum of money and bid him visit a tailor's shop. As I requested, he hammered upon the door and cast stones at the bedrooms on the upper floor until the proprietor opened up for him. Offering the man an outrageous amount of money, Malone handed over some plans I had drawn up during our return from the Battle of the Invisible Fleet. That tailor worked throughout the night and for all of today until the item was ready. Shortly after the government came to collect the *Rocket* (thanks to Klothe and Melenkius for removing all working parts before they did so), and shortly before the visit of Professor Quigg, I took myself down to the tailor's and collected the finished garment. I have the parcel which contains it beneath my chair at this very moment.' He bent down and picked it up, before

walking around the table to where Master Zangpan sat. He handed over the parcel. 'I hope that you will accept this token of the sincerity of my apologies and regret.'

'I do not know what to say, Master George,' said Master Zangpan, clearly pleased with the parcel. We all cried, 'Open it!' as he was showing no signs of doing so under his own steam. 'Okay then,' he said, 'I will! No problem!'

He carefully removed the string and unwrapped the paper to reveal the spectacular jacket that Challenger had bought for him. He stood up so that

he could let the jacket open out to its full length. It was a delicious burgundy and velvet smoking jacket, sewn with golden thread and having golden buttons. Zangpan's favourite symbol, the yin and yang, the two halves that were one, were embroidered upon the cuffs and around the edge of the collar and lapels. It was the finest piece of clothing any of us had ever seen, and more than one of the people at that table wept a tear as Master Zangpan put it on.

'Now,' said Professor Challenger to no one in particular. 'Bring out the cigars!'

THE
END

Quiet, the Tin Can Brains are Hunting! Part I

The Message Brought by Nanotus the Giant

Nanotus the Giant stood panting in Mrs Challenger's kitchen, the huge gusts of his breath quite blowing her hair out of its bun.

"Calm down, dear Nanotus," she said. "You have done exceedingly well to make it this far."

The giant, while not yet being able to catch his breath enough to speak, screwed his face up in a gesture of thanks. She went to a cupboard and took out some sachets of herbal tea. By the time she had filled the kettle and laid out some cups and saucers on the table, Nanotus was almost ready to speak.

"Here, take a seat," she implored. He made a move for one, but a tiny hand on his hip steered him away from his original choice. "Take the chair George usually sits in. It already has a measure of reinforcement."

The wooden chair creaked ominously, but held.

"I had to run here," said the giant, "because the thing I've learnt is so important." Though Mrs Challenger had no difficulty in focusing on his words, a small river of sweat pouring from his brow and pooling in the shirt he wore did its best to distract her. If she were not so foolishly faithful to George, she considered, this job might be even more fun than it already was!

Nanotus seemed to be waiting for her to respond. In fact, he seemed to have been waiting for a few seconds. Perhaps she had been distracted after all... This would never do! Mentally, she slapped herself

around the face, took a cold bath and retied her bun, twice as tight as before.

"Important enough to run, you say!"

"That's right," answered the giant. "I ran all the way from Andromeda. News this important couldn't wait. The news I bring could have dire consequences for every living being in the universe!"

"So," Mrs Challenger said dryly, "we have established its importance. There is one danger, though, which does not seem to threaten."

"What do you mean, Mrs Challenger?"

"I mean that there seems little danger of you actually getting to the point and telling me what the danger is!"

The hangdog expression she received in response turned her sarcasm to guilt.

"Oh, I am sorry, Nanotus," she said at once. "I'm used to dealing with such brutes, you would not imagine! Here, drink some tea, take all the time you need!" She made haste to pour water into the kettle, and then tea into his cup. Not wishing to risk the delicate china handle of the cup between his gigantic fingers, he lifted the whole apparatus, saucer and all, to his lips, before continuing.

"That's all right, Mrs Challenger. I suppose I might have been milking the moment a bit. I don't know how much you know about me, but I haven't had a pretty life. I've been a bad person. And this has been my first chance to be a hero."

That is quite the understatement, thought Mrs Challenger. If she recalled the contents of her files on him correctly, Nanotus had for many years been renowned as one of the most depraved reprobates in the galaxy, living a life of crime and debauchery that left him a wanted man in five galaxies and a father on one hundred and thirty-seven planets. A stray wicked thought enquired whether she might not wish to make the figure one hundred and thirty-eight, but she swatted it away like an impertinent wasp, despite the delectable way in which the sweat stained the shirt on his back.

“I assume Milon sent you?”

“Yes. He wanted me to get a message to you, whatever happened to him.”

Mrs Challenger began to pace the room hurriedly, straightening crockery on the shelves as she went. Nanotus gave up on the cup and saucer, and took his second drink directly from the teapot.

“And what has happened to him? To the best of your knowledge?”

Nanotus put the teapot back down and shook his mighty head sadly. “I wish I knew. When last I saw him he was in the clutches of the tin can brains—”

“The tin can brains!” exclaimed Mrs Challenger. She ran round the table to face Nanotus full on. “Are you sure? We thought it would be centuries before they posed any kind of serious threat!”

“There is no doubt,” replied the giant, deep regret in his voice. “And there is no hope.” He bowed his head. Tears dropped from his eyes, hitting the carpet and splashing Mrs Challenger’s skirts.

“Now then, Nanotus,” said the lady as sternly as she could manage. “Chin up! There’s a brave giant! There is always hope! After all, that is why I am here. Hope is my job! Now why don’t you tell me exactly what happened?”

“Well,” said Nanotus, “it began like this. Milon the Assassin had been recuperating on his home planet of Golgokkamok following the Battle of the Invisible Fleet. Suddenly he received a message, and was summoned to the local Ibis base. I was there to toast his departure; in those days, he was quite the hero. Unfortunately, his idiotic sidekick, Zaaloon the Robotoface—”

“Oh no,” said Mrs Challenger, “he isn’t still operational, is he?”

“I’m afraid so,” replied Nanotus.

“That pile of junk has done more damage to the galaxy than all the tin can brains put together!”

“Hardly true,” said Nanotus.

“What do you know?” said Mrs Challenger angrily. “Have you ever tried to cook with him in the

kitchen?”

“Well, aside from that,” said Nanotus. “Anyway, as I was saying, Zaaloon had left the mega-wave on after cooking Milon’s farewell dinner. Somehow the automatic cut-off failed and the mega-wave’s core went critical, causing an explosion which devastated half the planet.”

“And I thought he damaged *my* kitchen,” said Mrs Challenger.

“By that time Milon and Zaaloon were far away of course. I woke from the concussion that had felled me to find myself buried under tons of rubble. Fortunately I am entirely impervious to radiation, so that wasn’t an issue, but upon working my way up through the ruins of my home, I found that the other inhabitants of Golgokkamok, or at least the inhabitants on the continent on which I lived, had been transformed into hungry flesh-eating zombies. As you can imagine, they were pleased to see a big fellow like me, and as I stood among my incinerated possessions fighting them off, I vowed to have my revenge upon Milon the Assassin.”

“Do you think,” began Mrs Challenger airily, “that they would have grilled your flesh, or parboiled it?”

Ignoring her, Nanotus continued. “To cut a long story short, I chased Milon through the galaxy, hoping to end his life before someone beat me to it. But at the last, I realised the importance of his mission, and tried to assist, rather than kill, him. Brave to the very end, in the very clutches of the tin can brains, he had thought of nothing but sending me here to your aid, with the message I have brought.”

“Well, Nanotus,” said Mrs Challenger, stroking her chin, “it is marvellous, really, really marvellous that you made it. I think I have the gist of what happened here. There is one thing – did you have any physical contact with Milon the Assassin before leaving him to an agonising but courageous death?”

“I did, in fact,” replied Nanotus, rather surprised. “He slapped me on the back, rather too firmly, I felt. I still have the bruise.”

“As I thought,” said Mrs Challenger, raising an eyebrow. “Milon, you old hound,” she laughed. “I might have known you would have been a step ahead of them all!”

Nanotus was completely baffled.

Mrs Challenger put the empty cup to one side and asked Nanotus to hold the saucer. “Just wait there a moment,” she said. “All will be revealed.” She rolled up her sleeves and leant in to grab a double handful of the giant’s shirt.

“Hey there,” he said, “Mrs Challenger, I must protest! Your actions may put my life at risk, and

hence I must complain most stridently!"

She laughed. "So the reputation of my husband has even reached the Andromedan galaxy? As I said, wait a moment." She began to squeeze the shirt, tighter and tighter, until the saucer was filled with a puddle of the giant's sweat. Carefully taking it from his hands, Mrs Challenger laid the saucer on the table before going swiftly to scrub from her fingernails to her elbow joints.

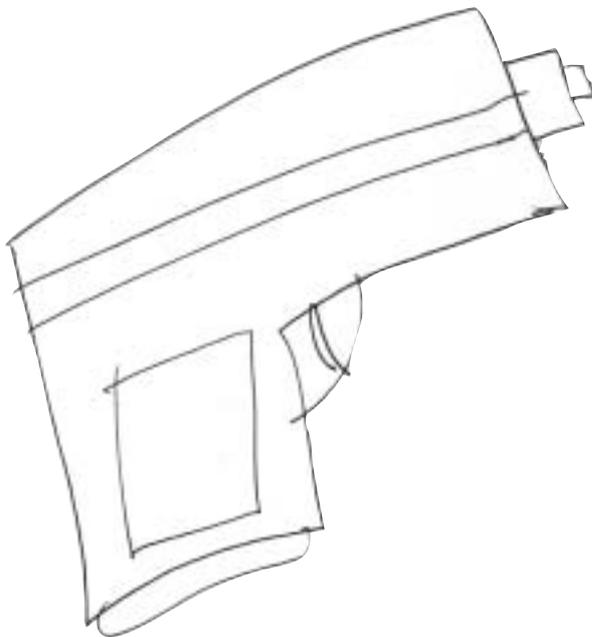
"Nanotus," she said, rubbing soap over her exquisite forearms, "since you arrived, something has been bothering me. Your sweat. I could not stop myself from thinking about it."

Nanotus got to his feet in a hurry, but realised that there was nowhere else to go – if this woman could not help, then the universe was lost – and so sat back down, despondently. Mrs Challenger did not notice, and moved onto her nails.

"At first I thought it a mere girlish infatuation, which would hardly have been that unusual, with such a big strong hero as yourself being concerned. But then I have never been one to let myself get carried away like that. Even in the first flush of my love for George" – she stretched out her fingers and admired them; not too long, she thought, just perfectly in proportion with the size of her wrist and her dainty palm; she wore the nails short, because she was often, as today, up to her elbows in dirty work – "I kept a cool and steady head." She span round to grab a towel, flourishing it like a captured ensign. "It had to be something else!"

"Mrs Challenger, you lost me at the sweat," shrugged Nanotus.

She wagged one of those perfectly proportioned



fingers in his face. "Then you must find your own way, Sir Giant! This train of thought does not stop for stragglers!"

Her hands dried, she sat back down at the table, and pulled the saucer across to her. "As yet this liquid is inactive. We must stimulate it into activity."

Leaping back to her feet, she indicated a newly fitted electric lamp upon the wall. "Would you do the honours, Nanotus? Please rip this lamp from the wall, but ensure the cable connecting to it is not severed."

"Yes, Mrs Challenger."

"Thank you. Now, if I remove this wire from here, and dip it in here..."

"Astonishing!"

"I bet you never suspected you had it in you!"

The most incredible thing had happened – the face of Milon the Assassin, complete with lacquered eyebrows, had appeared in the saucer, and appeared to be mouthing words.

"What is it?" asked Nanotus.

Mrs Challenger tapped the side of her nose meaningfully. "The very latest and most secret development in Ibis technology, intelligent information carrying microbes... they are carried under a fingernail. The agent activates them, and records a message. Injected into a suitable host, the microbes multiply, then begin to make their way through the epidermis."

"So he stabbed me with his fingernail?" said Nanotus, rubbing his back, rather put out.

"I am afraid so," smiled Mrs Challenger. "But it was in a good cause!" She peered into the saucer. "To get the full message I shall have to feed this sweat through my Ibis computing machine." Turning back to Nanotus, she finished her explanation. "Those of us in the organisation for whom messages may be destined have been treated with complementary microbes which react, as you have seen, to the presence of the message-carriers."

"I have strode across the stars," said Nanotus, "but I am still amazed."

* * * * *

Mrs Challenger thought about what she had learnt from the message from Milon the Assassin. Clearly this was a case in which she would have been well-advised to involve her very top operatives. Unfortunately the very best, the cream of the cream, were already out in the field, that is to say, her husband and his friends. Some of those currently available to her she was far from sure about. On the other hand, there were some very promising prospects who were fresh out of her training

academy. She switched off the Ibis computing machine and called the butler (one newly employed, and not yet scared off by the tantrums of her fearsome husband), asking him to prepare the carriage. The dreadful thing was that whoever she sent to rescue Milon the Assassin faced almost certain death. This was something about which she felt terribly sad, but then she had always accepted that saving the universe on a regular basis, as head of the Interstellar Bureau of Investigation and Skulduggery, would never be an easy job. After all, she had only been entrusted with the job as a result of tending her predecessor, Hallius Dohander, through his own death pains.

* * * * *

Professor Samson Quigg, the noted brain specialist, was at that moment relaxing in his study, pouring whisky down his throat with little or no regard for the stupendous fate which was at that moment hurtling across London in his direction. (If he had known anything of it, the whisky would surely have been poured twice as quickly!) He had a thick, leather-bound volume in his lap, a volume that looked like it should have been extremely dusty, but which in fact had obviously been pored over to such an extent that dust was deprived its natural home.

"It is impossible," he cried aloud. "This book is nothing but the purest bunkum! Father, you lied! Grandfather, you lied! Oh, that I had been stifled at birth!" From beside the skirting board on the other side of the room a tortoise, comfortably ensconced in a box lined with hay, watched him impassibly. "Damn you!" he raved at the reptile.

He flung the book into the roaring fire with an incoherent shout. He watched as the flames tickled its corners, then threw himself from the chair and dragged the book to safety. He pulled the sleeves of his jacket over his hands and frantically patted out the sparks of fire.

Disgusted with himself, he kicked the book under a couch and retreated to his favourite chair, his hands to his face to cover his shame. There was no way for him to find happiness, he felt it more strongly now than ever. He could never hope to complete the researches of his father; he had even begun to lose faith in the very *possibility* of success. As his head sank into his hands, the tips of his fingers struggled to find his receding hairline, the constant evidence of his lifelong failure.

"Samson, can I come in?"

It was Mrs Quigg at the door. Calm, patient and faithful as she was to a fault, he would never let her

see his weakness. Indeed, he kept his true researches, and hence his failure, an absolute secret from her. He got to his feet and composed himself as best as he could.

"Come in, darling," he called.

The door opened, and in she came, a sweet and homely woman, as yet unbowed by the evidences of her husband's disaffection that were discovered to her every day of her life.

"How are you, sweetheart?" she asked.

"I'm fine, Lottie, don't bother yourself with a silly old fool like me." He pushed her hand to one side and pushed past her into the hallway. She followed him, obedient as a village idiot following a peddler to the town limits. "I just dozed off, and woke to find the newspaper slipping into the hearth... half-asleep as I was, it gave me quite a fright. I think I dreamt of the inferno..."

Once in the drawing room, he headed for the drinks cabinet, and poured himself a glass of brandy. Lottie was soon at his side, looking up at his tired face with imprecating eyes.

"Are you sure this is good for your health, dear? The way you shut yourself up in there every evening..."

"I need time to think," he said angrily, sweeping past her to the other side of the room. She gave up her pursuit and sank onto a divan.

"You know best, Samson," she said, blinking slowly.

With a gulp of brandy came a surge of conscience. Did he have the right to make her so miserable? She might thank him in the end, when his research was complete, and he was able to tell her everything,



show her everything, share everything... Till then, though the silence between them must persist, must the pain?

He took another swallow of brandy, but rather than refill it, he went to his wife's side. He knelt by the divan and took her hand. He kissed it gently, allowing the warmth of his breath to play over her knuckles.

"I am sorry, darling, you know I am," she said. "I don't mean to be so demanding of you."

"The only fault is mine," he told her. "I'm driven, Lottie, you can never know how much." He held her hand against his cheek. She began to chuckle; his whiskers tickled. He came to a sudden resolution. "Let's go away!"

She laughed; perhaps, she thought, for the first time that year. His preoccupation had quickly come to over-determine her life, though she endured yet.

"Darling Lottie, I mean it. Let's go away together, to Brighton or Yarmouth, as we did twenty years ago."

"Before our parents knew..."

"Yes," he said, a cloud spinning briefly across his brow, "before our parents knew."

"Oh, Samson, it is a glorious idea. Do you think

we could fix things? Could we? It's nothing that cannot be fixed, is it?"

"Of course not, Lottie. Of course not. I'll fix it. Why don't you go and pack? We could leave in an hour."

She hopped from one foot to the other, just as she had at the age of 18, when he had proposed a similar trip, though with less honourable intentions... She clapped her hands together. "Let's not even tell the help, Samson! They'll be so amazed!"

As she ran up the stairs to prepare, Professor Quigg reflected that he did actually feel a bit better for the effort. Was love, once released from repression and expressed, its own benefit? Or did feigned love have the same beneficial effect?

He pushed the thought aside. Did it matter? He felt almost happy for once and decided to make the effort to appreciate it. Even if it was just the brandy, by God they had brandy in Brighton. Whole bottles of it!

This tawdry epiphany achieved, he did not hear the ring of the doorbell, and so was quite surprised when Mrs Challenger was shown into the drawing room. He quickly poured himself another glass of brandy.

Quigg Time!

This is terrific, thought Professor Quigg to himself. Absolutely terrific. How did it go so very wrong? Could it possibly be any worse? Upon reflection, it could have been. If the keen ears of Nanotus had not, almost subliminally, picked up the tiny whirring and cranking noises made by the tin can brains as they waited in ambush in a typically foggy London alley, things might have been a good deal worse. As it was, they had dashed into a riverside warehouse, one of those that lined the Thames, and were now stuck behind a dozen packing crates hastily piled up by the giant as a makeshift bunker wall. As it was, things were bad. If they had fallen into the hands of the enemy, they would have been so very much worse as to fall into the category of downright inconvenient. And Professor Quigg hated nothing so much as inconvenience.

The deadly laser guns of the tin can brains blasted and splintered the cases more and more with every second that passed. He estimated that there were as many as five of the silver-black psychotics left out there, although Nanotus was doing his darndest to reduce their numbers, despite the difficulty of having had no weapons with him – they had far from expected such an a peremptory attack from the tin can brains, who had up until now been biding their time for centuries.

Having worked a hole in the back of one of the crates, Nanotus had been intrigued to discover the contents to be small glass balls, which Quigg told him (after several attempts to make himself heard above the screaming sound of the laser blasts) were marbles, beloved of schoolboys everywhere.

“They raise ‘em mean on this planet,” snarled the giant as he grabbed a handful and flung it at the most exposed of the attacking tin can brains. The first shot had been unreasonably successful, completely smashing the eye-pieces of the metal monster. It retreated from the warehouse, leaving the others to continue their attacks from a safe distance.

Safe for them, thought Nanotus. His tireless enemies saw no point in taking unnecessary risks; they could wait till the turn of the next century for the humans to fail; their damnable ball bearings would still be running freely and well-oiled. They would keep clear of his marbles, and move in for the kill when they chose.

“Professor,” he shouted above the din. “We have to get out!”

Even if the giant had not had such a deafening voice, Quigg would still have been able to take a good guess at the direction of his thoughts.

The pressure was upon him now. Nanotus pointed out one of the tin can brains, hooking itself upon a chain dangling from a pulley, a mechanism intended for lifting heavy crates, and helping men to avoid breaking their backs, but, it seemed, with an irony too awful to savour, destined to assist in the destruction of every man in the universe and quite possibly the universe along with them! From what he had learned in his briefing from Mrs Challenger, he knew that the dreadful ambition of the tin can brains would never be satisfied until it had brought about its own annihilation! One of its comrades made haste to crank the chain. Already blasts from the others were cracking the brickwork of the wall behind them. Chips blew into their faces, causing tiny scratches.

Damn, damn and dagnammit!, thought Nanotus to himself. If they didn’t do something soon, the tin can brain would be hoisted up and swung above them, able to pick them off at his pleasure (if those things felt pleasure). He was doing his utmost to be understanding, since he knew that Professor Quigg was fresh out of the Ibis academy, but really, this performance was putting his life at risk! And the mission had barely begun! Not for the first time that evening, Nanotus wondered how Milton the Assassin had come to fall in with these amateurs.

He barely knew why he was here himself, but he knew it had something to do with Mrs Challenger’s charming personality, and something to do with rescuing Milton. They had been on their way to recruit the third member of their team when the tin can brain ambush had begun.

“Think, Quigg, think!”

Nanotus shouted it, but Quigg was thinking the same thing. Honestly, he thought at the same time, thought on a different level, perhaps if the beastly giant thought for itself for a minute instead of waiting for him to pull a rabbit out of the hat... But the other line of thought came to a conclusion first, and so this one was forgotten as quickly as a conversation with Mrs Quigg.

Despite throwing himself into action, he found

mental time to berate himself for being so mean-spirited with regard to his own wife... but then if anyone was mean-spirited, was it not she? Was it his fault if Mrs Challenger sparkled so as to push her own friend into the shadows whenever she entered a room?

Though pulling a miniature chemistry set (product of Ibis) from an inner pocket of his jacket, he allowed his brain to tick over the Brighton question... why could Lottie not see how important this mission was? Or that in comparison Brighton, the holiday, the marriage, even Lottie herself, were all less than nothing, mere sparks quickly fading as an inferno raged all around? Mrs Challenger, he felt sure, would understand. Mrs Challenger, he thought, might even have helped with his desperate researches, rather than have been the unwitting block to all his ambitions that Lottie had become.

Quickly he mixed together a few particular chemicals in a tiny plastic test tube, before jamming it through the hole in the crate of marbles as far as his arm would reach. Nanotus looked at him quizzically, one eyebrow leaping into the air like a frisky dolphin asking a question which Quigg answered with a quick movement of his hands. Nanotus nodded, and the eyebrow fell back, though luckily no eyes were hurt in the process.

"Lead the way!" shouted Quigg, pointing to the brick wall at their backs.

Nanotus winced, then put his shoulder to the wall at a spot where the brickwork had taken a particularly brutal blast. He winced some more as the wall began to give, and even groaned as the wall gave way and a couple of bricks tried to fall into the gap, heading for the ground by way of the top of his head.

Quigg dashed through the gap into the night. "Quick," he called back over his shoulder as he ran, "there's no time to dawdle, Nanotus!"

With a scowl, unseen by anyone save your ever-present narrator, Nanotus sprang from the hole in the wall, letting the remaining bricks fall as they might. Though his great legs ate up the distance as quickly as you might have expected, one of the tin can brains managed to reach the gap in the wall, and let the giant have it as best he could in the darkness. Winged, Nanotus fell to the ground, to Quigg's frustration and, no doubt, his own consternation. Quigg, after a quick glance back and a shrug of the shoulders, continued to run. Nanotus fully expected the tin can brains to advance across the scruffy, half-bare muddy land and finish him off, using their lasers to slice him up like an extra-juicy joint of ham...

But happily time did not allow him the pleasure of dwelling on that image, as the tin can brain at the

hole in the wall shattered in an explosion of a thousand marbles, the chemicals left by Professor Quigg in the case unleashing their pent-up fury to devastating effect. The robotic monster screamed in mechanical agony before falling to the floor, lifeless. Before the scream had quite died away it was echoed by the howls of its comrades... Sounds like we got 'em all, thought Nanotus happily, before passing out.

* * * * *

"So," said Professor Quigg, "that's just about where we're up to. Mrs Challenger picked me to lead this mission, but she thinks you are essential to the team if we hope to succeed. Admittedly, we have already successfully destroyed a hunting party of murderous tin can brains, but it was tight, and with you at our side, I think we would really have given those tinpot fools what for!"

Nanotus smiled in what he hoped was a supportive and encouraging manner. The scabs that littered his face might well have rendered this a less than pleasant sight to the intended recruit, had he not seen much worse things in the course of a long career fighting crime in the back alleys of London (and Istanbul, Karachi, and Chicago, to name just a few).

"Great!" said Detective Jim Grimm. "I'm ready to go right now! Things have been quiet down at the Yard since I put away Professor Helium and his Noble Gases... did you hear about that case?"

Professor Quigg had. He regarded Professor Helium as a contemporary, a deluded and psychotic contemporary, of course, but a man sharing at least some of the same ideals and values.

"He could have been a great man," he said rather sadly.

"I'll say," said Grimm. "He could have been the greatest scientist of our time, but for his insane desire for power..."

"Well, maybe not the greatest..." responded Quigg.

"Of course you're right," said Grimm to a smile from Quigg. "I was forgetting the marvellous Professor Challenger! Who could ever hope to match his magnificent achievements!"

Nanotus tried and failed to hide a smirk, but then a smirk that big would really have taken some hiding, and the living room of Detective Jim offered little cover. There was just enough furniture to get by, a few chairs, a writing table and a padlocked weapons cabinet being the sum total of Grimm's necessities. None of the chairs looking strong enough to hold him – giants being, after all, few and far between in 19th century London, and far from ubiq-

uitous in the early 20th – Nanotus had settled for sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor. One of his ears was still ringing slightly, but apart from that the explosion had left him reasonably hale and hearty. None of the cuts to his face had been too serious, most of them scabbing over as they continued the journey along the riverside to Grimmatt’s residence.

“And then there was Mr Nemor,” continued Grimmatt. “He too was a genius of no little repute!”

“Yes, yes,” said Quigg. “So will you be able to join us on this mission? I would so hate to have to start off without you if you are too busy.”

Nanotus could only admire Grimmatt’s imperviousness to Quigg’s sarcasm. “It was the darndest thing with Nemor, though... just disappeared into thin air... doubtless one of his experiments backfired... That was one case I just had to leave in the bottom drawer of the cabinet...”

“Fascinating,” said Quigg unconvincingly.

“You know, I only finished the training a few months ago. To be picked for such a blamed important mission is a real thrill for the old pipes! In this day and age, it’s all too easy for the quality of effort I bring to a case to go to waste. Point me at the worst of the villains and let me rip!”

Nanotus clenched a fist and punched the air, shouting “Well done that man!” Luckily, as I pointed out earlier, he was sitting on the floor, and so the ornamented ceiling escaped unharmed.

“Shhhh,” said Grimmatt, putting a finger to his lips. “We wouldn’t want to wake the housekeeper. She turned in early today.”

* * * * *

This is probably a good time to tell you about Detective Jim Grimmatt, because there is hardly enough space to tell the whole tale, and there may well not be room to tell his story later. Born forty-four years and one hundred and seventeen days before his first appearance in this novel, Detective Jim Grimmatt had known right from the off that he would be an officer of the law. The gossip at Scotland Yard had it that on being born he rounded up the doctors, nurses and Mr and Mrs Grimmatt and demanded the identity of the perpetrator... Of course, he wasn’t called Detective Jim Grimmatt then. That didn’t come for a few years, when as a toddler he made his first citizen’s arrest (and *this* story is documented fact, as researched by your author in the annals of Fleet Street). A vicious miscreant, having so far been successful in robbing a bank, made the mistake of making his getaway along a route too close to that of the young hero’s peram-

bulator. One well-placed teddy bear later (young Jimmy had begun to think he might be growing out of it anyway) and the budding detective’s first apprehension, the first of so many hundreds to come, was accomplished (with the help of a paving stone and at the cost to the villain of a severely cracked head). From then on he was known to the whole nation as Detective Jim Grimmatt, even, oddly enough, for the few weeks after joining the force that his official rank was just constable. (Foiling an attempt by the infamous Manx Dan to steal the crown jewels quickly led the superintendents of Scotland Yard to correct the oversight.)

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The case of the tin can brains, of course, was of such urgent importance that Detective Grimmatt would have had no difficulty in securing a secondment to the forces of Ibis for the duration of the crisis. However, Mrs Challenger had, via Professor Quigg, sent her advice that it would be better to take a leave of absence. Dire as the danger was to the people of Earth, she saw little point in panicking them over something nobody could do absolutely anything about. Nobody, that is, except the three stalwarts she had selected for the mission.

The detective quickly wrote his superiors a message to the effect that he had been offered a sudden and unmissable opportunity to travel, and that he would be grateful if they would excuse the lateness of his notice. Given his track record, he felt sure he would not return to face censure. And if he did, it would take nothing but a quick call from Mrs Challenger to the Prime Minister to fix the situation.

The message handed to the housekeeper to be sent post haste, the three fellows set off. The first order of business was to arrange suitable apparel for Nanotus the Giant, whose clothes, never the height of fashion, had fared badly during the destruction of his planet, and the pursuit across the galaxy of Milon the Assassin, not to mention his return to Earth and the subsequent attack of the tin can brains. Mrs Challenger had provided them with a well-filled purse, so London was at his mercy.

A brisk walk, a quick and cramped trip on the underground, and a second walk later, the three had reached New Oxford Street, and were shown into Professor Quigg’s favourite tailors, Pollopp & Son. Given the size of the task and the money available, Mr Pollopp himself came out to meet the customers. He was a short thin man, the bald roof of his head tickled at the sides by tufts of hair curling up from behind his ears. He wore no spectacles, but gave the

impression of having accidentally left a pair at home.

"My friend here is a little on the large side," Quigg informed Mr Pollopp, quite unnecessarily.

Mr Pollopp clapped his hands together eagerly. "A challenge! How one loves a challenge!"

"How one does," said Quigg. "Mr Nanotus requires some sensible and hard-wearing travelling clothes; we are about to embark on a long and quite possibly hazardous voyage."

"Oh my," said Mr Pollopp, "how interesting. Somewhere exciting, eh?"

Grimmett coughed. "I hope not," he said emphatically.

While Mr Pollopp got on with making the clothes, Nanotus, Grimmett and Quigg went to have a spot of lunch in a nearby public house, the Crouching Hound. It mainly catered for working-men taking their lunches – the three travellers selecting it for the publican's obvious lack of concern as to the niceness of its patrons' garments.

"Are you both ready for this mission?" asked Grimmett as they waited for pies and steaks to be brought to their table. He took a gulp of his beer as Nanotus and Quigg looked at each other. It tasted pretty good. He was far from sure about his colleagues. Quigg seemed rather flaky, and Nanotus... well, Nanotus he had some ideas about. He had a shiftiness about him that Grimmett had seen before, on a thousand different faces.

Nanotus was the first to reply. "I realise you have your doubts about me, Detective Grimmett. You know enough about my background to know that I haven't always fought on the side of the angels. But on the planet of the tin can brains I had an epiphany of sorts... seeing my friend and enemy Milon the Assassin sacrifice himself like that made me realise what it was all about. I think you need me on this mission. And even if I have doubts about myself, I trust Mrs Challenger's judgement of me."

"That's good enough for me," said Grimmett. "What about you, Quigg?"

"I don't have to justify my place on this mission to you," said Quigg, as the barmaids brought over their meals. He began to pick at the food, examining it like an entomologist would his samples.

"Quite right, you don't," said Grimmett. "But there'll come a point in the next few weeks when my life will depend on you, or where your life might depend on me, and we'll both be a whole lot more comfortable in that situation if we are comfortable with each other."

"Don't worry about me," said Quigg without looking up. "I've been waiting for this opportunity all my life."

Nanotus and Grimmett shared a quick glance and shrugged, before starting work on their pies.

Travelling Through the Space-Time Continuum

Do you remember how Nanotus the Giant said that he had run all the way from the Andromeda galaxy to reach Mrs Challenger's kitchen? Perhaps you didn't take him literally, but perhaps you stopped a moment to wonder what he meant. This chapter is dedicated to those who did.

Sitting in the middle of Hyde Park, children laughing nearby, parents doing their best to stop worrying, young lovers doing their best to pretend they were alone, Detective Grimmert found it hard to believe that he was about to leave the planet for the first time. He found it just as difficult to understand how he was able to contemplate the possibility of doing so without going stark raving mad.

Mrs Challenger would have been able to explain his calmness – the Ibis training which he had undergone had included a course of hypnosis sessions, though he had not realised it. Months before introducing each student to the more bizarre aspects of their work – aliens, time travel, space travel – the notions were implanted at a sub-conscious level of the student's brain. So when the time came for the conscious brain to be told, for example, of the existence of aliens living, not just on other planets but also on our own, there had already been ample time for the sub-conscious to safely deal with it.

It was now the turn of Nanotus to ask if his comrades-in-arms were ready. Nicely turned out in a dark green suit of thick cotton, he was looking particularly dashing and heroic, and neither felt it necessary to question his taking the lead at this point.

"This is going to be very difficult at first," he warned them. "It will be extremely disorientating until you get the hang of it."

"Fine," said Quigg.

"Let's go," said Grimmert.

"Right," said Nanotus.

He opened his bag, a leather satchel made for him by Pollopp & Son, into which he had transferred the contents of the pockets of his discarded clothes. One of the items he now took from inside, after a quick look round to make sure no-one was watching. He showed it to Grimmert and Quigg. It was a small metal device, with a big red button in the middle.

"This is the dimensional opener," he explained. "I press this button once and the way opens. We get in, we run, when we get to where we want to be, I press the button again and the way pushes us out."

"That sounds simple enough," said Grimmert. "Is it going to be that straightforward?"

"It's difficult to say. The way is like any road on any planet; it depends when you catch it. On my way here to Earth it was pretty quiet. I ran all the way through without any trouble. But other times... catch it on the wrong day and you'll struggle."

"If we run into anyone," asked Quigg, leaning forward and peering at Nanotus over the rim of his spectacles, "who is it likely to be? Miscreants? Ruffians? Tin can brains?"

"All are possible, I'm afraid," replied Nanotus apologetically. "My people didn't create this technology, we discovered it buried deep within one of the six moons that orbit our planet. At first the authorities tried to restrict its use, and our scientists never developed the ability to replicate the machines, but it was inevitable that something so useful would find its way into the hands of the underworld."

"Hence your possession of one," said Quigg.

"Actually, no," said Nanotus. "I inherited it from my father, who was bequeathed it by his own father, who had been among those to discover the cache on the sixth moon. But I certainly found more creative uses for it than had my father... I think he would be happy that I'm putting it to *good* use now, though. Everyone to their feet, then."

They all got up, each picking up his leather satchel and hooking it over his arms and onto his back. That of Nanotus has already been mentioned; those of Quigg and Grimmert contained a mixture of provisions and Ibis gadgets, prepared in accordance with Mrs Challenger's instructions and left at a secret London location for the agents to collect.

Suddenly there was a scream from one small copse of trees, and the agents turned to see a pair of children rush out to the arms of their anxious parents. Tears rushed down the faces of the youngsters as they pointed back in the direction from which they had come. The agents tensed as the sound of crack-

ing branches reached their ears.

"Tin can brains," said Nanotus immediately, dropping into a fighting stance. The others weren't so sure, so quickly, but as the leaves parted to reveal the black steel of a robotic monster Grimmatt began to reach for his gun.

"Don't bother," said Quigg, putting his hand on Grimmatt's arm. "They are only here for us. If we go, they will too. We would only be putting these people in danger."

"We can't afford to," said Nanotus. "If we set off and they see us, the tin can brains will know too much, about how we are travelling, about how long it'll take us to get there. We need to destroy them, however many of them there are. Then we go."

Grimmatt looked pained. "For once I was ready to go with Quigg."

He took his pistol from the holster, hidden within his jacket. To all appearances it was a standard issue, British army model. But it was not. The appearance was mere camouflage – the gun had been rebuilt from the inside out, designed to handle specially-coated bullets that were guaranteed to go through anything, particularly the shells of tin-plated murderers.

By this time two of the tin can brains had emerged from the trees and were heading towards the agents. At this range their movement was almost silent; had it not been for their accidental discovery by the children, this second ambush might have been successful. As screaming people scattered in every direction, the silence of the intruders became ever more eerie.

"They aren't going to fire," said Quigg. "We must be within range already." The pair of tin can brains were less than 20 metres away by then. Their optical receptors, he knew, were staring right into his eyes.

"Give me the dimensional opener," said Grimmatt quickly, without turning his head.

Nanotus hesitated. Using the opener was a serious business.

"I've got an idea," said Grimmatt. "Give it to me now, quickly and quietly."

Nanotus passed it to him, just as the twin can brains arrived. Grimmatt concealed it in one hand, his thumb on the red button. He kept his pistol in the other hand. Quigg stepped forward.

"What do you want?" he demanded of the tin can brains.

"You must surrender," answered one of the creatures. "Surrender or die. Join us or be eliminated." It was the first time Quigg and Grimmatt had heard one of them speak. The voice was, as they would have expected, cold and mechanical, but, unless it was

their imagination, there was also a touch of almost neurotic intensity.

"I don't like the sound of elimination," said Grimmatt. "What are the benefits of joining up?"

"You will live forever," it announced, shrilly. "Until the end of time. *Until the end of the universe.*" It seemed to be getting rather excited. As was the other tin can brain, which was rocking back and forth on its gyroscope.

"And when have you scheduled that for?" demanded Quigg. "Next Tuesday?"

Before the creature could reply, Grimmatt thumbed the red button.

It began at his eyes. They squeezed tightly shut against the sudden brightness of the light, but that did nothing to prevent the skin of the eyelids being peeled back, as if by an inexorable torturer, who didn't stop there, but proceeded to peel back the skin from every part of his face... the excruciating agony ripped Grimmatt's soul apart, shredding his consciousness; he would have screamed but his tongue had dissolved into a hundred thousand scarlet threads... Every muscle in his body pulled in a different direction, trying to rip themselves free from the tendons anchoring them to the cracking bones of his skeleton...

But he could still feel the dimensional opener in his hand. Reaching back through an eternity of pain to remember the warning of Nanotus, Grimmatt forced himself to open his eyes.

He was still in Hyde Park, but it was as if he was seeing it through a veil. Quickly coming back to his senses, he remembered his plan and strode quickly towards the tin can brains.

There was an instant of incredible blurring, an impression of immense speed, and when it ended, his surroundings had completely changed.

He was floating in the air above the sea. Just as in Hyde Park, everything was faded, almost as if it was not fully switched on, like a motion picture might if the projector was running with too few bulbs.

There were no boats in sight, but squinting his eyes he fancied he could see, in the distance, a range of white cliffs rising from the sea.

"My goodness," he said to himself. "Dover! A single step has carried me over two hundred miles! But then, it only makes sense. If this device enables people to cross the enormous distance that separates one galaxy from another, then each single step must count for hundreds of miles! I should count myself lucky I didn't end up on Mars!"

He took a single step back, carefully judging the distance so as to travel as far back as he had forward.

Again there was the blur, and he turned to get his bearings. He was on a road in the countryside, but he could see the edges of London in the distance. He shimmied forward slightly, to find himself above the Thames, in sight of Big Ben. Re-orientating himself, he inched forward, to find himself back in Hyde Park, a Hyde Park now empty of every soul except his two colleagues and the two tin can brains confronting them. His journey into this travelling dimension and then to Dover and back had evidently taken less time than he might have guessed, as the tin can brains had yet to make a move against Nanotus and Quigg.

Grimmett leant forward a little and pressed the button once more. This time the pain was merely a flicker. While Quigg reacted with surprise and Nanotus with relief to his sudden re-appearance, Grimmett brought up his pistol and blasted first one, then the other, tin can brain to bits.

“Well done!” said Nanotus heartily. “I didn’t think you had a chance!”

Quigg looked at the giant sourly, “I just assumed he’d abandoned us.”

Grimmett smiled at them both, without apparent irony. “I don’t know which of your sentiments touches me most. With allies like you two, I can see this mission will be a great success.”

Quigg just scowled, but Nanotus actually seemed to be a bit hurt.

“Shall we set off?” asked Quigg.

“Yes, let’s,” answered Grimmett, slyly winking at Nanotus. “You know, I really hope, Professor Quigg, that you enjoy the trip as much as I did.”

Quigg did not know what to make of his words, so he kept his peace.

“Right,” said Nanotus, taking the dimensional opener back from the detective. “Please link arms with me, and we’ll be on our way.”

This time Grimmett didn’t feel a thing, but he was able to fully enjoy the agony that Professor Quigg went through...

* * * * *

Skating through the spaceways, the three of them did not talk much. Professor Quigg was in a mood with the other two, and had an amazing ability to bring their conversations to a grinding halt, even when they tried to talk around him. One time Quigg lagged a little behind, and Grimmett expressed surprise at the professor’s surliness. Nanotus agreed.

“Mrs Challenger mentioned to me that he could be a little obsessive and driven, but she had thought that would probably be a good quality in an Ibis agent...

it seems she first met him when he was treating her husband, checking him over after the famous Battle of the Invisible Fleet.”

“Really?” said Grimmett. “Were you there?”

“I’m afraid not. I was unfairly incarcerated at the time; an unfortunate affair with the daughter of a Azzuzzian potentate’s jewels. But my friend, Milon the Assassin, played a major role. Although for some reason he had dropped the ‘n’ from his name at that time and was calling himself Milo.”

“Why was that?” asked Grimmett. It was turning out to be quite a long journey, and he was eager to chat while they had the chance, regardless of the conversation’s inconsequentiality, just for the sake of something to do. Having said that, there is no reason why I should inflict such a dull conversation upon my readers, so I shall not. Suffice it to say, Quigg soon caught up and threw another crowbar into the spokes of the conversation’s wheels, and being already a rather shaky vehicle, it veered off the road and crashed, wrecked beyond repair.

But don’t think the journey was dull, for all that.

The three of them were travelling from one galaxy to another on the opposite side of the universe and the things they saw along the way were quite incredible: pulsars, quasars, black holes, white holes, supernovae, nebulae; they saw everything there was to see, slowing down for some of the more stunning sights, as most things went by in a blur.

Soon they were approaching their destination: the home solar system of the tin can brains. The devastation the deadly beings had wreaked in their neighbourhood was plain to see along the way. The gutted swirling remains of suns that had been ruthlessly mined for precious elements. The frozen civilisations on planets orbiting those suns. Worlds where the inhabitants slaved in chains. Others where they simply laid down on the ground to die from despair.

“This is terrible,” said Quigg to Nanotus. “Is there nothing we can do?”

“Yes,” echoed Grimmett, “could we not pop in on a couple of these places, blast the hell out of the occupying troops, and set the planet free?”

Nanotus shook his head as they skated on. “Of course I’ve thought about it, on the way back to give Milon’s message to Mrs Challenger, and then when I was talking to her in her kitchen, but it would be madness. Before we got anywhere, the word would be out, and they’d be waiting for us on the next planet... imagine if the tin can brains had possession of this technology.”

“How *do* they get around?” asked Quigg. “They seemed to catch up with us quite easily in London.”

"As far as I know, they just have normal faster-than-light ships." He thought for a moment. "In London, they must have traced us by my radioactivity." He laughed as Grimmatt raised an eyebrow and edged slightly away. "Although the level of radioactivity in my body is safe to those around me, it would still be significantly higher than normal levels present in early 20th century London, thanks to the destruction caused by Milon on Golgokkamok..."

On they skated, until the planet of the tin can brains was almost reached, and right up until the last minute, fortune was with them, they met no resistance, no bandits and no ambushes. Right up until the last minute. As they skated down toward the surface, Grimmatt realised that they were not alone.

"What's that?" he called to Nanotus. "Can you see it?"

Approaching them through the darkness of space were a thousand black shapes; they would have been completely imperceptible if it were not for the fact that they were really, truly black, whereas space itself, viewed from the travelling dimension, was merely a very dark shade of grey.

"Bloody hell, what are they?" yelled Quigg in terror, the panic in his voice diverting Grimmatt for a moment from the approaching horde.

Nanotus shrugged. "I don't know, but they can't be good news. Let's get to the surface as quickly as we can, and hope they're not void-wraiths."

He led the way, but before the three travellers even reached the stratosphere the assailants were upon them. And they *were* void-wraiths, ghostly beings, tentacular and skeletal, with a freezing touch and an empty gaze, mindless creatures forever existing and

dormant in the eternal emptiness of the travelling dimension, awakened only when that eternity is broken by the passage of living beings.

Grimatt and Quigg took out their pistols, and began firing upon the assailants. Though they had a little success in forcing the void-wraiths to move away, none were injured, and soon fluttered back in attack, ghostly arms reaching out, solidifying into hard tentacles that tried to grab the humans and the giant by their extremities. Nanotus was kicking and swinging those extremities around for all he was worth, with not much more success than the others, but the void-wraiths seemed to have identified him as the biggest threat to them, or perhaps he was just a more promising source of food, as they concentrated their attacks upon him. Soon he was covered in the creatures, wrapped from head to toe in leathery black tentacles, but his face and hands were still just free, and he called to Grimmatt and Quigg.

"There's nothing we can do to stop them! The only chance is for you to escape and rescue Milon. The information he has gathered since his capture may be vital to Mrs Challenger's efforts to defeat the tin can brains! Take the dimensional opener, take it to the surface and use it. These creatures won't be able to follow you." He threw the opener to Grimmatt, who caught it in his left hand. "Quickly, go, while I distract them!"

Quigg turned to go, but Grimmatt called back to Nanotus, "We can't leave you! You'll be trapped here in the travelling dimension forever!"

One fist of the giant remained free, and he shook it at Grimmatt, "Go now! The future of the universe depends on you!"