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Editorial	2
QUIET, THE TIN CAN BRAINS ARE HUNTING! PART II	3
In the Halls of the Tin Can Brains	3
The Tin Can Base	7
The Call of the Orbiting Princess	11
How Many Dusty Trails Must a Man Walk Down?	15
The Town of Monkey-Monkey	20
The Way to the Grim Thinker	24
The Cosmic Butterfly	28
Better Living Through Cannibilisation	32
Smouldering Coals	35
Milon Does What Milon Does Best	39
The Original Tin Can Brain	43
Dinner with Mrs Challenger	47

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Editorial

Stephen William Theaker
Editor

This issue, with the second instalment of *Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!*, brings to an end our three retrospectively-created issues of reprints. I hope you have enjoyed them. From this point on, this publication will provide all-new material (unless the deadline is crashing over my head). We shall see how it goes.

In theory, this is the Autumn issue of *TQF*, and I am in fact writing this at the end of September, so for once my editorial is contemporaneous with our supposed date of publication. No need to falsely cast a scrying eye into the future – I can just throw it out of the window to see brown leaves, grimy skies and drizzling rain. It doesn't look kind out there, reader, so stay inside and snuggle up with *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction!* This issue, as will many in the future, ends with a traditional slap-up dinner, so you are guaranteed a warm feeling in your tummy when you get to the end. To get the most from this issue, I

recommend that you take it to a nice place to eat, perhaps your favourite pub on a Sunday afternoon, and ask your friends to meet you there, perhaps friends that you have not seen for a few months, who have travelled just to see you, and when everyone is sitting comfortably, having filled their bellies to the utmost extent, get to your feet and read a few chapters out loud. I recommend that it be read in a pseudo-declamatory style, with a touch of pomposity and self-importance. If other diners can hear you, take a moment to gauge their mood. If they appear receptive, kind, open-hearted, sweet-natured and intelligent, read a little louder, and when you are done, accept their plaudits and tell them where to purchase a subscription. If, on the contrary, they seem pugnacious, unpleasant and uneducated, walk over to their table and raise your voice even more; it will do them good.

The Editor

Quiet, the Tin Can Brains are Hunting! Part II

In the Halls of the Tin Can Brains

Grimmett struggled to catch his breath. The desperate flight from the void-wraiths had left him tired and vulnerable to the rigours of the transition from the travelling dimension, and it had taken a lot out of him. He had barely been able to stand long enough to check that the immediate surroundings were safe before dropping to his knees. The opener was still gripped tightly in one hand. The gun had quietly slipped from the other. He looked up at Quigg, who was in no better state.

“Could we have done anything more for him?” the detective asked.

Quigg shook his head firmly. His spectacles were misting from the heat of his skin. He took them off, and pulled his shirt from his waistband to wipe them as he spoke. “You know we did the right thing.”

There was silence for a few moments as the two men struggled with their thoughts. Though Professor Quigg was nominally the leader of the mission, Grimmett could not help feeling responsible. As an officer of the law, he saw his role naturally as that of protector; to have sacrificed the life of one of his comrades did not sit easily with that, even if it was for the sake of the mission. He wished there could have been another way. But at core, beneath the magma of emotion that boiled beneath the grizzled crust, he was pragmatic, and there was little point in wasting his comrade’s sacrifice. There had been a case a few years ago, the case of the grizzled yarn

they had called it in Scotland Yard, with their customary wit.

A police constable had discovered a consignment of stolen clothes in a shop along the Tottenham Court Road, and under interrogation the owner had admitted that the items had been supplied by a certain underworld figure in whom the Yard were very, very interested. But the owner had not known the location of the master villain’s base of operations, and, despite their very best efforts, the officers in charge of the case were unable to persuade him otherwise. Finally, they had requested the assistance of Detective Grimmett, who had begun by examining the clothes themselves.

“Do you see this?” he asked PC Jenkins, the young fellow who had discovered the stolen clothes. Though of course since Scotland Yard had become involved he had been kept at a safe distance from the case, Grimmett had thought the young man might prove useful.

“I’m afraid I don’t, sir,” replied PC Jenkins, though he took a good look at the jacket in question before answering.

“What about now?” asked the detective, before turning the jacket round.

“Turn it back again, sir.” Grimmett did so. “It’s faded on this side, isn’t it?”

“Well done, Jenkins. Now feel it as well. This jacket is faded on one side, but the cloth is ever so

slightly grizzled on this other side. In this shop the items were stored in a windowless storeroom, and there is no heat source which could have caused this damage to the clothes. These clothes were stored in a room or warehouse with windows facing the sun, and what's more, I would bet, with a bakery of some kind next door."

"Sir, I congratulate you! Master Saxon is as good as behind bars!"

"Hold your horses, youngster," admonished Grimmett. "He'll still take some catching. Save the congratulations for the minute he actually is behind those bars – I assure you they will be warmly received."

In the event, the apprehension of Master Saxon had almost gone according to plan. The warehouses of London were searched by the capital's finest officers, Grimmett and Jenkins co-ordinating the efforts. A likely location for the criminal mastermind's efforts was discovered, a building near Euston Road with, as Grimmett had predicted, a successful baker's shop next door. For a day and a night the premises were under constant surveillance, and, the moment Master Saxon's presence was confirmed, the police stormed the building in force. It had gone well, almost every member of the gang being overwhelmed and arrested before having had a chance to lay their hands on a weapon. Just one managed to. Master Saxon, at work in his office on the mezzanine, saw the swarm of blue suits sweep through the building below him. He quickly grabbed a pistol and headed for the rear entrance, only to find Grimmett and Jenkins waiting for him there, pistols drawn. Without a second thought he gunned down Jenkins and charged Grimmett, who let him by in the shock of the moment. As the young officer, whose life had been filled with so much promise, lay dying at his feet, Grimmett made the decision in an instant to go after the cur responsible. A short chase later, he had Master Saxon subdued, and brought him back to the villains' hide-out, only to find the other officers gathered round the dying young man.

So Grimmett had been there before. But it hurt just as much the second time.

As for Quigg, his thoughts were complex and at variance with one another. On one hand he regretted the loss of a useful comrade. On the other, that comrade had already served his primary purpose in transporting them safely to the planet of the tin can brains. And in the long term, he could easily have seen Nanotus becoming a positive impediment to his plans.

He got to his feet and took a look around. There

was no doubt they were on the planet of the tin can brains, a clear artistic signature being imprinted powerfully upon the apparently deserted architecture all around them. Steel spires rose intimidatingly from the ground itself, twisting the line of the eye around their rigid curlicues, the pale sun having just enough strength to burn the eye when caught in those mirrored traps. Other buildings were short and squat, almost deliberately unappealing, while huge hangars raised above the skyline on every side. (Quigg surmised them to contain the vicious fruits of the tin can labours, and resolved to investigate at the first opportunity.)

Grimmett had finally got back to his feet, scooping his gun back up as he did, putting it back into its holster. He shrugged off his satchel and grabbed himself something to eat; a solid and dry, but filling, biscuit. He offered Quigg a bite.

"Thanks, but no," said Quigg. He waved at their surroundings. "Pretty unappealing, mmm?"

Grimmett unhurriedly chewed his mouthful of biscuit and carefully swallowed before replying. "It's very utilitarian. Very nasty."

"I suppose it is utilitarian," said Quigg thoughtfully, "though probably not in the way that you mean. For us, utilitarian has come to mean merely functional; it is used to describe products with no value whatsoever beyond their basic usefulness. Yet this is not the true meaning of the word; at its best, utilitarian encompasses every possible benefit a product could offer society, or to be more accurate, the people who make up that society: whether it be the way it cuts cloth, the way it pleases the eye, the way it sits in the hand, or even the noise it makes when you tap the tabletop with it."

Grimmett, who had learnt in the course of a long career fighting crime that it never hurt to understand the opponent, gave serious consideration to Quigg's words. "And you don't think this place is utilitarian in the first sense?"

"Not when you consider the people who live here – the tin can brains. The nastiness of this place is deliberate, carefully judged to work them into just the right frame of mind to go out and slaughter the universe."

"And that's exactly the frame of mind they judge most desirable..."

"Exactly," said Quigg, going so far to give Grimmett a comradely pat on the back. "The question is, where are they all? Why are things so quiet?"

Grimmett had no suggestion, and took another bite of his biscuit.

Quigg took off his own satchel and pulled out a

tracking device, which had been prepared by Mrs Challenger. Primed with biological samples taken from Ibis records, it would scan the air for traces of Milon the Assassin: dead skin cells on the breeze, pheromones released in sweat, even, once they were close enough, the distinctive rhythm of his heartbeat. Both reslung their satchels over their shoulders and they began to walk in the direction the tracer indicated.

“The only thing I can think of,” suggested Quigg, “is that they are all now out conquering. Perhaps at some point in the past they faced opposition on their very home planet, and were forced to reproduce and fortify here to an extent no longer necessary.”

The way was not difficult, the tin can brains having produced smooth runways and gently inclining ramps suitable for negotiation at high speed by their spinning gyroscopes. The two humans were able to make their way along easily, although there was quite a distance to walk. After a couple of hours Quigg came up with the idea of trying a little triangulation. They walked for five minutes at a right angle to their previous course, then took another reading. Calculations roughed out on a notebook from Quigg’s satchel indicated they still had something like five hours walking to go. The dim sun was still high in the sky; in fact it had shown little or no inclination to sink in any direction. Quigg concluded that they must be near one of the poles of the planet, probably in the midst of a long, long midsummer’s day. It could be weeks before the sun set; it made sense, he told Grimmatt, that the tin can brains had originally bases themselves here. The weeks of daylight, properly processed and stored, would have provided fearsome amounts of power to the nascent monsters. During the months of night that followed they would probably have hibernated, their gains protected and consolidated by automated weapons, before the brains awoke in summer to launch new offensives. “Of course,” he said, “they would no longer take the trouble to do that. With no aggressors on their home planet there would be no reason for them to hoard their energy so carefully. That may well be another reason why this area is now so deserted.” They still had yet to see a single tin can brain on the planet – surprisingly, after the number they had encountered on Earth!

Grimmett laughed. “They’re probably all burnishing their shells on the equator...” He was pleased to see Quigg smile, however wearily. The trek had done something to build a camaraderie between them. Neither wished to bear the weight of the mission alone, he thought.

After a further couple of hours’ walking, Professor Quigg realised their route would soon bring them near one of the immense warehouses, and he said as much to Detective Grimmatt. “Think of the possible benefits if we could get inside one of those things! The secrets we could discover!”

Grimmett pondered for a moment, but could see no reason to refuse. If the worst came to the worst, and they were unsuccessful in rescuing Milon the Assassin, any other information they picked up along the way might well prove vital. “All right, Quigg, but let’s be careful. Remember, there are at least enough tin can brains around here to keep Milon the Assassin locked up, and from what I understand of him, that’s no mean feat. Even the instructors at Mrs Challenger’s academy spoke of him in hushed voices.”

Professor Quigg promised to be cautious, and they took the slight detour that would bring them to the immense doors of the hangar. There was still no sign of the tin can brains, which, if he was honest, was worrying Detective Grimmatt more and more with each passing moment. He would have felt much happier dodging patrols, hiding under walkways, and crawling through tunnels. Something was definitely up. But, he reflected, even if this was a trap, every step the tin can brains let him get closer to Milon was a step closer to freeing him. Quite possibly the tin can brains did not realise how easily the humans would be able to effect their escape once they reached the captive assassin. He had kept the dimensional opener in an inner jacket pocket, ready for emergency use. He knew that returning to the travelling dimension would present a risk, but there was a hope, however small, that they would be able to evade the void-wraiths long enough to escape back to Earth. There was even a tiny hope, right at the back of his mind, that they might find Nanotus there, waiting for them, somehow having escaped the clutches of the void-wraiths himself, but that hope was one Grimmatt did not even acknowledge. It was so unfortunate, he reflected, that the attack of the void-wraiths had come when it had. A little more time would have allowed the travellers to safely reach Milon’s side before leaving the travelling dimension, thus helping the rescue effort immensely. As it was, they could not even take the risk of reactivating it now for just a few brief seconds to speed up the hunt. That might just be enough to keep the void-wraiths’ attention focussed upon this spot.

The doors to the hangar, close up, were truly gigantic, even set against the scale of the elaborate architectural monstrosities that surrounded the build-

ing. They extended up into the sky beyond the ability of the humans to discern their tops. From one side to the other, the front of the hangar extended for a good twenty minutes' walk.

"There's no way we can move these," noted Grimmatt.

"Of course not," replied Quigg snappily. "These would obviously only be opened when whatever was inside was ready to be let out."

"A ship of some kind?"

"Definitely. A ship of the most incredible kind. We must get inside at once!" He was fired with enthusiasm, though Grimmatt was still lukewarm.

"But is it still in there, do you think?"

"I doubt it," said Quigg. "Or else there would still be tin can brain activity here. But though the bird has flown the coop, there may still be some fascinating feathers in the nest!"

"I think there's a small entrance over there," said Grimmatt, having spotted a break in the smooth lines of the hangar doors. "Remember our priorities, though, we have to get to Milon quickly. Every minute that goes by could mean his death."

"You don't need to tell me that," Quigg retorted. "Death at the hands of the tin can torturers, or by the long arm of the Ibis failsafe. If the torturers come within reaching distance of information that could compromise Ibis, Milon's entire personality will be erased."

"It's a terrible fate," said Grimmatt, feeling for a way to open the smaller door. He found a recess, and, using both hands, he was able to pull the way open for Professor Quigg.

"But one we all agreed to," said Quigg sternly as he entered the hangar. But the tenor of his voice changed almost immediately. "My goodness! Quickly, come in here, detective."

Grimmatt followed him in. Impressed by the size of the hangar, as seen from the inside – there were tiny traces of clouds against the far-off ceiling – he was otherwise slightly underwhelmed. Almost entirely empty, save for racks of tools and pieces of discarded machinery around the periphery of the space, it was not a million miles away from the technician's workshop in any London factory, though on a different scale, of course. Quigg, on the other hand, was dazzled, and dashed from junkpile to junkpile.

"This is stunning," he called out.

"Keep it down," warned Grimmatt. "We've just

assumed this place is deserted. It might not be. Someone might have forgot his lunchbox."

"Don't be such a hang-dog," laughed the professor, dancing about just as his wife had been known to do when happy. "If you had the wits to understand the level of scientific achievement involved here, you'd be just as excited!"

Grimmatt was becoming annoyed. "If you had the wits to understand the situation we're in, you'd get a grip on yourself and lead us out of here." He turned on his heel, stamped his feet a couple of times in frustration, then, having mastered his anger, turned back to address Quigg again, who had, in the meantime, buried himself to the waist in a dump-bin of discarded circuits and wires. "I know that this is your Christmas, and I'm willing to wager your parents weren't big on Christmas, but we really have to go. I have a very, very bad feeling about this. It's just been too easy, and we have to make every bit of progress we can before it gets very, very hard."

Resentful as a naughty child, Quigg snorted an agreement. Filling his pockets and his satchel with as many bits and pieces as he possibly could, he led the way out of the hangar. "Do you realise how much we've left behind?" he demanded of Grimmatt over his shoulder.

"I know," said Grimmatt, thinking of Nanotus, stuck in the ghostly travelling dimension, cloaked in soul-sucking void-wraiths. But he let Quigg take the words however he would, for the sake of peace, quiet, and a quick departure.

There was just an hour's walk to go, by their reckoning, and soon, sooner than Grimmatt might really have liked, with Professor Quigg still rather twitchy and spiky, they were crouched half-way up one of the spires, scouting out the lay of the land. Now, for the first time, they saw signs of movement. Black ants scurried around the entrance of a certain building, one grey and bland, of disturbingly distorted lines. Other buildings all about still seemed deserted. The answer seemed to be on the large open space that gaped behind the occupied building – a ship, disgorging steely workers by the dozen that poured into Milon's prison with the eagerness of dogs to a bone, and swallowing up others heading in the opposite direction.

"Great," said Grimmatt, ever undaunted. "We've found him!"

The Tin Can Base

“Yes,” said Quigg, “we’ve found him. But what can we possibly do about it?”

“Brave heart, professor!” replied Grimmatt, giving his colleague a gentle punch on the shoulder. “We’ll be able to get in there, Quigg. Don’t worry!”

“That is all too easy to say from up here. It’ll be a quite different matter when we are down there, surrounded by vicious tin can brains and their deadly murder-droids...” The professor shook his head and clenched a fist so tightly his knuckles went white.

Grimmett turned to take a good look at his wavering comrade. He had heard words like those many times before. The funny thing was, Quigg did not show the usual signs of fear. He did not seem to be sweating; his gaze was remarkably steady, intense even.

“Quigg,” said the detective brusquely, “I know that Mrs Challenger wouldn’t have chosen you for this mission if you weren’t up to it, so enough of this ballyhoo... let’s get down there and rescue Milon post haste!”

The climb down through the tower took a few dozen minutes, long enough for Detective Grimmatt to consider the options. Though Quigg had been appointed leader of the mission, this was the kind of thing for which Grimmatt had been put on the team; it was his speciality. By the time they got to the bottom of the almost endlessly spiralling ramp, he had a plan up his sleeve. Literally, in fact!

“This is what we shall do,” he informed Professor Quigg as they strolled down the ramp, doing their best not to succumb to dizziness. “As you noted, there is no way on Earth, no way on *any* planet, that we would be able to fight, or even sneak, our way into that base. But we know that Milon is in there.”

“Definitely,” confirmed Quigg. “The readings are unmistakable.”

“To rescue him, we have to get to him, and the only way I can see us doing that is to let the tin can brains capture us.”

Professor Quigg winced, but he didn’t seem surprised. “Somehow I guessed it would come to this.”

“Sorry not to disappoint you! The idea of using the dimensional opener to rush in there, grab him, then get out the same way, is appealing, but we would run a very strong risk of having the void-wraiths waiting for us when we tried to leave, summoned by our first

passing through the travelling dimension.”

“We cannot take that chance,” said Quigg.

“If we allow the tin can brains to capture us, we wait till they take us to their jail, where I hope we will find Milon, and from where we shall burst back into the travelling dimension.”

“And then we’ll be half-way back to Earth before the void-wraiths even notice us.”

“That’s the hope.”

Grimmett ripped a little at the lining of his coat sleeve, creating a gap just big enough to let him push the dimensional opener inside. “That should do it. Let’s just hope the blasted robots don’t search me too carefully. With a bit of luck, they won’t think I’m worth the effort.”

Professor Quigg gave no hint as to his feelings about the plan, but showed no reluctance to go along with it. The two of them strode out of the tower in the direction of the tin can base as if they were on a promenade along the Strand.

“Dashed terrible weather we’re having, sir, don’t you think?” asked Detective Grimmatt.

“No doubt about it,” replied Quigg in kind. “It is positively pallid.”

They looked at each other and the professor took a deep breath.

“Hey,” he shouted. “Hey, you brains over there! Come and capture us. We are your mortal foes!”

The tin can brains broke off from their hithering and thithering and raced over to capture the intrepid agents of Ibis.

“I hope we have made the right decision,” said Quigg quietly to Grimmatt.

Grimmett shrugged. “If we haven’t, we won’t have long to regret it.”

* * * * *

The interior of the tin can base was beautiful, even to Grimmatt’s human eyes. Held in mid-air between two of the tin can brains as they raced through its corridors, unable to move much more than his head, he was able to take the time to enjoy the sights (although those sights did not include Professor Quigg, being borne along by his captors a few metres behind Grimmatt, the detective could hear his occasional gasps of excitement). Glistening floors, polished and shining walls, ceilings intricately deco-

rated with wave forms picked out in tiny slivers of magnetised steel that swung to follow the tin can brains as they passed, all flew by before Grimmatt could really appreciate them, but he saw enough to realise, even given his limited experience of the arts back in London, that the tin can brains themselves, despite their use of murder-droids for their dirty work, were far from being mere robots themselves. The brains, after all, were organic, gestated in metal wombs, and transferred into the tin can bodies so that they could live forever. Although no-one had records of the tin can brains from the days before the move to the tin cans, analysis of the remains of their occasional dead suggested that they might have had an original form not far dissimilar from that of the human norm. It would go without saying that living forever in a tin can would affect a person's tastes, thought Grimmatt – hence the stark and cruel architecture of this, their home planet – but it was important to remember that it *was* a matter of taste, and not one of programming. It would be a grave error to think of them just as simple, single-minded, predictable pre-programmed robots. In his experience of the criminals of the London underworld, most of them *were* single-minded and predictable; the key was to anticipate the times when they would come up with a surprise.

Soon they arrived at, and were thrown into, a cell. Their satchels were taken, and a single guard-droid left to keep watch. There was no sign of Milon the Assassin.

It was a new experience for both Grimmatt and Quigg – after all, despite their impressive credentials, they were still just recent graduates of Mrs Challenger's school for the training of Ibis agents. A few years in the service, and the inside of a cell would have lost all novelty for them.

This cell was pretty bare, as you might expect in a cell created by tin can brains. There was no toilet and no water, but after a complaint by Quigg, a pair of buckets were brought; one full of water, the other full of water before long. Though never previously imprisoned himself, Grimmatt had thrown more than a few other people into cells, and to his eye it did not look like this small room had always been a cell, and there were signs it had only recently been converted to this purpose. Most of the things he had seen on this planet had been created with a unity of design, objects and mechanisms had flowed together, sharing parts and purpose. But the generator that created the force field barring their exit had been bolted roughly to the wall (on the other side of the field to the prisoners, of course). It seemed likely to

him that this building, like all the others, had either been abandoned before being put to this use, or, possibly, that it being a convenient location in which to concentrate their final efforts here, the building, and this room, had been quickly re-jigged to suit. The question remained: where had all the other tin can brains gone? Perhaps Milon the Assassin knew. That was why they had to find him.

There was no bench to sit or lie on, so after testing out the force field – he found it was possible to poke his index finger through up to the first joint before resistance hardened and flung him back against the far wall – Grimmatt lay on the ground, resting, while Quigg paced back and forth. They tried not to meet one another's eye.

For something like an hour the agents waited, but nothing happened.

"They don't seem very interested in us," said Grimmatt.

"Unless they are playing a waiting game," replied Quigg.

"Or perhaps they just don't care?"

To the detective, it seemed Quigg was grinding his teeth in frustration. "Then we shall have to make them care, detective! We must make the long-lived scoundrels sit up and take notice of us!"

"It's certain that we're doing no good here." The detective sat up. "I'm interested – how shall we get them to take notice?"

"Remember our training! The endless nights of memorising different plans for getting out of a trap like this? Surely one of them must apply!"

"Perhaps with a little tweaking, eh? Let's give it a try. First, I believe I need to use the lavatory." He gave Quigg a wink, who nodded slowly and pursed his lips.

The guard-droid on watch outside their cell, a slender cylinder of burnished black steel, balanced on the usual gyroscope, but with, apart from a big gun sticking out of one side, no other feature to distinguish it from a sliced-off section of lamppost, had not appeared to pay any attention to their conversation so far, reacting only when directly addressed by Quigg as to the need for refreshment, at which it must have silently summoned the services of a tin can butler... Even if the tin can brains had no particular use for the agents, they seemed to want to keep them alive – perhaps because of their potential usefulness as bargaining chips. The tin can brains really did not know Mrs Challenger – if the fate was the universe was at stake, she would throw away her own life without hesitation, if that was what the situation required, and she would never have admitted

anyone to Ibis who did not accept that at some point she might have to throw away *their* lives. (In her defence, if anyone is starting to think of her as cold-hearted or ruthless, she went to exceptional lengths to ensure that the universe never got into such a bad state that the lives of her agents had to be lost to put it right.)

Though the guard-droid seemed to be ignoring them, Grimmiett felt sure that every one of their words was being monitored, so he called out to it.

“Hey, droid, there!”

It turned to face him. He had picked up one full bucket; Quigg, rather gingerly, had picked up the other.

“Both our buckets are full! And we’re bursting to go again!”

The guard-droid moved closer to check the contents of the buckets. Sensors indicated that the buckets were, in fact, full of urine, just as the humans claimed. Logic circuits made the decision to request assistance. At that moment, Grimmiett let out a yell.

“Now, Quigg, now!”

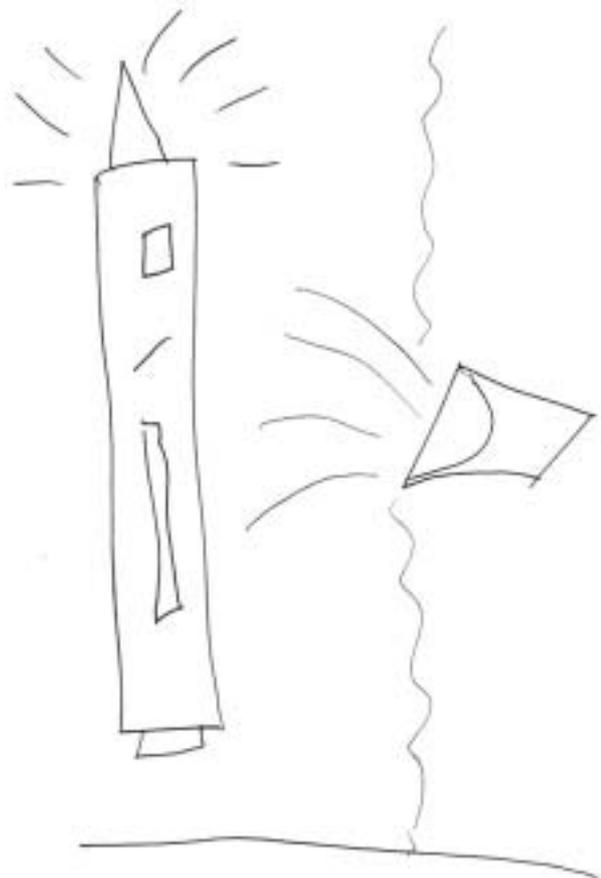
The two of them rushed to the front of the cell and with all their strength tried to fling the contents of the buckets through the force field. Naturally, the power of the field prevented more than a couple of centimetres of the tops of the buckets getting through, but that was enough to briefly open up two holes in the barrier, through which flew two fountains of liquid, even as Quigg and Grimmiett were slammed, buckets and all, against the wall of the cell.

Dazed, they got to their feet, to find the attempt had been a success, both having found their targets – Quigg had soaked the generator, Grimmiett the guard-droid, and both mechanisms now sizzled and burned, short-circuited and ruined. The force field dissolved, and the guard-droid fell to the ground with a clank. The two men thought about shaking hands or slapping each other on the back in celebration, had second thoughts, and set off out of the cell with no self-congratulation other than a pair of happy grins.

No longer having the tracing device to help them locate Milton – it was taken with their satchels – the two agents had to rely on instinct this time. Though they had been fortunate in that the corridor outside their cell had been unoccupied when they left it, they soon found that working their way through this single building would be much more dangerous than the trek across the city. The base was crawling with tin can brains and their servants, the guard-droids, murder-droids, and, doubtlessly, to Grimmiett’s mind, torture-droids and just plain out-to-do-evil-droids. But, there being no other way, the two agents slowly

inched their way into the heart of the building, the direction of which, painfully enough, they could only judge by the concentration of tin can brains... The one thing that helped them was the speed at which the tin can brains and the droids flew around the building. More than once Grimmiett and Quigg were caught in the open, only to flatten themselves against the walls as a droid sped past, half-way down the corridor before its sensors had had a chance to notice the intruders.

Eventually they came to be crouched in a short, thin tunnel that linked two other main corridors without leading anywhere in particular itself. Quigg suggested it was just a maintenance tunnel, giving access to systems that might need repairing from time to time; for the moment, they were fairly safe, especially as it didn’t seem that anyone was particularly searching for them, though the numbers of droids and tin can brains streaking across the junction ahead of them made it hard to see how they might progress. At the same time, the numbers of enemies ahead made it clear that that was just where they had to go! Grimmiett thought hard, while Quigg stared at the junction ahead. As had often happened on this mission, the detective found Quigg’s intensity rather distracting; he much preferred to work with



people who kept their heads clear in a tricky spot. Nevertheless, he was going to have to rely on him to complete the mission.

"Listen," said Grimmatt as quietly as he could, "I can only see one way out of this. We are going to need a distraction, to draw the tin can brains away from where Milon is, then one of us can get in there, grab him, and get him back to Mrs Challenger for debriefing."

Professor Quigg spun to face him. "You mean me?" he demanded in a violent whisper. "You want me to sacrifice myself so you can escape?"

"Oh no," said Detective Grimmatt, shocked at his colleague's vehemence. "I meant myself, of course; in the long run, a scientist of your calibre will be of much more use to Ibis than an old cop approaching the arse-end of his career..."

"Well," said Quigg, backing down a little, though his fist was still clenched tightly. "There is that."

Grimmatt waited a moment, trying to assess the mood of the scientist. Before the moment was up, though, Quigg spoke again.

"No, you are right, it must be me."

"Honestly," said Grimmatt, holding out his hands, "I didn't mean that!"

Quigg gripped the detective by the sleeve. "No! It must be me!"

Grimmatt looked nervously over his shoulder. Luckily Quigg was still speaking in a whisper, though a harsh, rasping one, but how could the tin can brains avoid noticing this performance?

"Calm down," said Grimmatt. "It's not a race." After a second so intense that the detective thought he felt his eyelashes burning, Quigg let go of his sleeve and let himself sag onto the floor. "Why do you think you should create the diversion? The tin can brains took all your explosives when they took your satchel."

"That's irrelevant," said the scientist. "I can run out in the opposite direction and make a hullabaloo as well as you can. Whereas you have a much better chance of being able to get to Milon and free him. Then there are the void-wraiths; I would be of no use whatsoever were they to attack again."

Grimmatt didn't know what to make of this new self-sacrificing Professor Quigg. Was he just scared? "Milon would be able to do the fighting for you. He's legendary for it."

"After days of being tortured? He could be seriously weakened. Would I have the strength to carry him back to Earth?"

Professor Quigg did have a point, reflected Grimmatt. The chances of the mission having a suc-

cessful outcome would be higher if he was the one freeing Milon.

"All right," Grimmatt whispered. "You've convinced me. But if I use the dimensional opener and there are no void-wraiths about, I'll try and find you before leaving."

"It's a deal," said Quigg with a smile, grasping Grimmatt's hand in both of his and shaking it vigorously.

Maybe, thought Grimmatt, I had Quigg all wrong. Maybe he's not such a bad egg after all. Did Mrs Challenger *ever* make mistakes? I suppose, in the end, everyone wants to be the hero of their own life story.

"Are you ready?" asked Grimmatt.

Quigg nodded. "Good luck. I hope you make it."

Grimmatt smiled back. "I hope you do too."

"Let's not set our sights too high, eh, detective? We have to be realistic! Well, here goes."

He let go of Grimmatt's hand, stood up, and turned in the direction of the junction from which they had just come into the service tunnel. Half-way along he noticed a loose metal tile on the wall and pulled it off. When he reached the end of the tunnel, he gave the detective a wave, leaped into the main corridor, and ran off, banging his tile against the walls, shouting at the top of the voice, and generally inviting every metal man on the planet to take a pot-shot at him.

Grimmatt tried to put the fate of Quigg out of his mind, and focused on the junction ahead. As the racket started up behind him there was a sudden flurry of droids and tin can brains heading at speed in a single direction, probably to head off the noise-making professor. The detective crossed his fingers in hope that none would think of using this tunnel as a short cut.

Luckily, none did, probably thanks to the speed at which the professor had run off in the opposite direction.

After that first sudden rush, there was something of a lull. Grimmatt knew there was no time to make sure that the way was safe; by the time he was sure, the opportunity would be gone; so he leapt to his feet and set off.

The way was clear.

He decided to head left, that being from where most of the droids had headed after Quigg. He ran as quickly as his feet would take him to the end of the corridor, where a sliding door whizzed to one side to let him in, whether he was ready or not.

Two tin can brains, moving towards him.

Three guard-droids, turning to bring their guns to

bear.

Milon the Assassin, strapped to a surgical table, blood streaming from a dozen wounds to his face, but with eyes that suddenly lit up with hope.

There wasn't even time to breathe.

Grimmett ran through the opening, dodging the grasping arms of the tin can brains, ducking to avoid the blasts of the droids, virtually leaping from one side of the room to the other, finding himself by

Milon's side more quickly than he could have hoped. He slid an arm under the assassin's back – there was no time to free him, but hopefully the restraints would not come with them to the travelling dimension – and reached to his sleeve for the dimensional opener.

It was not there. The sleeve was empty.

The tin can brains moved in.

The door slid shut.

The Call of the Orbiting Princess

Nanotus the Giant watched in horror as the tin can brains subdued Grimmett. He slid to his friend's side, and then looked into the eyes of Milon the Assassin as the hope in his eyes died. It was almost too much for Nanotus to bear – every muscle in his body was in spasm, every sinew demanding that he take action to help his friends. But there wasn't a thing he could do, trapped as he was in the travelling dimension. Without a dimensional opener to let him get back into the real world, he was stuck, powerless. His hope had been to rejoin the other Ibis agents when they made the leap into the travelling dimension, but that was no longer an option. He stayed long enough to make sure Grimmett was restrained, not killed – though of course he could not have done a thing to stop the tin can brains from killing the detective if that was what they had decided to do – then he slid away into the greyness of space to consider his options.

His new friend Pan-Pan flew up to chat.

"What happened?" asked the void-wraith. "Didn't they make it through?"

"No they didn't," replied Nanotus. "They're still stuck on the planet of the tin can brains."

"Oh dear," said Pan-Pan with a shiver. "That's pretty grim situation to be in. Can't we help? We really feel bad about separating you from your friends."

Nanotus shrugged.

"I'm not sure. If there was no other option, I would just head back to my home planet, and hitch a

ride with the first person heading in or out of the travelling dimension from there. The problem with that would be my reputation. Plus any outstanding warrants for my arrest. There would be nothing I could do to help the mission if I were locked up in prison."

Pan-Pan laughed. "They would lock up the Peacebringer! Are they crazy on your planet? Just tell them about the prophecy! You're the chosen one, sent to bring us to our senses! Tell them how you brought peace to an entire dimension!"

Nanotus smiled wryly. "You're being too kind – it was just one corner of an entire dimension! And I'm afraid they wouldn't see it that way; they don't often give pardons on my world, even for saviours!"

"Pshaw!" said Pan-Pan. "What a terrible place you must live in, Nanotus."

"Well, yes," he replied. "It was not nice. And they didn't have the excuses you fellows did."

Pan-Pan agreed heartily: "When you live in an infinite void, it's easy to get stuck in a rut. But that's no excuse for having terrorised poor travellers all this time."

"What's done is done," said Nanotus. "You really did just need to have your heads knocked together. And seeing as it was in the prophecy, it would have been thoroughly uncivilised of me not to." He shook his head. "But if only there was something I could do to help save Milon. If I could contact Mrs Challenger; surely she would be able to send another agent or something."

"There might be a way," began Pan-Pan thoughtfully. "But it would be difficult..."

"Go on!" yelled Nanotus. "What is it?"

"It's only been done a few times before... You see, the travelling dimension, as you call it, is not entirely separate from your dimension. After all, light travels from there to here, else you wouldn't be able to see where you are travelling to. We don't know why it is that light reaches here safely, but not other forms of energy – it has been suggested that if the travelling dimension was actually built by somebody, they built it this way on purpose."

"But I know we can see Mrs Challenger – the problem is that we can't touch her!" He frowned. "I mean, that we can't touch anything to give her a message."

"It's not that you can't touch anything. It's that the touch is so tentative as to be completely imperceptible. We have found that massive amounts of force in this dimension can have an effect over there. In fact, we think that force constantly leaks out of here, at an infinite number of points."

"I see – otherwise the kinetic energy of those travelling through here at high speeds would accumulate until the whole dimension exploded!"

"Exactly," said the void-wraith.

"So if we gather together enough of your people, we might be able to contact her. Would you be able to get them together?"

"I am afraid I could not," said Pan-Pan, making the face of Nanotus fall faster than a goose shot out of the air. "But you could."

Nanotus slammed one fist into the palm of the other hand, his face lit up once more.

"Of course I could, Pan-Pan!"

"Yes, you could, Peacebringer!"

* * * * *

At that moment Mrs Anna Challenger was taking a well-earned rest, her feet tucked up underneath her bottom, sitting in one of George's big armchairs in the living room. It had been a difficult day. There had still been no word of the team sent on the mission to rescue Milon, George was still away, Mrs Quigg had been knocking on the door after her husband every five minutes, the universe was still in danger, and the price of bread had risen by five pence!

But right now, there were two huge chunks of wood on the fire, both of them just starting to properly catch light. The room was feeling very cosy, and she was holding a mug of hot chocolate in both hands. Outside, night was falling. In some ways, she

felt, it was nice to have the house to herself from time to time, which she often did now, with the butler having taken his own lodgings nearby, coming to work only during the day. She could hardly blame him, George at night being twice as cantankerous as George during the day.

On a little round occasional table that she had pulled up beside the armchair lay a pile of notes and reports, which she simply had to finish reading before going to sleep, but she already felt herself to be in imminent danger of dropping off. Never mind, she thought drowsily, if I fall asleep now I shall wake earlier in the morning, and I shall be that much more fresh and alert. The one necessary thing, she sternly thought to herself, is to make sure I put this hot chocolate down before I doze off and spill it all over myself.

Perhaps it is already too late, she began to think, watching as glowing embers floated out from the fireplace and began to dance around her head. They looked ever so pretty, but she was quite sure it was not their usual behaviour. Was it the heat from the chocolate, she considered, creating a convection current above her head? Or were they fairies? asked a younger, yet much older, part of her.

She decided to play things safe, and put the hot chocolate down on the occasional table. If she was not yet dreaming, it was best to put it down before she was. (If she was dreaming, then it wouldn't make much of a difference.)

Oddly, now that she had noticed them, the embers began to fall the ground, almost like parachutists would, she imagined, each ember choosing its place on the ground and falling to it. She uncurled her legs and got to her feet.

One by one the embers dropped, and once they fell, others flew out of the fireplace to take their turn in the air, spinning, then falling. Mrs Challenger was quite sure now that she was not dreaming, however bizarre things seemed.

Realising she was obstructing the path of some of the embers, she moved off to one side, then looked back at the growing lines of ashes on the carpet (this was going to take some cleaning, she thought at one level of her mind, making a mental note to deal with it herself rather than leave it to the expertise of the maid). From this angle they seemed to make some kind of sense, though she could not quite grasp it yet. A few minutes more, though, and it began to become clear.

She said it out loud, just for the record.

"Mission failure. G captured. N trapped in TD. Q..." She frowned at the ashes still floating around

her. “Well, what about Q? I can’t make it out.” But at that point, the ashes gave up and dropped to the ground, Nanotus and his allies having utterly exhausted their strength.

“My goodness,” said Mrs Challenger. “This is not good... the mission a total failure.”

She stamped about the room (taking special care not to stamp through any ashes) as she tried to think of an alternative method of rescuing Milon. For the moment, despite his bravery, Nanotus would have to fend for himself.

Finally she sat back down and thought hard. Some people have good ideas without working at them; some people have to think hard and think methodically before the idea comes to them. The luckiest people are those who can get both types of good ideas; the unluckiest those who cannot get either. (Although in my opinion there are too many people who do not even bother to try for the second type, being content to stick with the bad ideas that come to mind quickly, no effort required or made.)

Searching through the information stored in her mind, allowing herself to free-associate in order to keep away from the most well-worn tracks, she came up with, in this order, an excellent new method of tanning leather, a radical new design for a child’s perambulator, and a more efficient way of arranging her morning *toilette*. Having noted each of these down on the little ideas pad she always kept about her person, she finally got to the idea she needed.

She seemed to remember that back when she had first took over the post of Ibis supremo, there had been a curious and ancient report from an agent operating in a distant galaxy, which had mentioned a boon being granted. Mrs Challenger was not sure of the exact details, so she rushed to her files. Soon she had the answers laid out upon the occasional table, burying the unread reports, which would have to wait for another day to be checked over.

She quickly finished off the mug of hot chocolate, which had very nearly gone cold, put the empty mug to the far side of the table, and settled back in the armchair to read the reports of the Ibis agent who had been known by no name other than that of his home planet: Grun Din.

Her recollection had been correct. Grun Din had undertaken an action, on behalf of Ibis, on the planet of Melrune, an Earth-like planet in a galaxy far distant from that of Earth. In recognition of those services, a famous holy man, the grim thinker, had promised to Ibis a boon: that in case of disaster, if all else failed, they need only ask, and he would do all he could to help. At first Mrs Challenger was not sure

as to whether this would help in the current situation – after all, the report was over 4,000 years old, and she received promises like this from grateful holy men (and presidents, prime ministers and emperors) every other day. But as she looked through the notes in the folder, added by various of her predecessors, it became clear that the offer of the grim thinker had been taken very seriously by all of them. It had obviously come up for review periodically, and each of them, right up to the immediate tenant of her post, Hallius Dohander, had had no hesitation in re-affirming the file’s status as top priority reading for new inductees.

Would the grim thinker still be alive? There was only one way to find out. At this point, she had no other options. She headed back to the files. Who did they have on Melrune that she could send on a mission like this?

* * * * *

Rolnikov, known the world over as the mad knight of Uttar Pradesh, for reasons he had always kept to himself, was receiving a phone call. He was in the middle of a life or death struggle with an exomentarius, one of the most deadly creatures that ever lived on the planet Melrune, but, he reflected, that was no reason to be rude.

“Rolnikov!” called Pelney to his battle-embroiled friend, not that Pelney would ever have been so bold as to call him friend. Pelney would even have hesitated to call him master, since Rolnikov didn’t really seem to want him around. The round-faced fellow was probably somewhere in between the two – he usually described himself as Rolnikov’s squire, even though that was not exactly a fashionable term in those far from chivalrous days. “There’s a call for you.”

“Who is it?” replied Rolnikov, trying not to be distracted from his fight with the monstrous exomentarius. “You can see that I am busy, Pelney, so please take a message if you can.”

Pelney consulted the talkoscanner for information. “Rolnikov! It’s the orbiting princess!”

Though the exomentarius held mighty Rolnikov with two of its dreadfully muscle-banded arms, near squeezing the breath out of him, the hero somehow found the space to give a nod to his squire. Pelney pressed the relevant button on the talkoscanner and spoke into the metal grille that occupied its bottom half – Pelney left the visuals off for the moment, to give Rolnikov time to arrange himself. “Lord Rolnikov will be with you in a moment.”

Its wings flapping in the air behind it, the monster let loose a cry of triumph and prepared to feast upon Rolnikov's bare head. But with a massive burst of strength the mad knight broke its grip upon him, twisted about and planted his sword into the unshielded space between its three eyes.

"There should have been a better way," he said sadly as its life-blood spurted over his clothes.

"There should have been a cleaner way," Pelney observed. After all, who would have to scrub Rolnikov's leather chest-straps that night, when he could have been playing shakva or something? Poor old Pelney, that's who!

But then danger was their constant travelling companion in those days; it followed them through the dusty red plains of Melrune like monkey-bats stalked travellers through the equatorial jungles. With danger generally in close pursuit and Rolnikov's name and reputation usually preceding them, Pelney counted himself lucky on the occasions where he found a comfortable rock on which to sit and polish the mad knight's boots.

Rolnikov straightened his collar as he walked over to take the call. He was a tall man, easily surpassing six feet and certainly within whispering distance of seven feet. His hair was non-existent, except for a narrow black band about the base of his skull, hemming in that tempestuous mind. His skin was dark brown, his nose Roman, and his eyes black. Pelney had heard women call him handsome, usually when they had him at rest and asleep, his sleeping-mask tied about his head. Only a hardy few kept that opinion once the night mask was removed, revealing those tortured black eyes.

Pelney handed over the talkoscanner. No woman had ever called him handsome, but more than a few had liked him anyway. A little chubby in places, just before leaving his teens Pelney had finally managed to climb a few inches above five feet.

Pelney's most striking feature, Rolnikov often reflected, was the way in which he was extraordinarily pleasant, and was eternally surprised that others were not. Constantly expecting the best of people, he was dumbfounded by their actual cruelty and meanness of spirit. The only times at which his moods

really coincided with those of the dark, cynical and brooding Rolnikov were after the frequent disillusioning episodes dealt the unfortunate squire by an unfeeling universe.

"Hello, Princess Ranita," said Rolnikov politely, in the same tone of voice that most people would use to note animal faeces on their shoes. For him, that was polite. "How can I help you?"

Pelney could not hear her response, but Rolnikov's posture changed entirely during the course of the conversation. From having been slouchingly disinterested as to the topic of conversation – though Pelney had guessed he was quite interested in the conversationalist – he moved to a posture of rigid alertness.

"That sounds fascinating," he told her. "We shall be up there to discuss it with you shortly."

Pelney raised an eyebrow as Rolnikov switched off the talkoscanner and handed it back to him. He asked, "What does she want?"

Rolnikov stared at him, amazed at the audacity of his companion. Pelney was used to this kind of treatment, and waited patiently for the answer.

"She has a mission for us." He turned his back on Pelney and began to stride in the direction of the small town which had hired them to kill the exomenarius. "Good pay."

"Good pay, eh?" said Pelney with a laugh. "And a personal visit?"

Rolnikov continued to head into the distance, not breaking stride as Pelney struggled to keep up. "It is not a personal visit. It is entirely business."

Pelney laughed again and began to sing a little song to himself. "Rolni and the princess, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g..."

Though Rolnikov was not quite out of earshot, he decided he was far enough ahead to make ignoring the song the dignified approach. If he actually paid attention to half the things Pelney said, the only truly dignified course of action would have been to slice the chubby fellow into a hundred pieces, and he didn't want to do that. After all, he did not want to clean his own leather chest-straps or polish his own boots.

How Many Dusty Trails Must a Man Walk Down?

Once they reached the small dry town of Tunesome, Rolnikov wasted no time in collecting his payment. The town mayor made no trouble about handing it over – people just didn't do that with Rolnikov, at least not people who knew who he was. Those people who didn't know, and who acted upon that lack of knowledge, soon learned the importance of good research. Before leaving the mayor's residence, they decided that they might as well make use of his palatial bathroom. Both of them cleaned up, and Pelney did what he could to wash the blood from his boss's leather chest-straps.

Money in hand, Rolnikov and Pelney went to the pub and checked their maps. Calculating the route of Princess Ranita's orbiting space station, they worked out where they would need to be in order to be collected when she passed overhead, and when they would have to be there.

"We have time to eat," said Pelney happily.

"That's never a bad thing," growled Rolnikov. "Order me some food, and if it's bad, you die." He poked a finger into one of Pelney's round cheeks. "Understand me? Bad food, you die."

Pelney could hardly stop laughing. "Rolnikov, you crack me up!"

Rolnikov narrowed his eyes as Pelney headed for the bar. Rolnikov's stomach was rumbling. Rolnikov wondered if he should have taken a slice of the monster to snack on en route. Rolnikov was ready to throttle Pelney as the squire turned back from the bar, making a big show of pretending to suddenly have a thought.

"Rolnikov!" he called to the mad knight. "I understand the bit about the food – bad food, I die. That's simple! But what about the beer – if that's bad, will I die then too, or could I get away with an amputation?"

Remember the boots, Rolnikov told himself, gritting his teeth. Remember that the boots are exceptionally dirty today.

He resolved to step in something especially disgusting tomorrow. Just before he turned in, of course. He wouldn't want to be walking around with poo on his boots all day.

Pelney was soon back with two pints of beer. He put them on the table and tentatively sipped one. "Not too bad," he told Rolnikov. "Just try and pretend your mother made it or something."

"Don't talk about my mother," said the mad knight.

Pelney shrugged and took a big gulp of the beer.

"Are you looking forward to seeing the orbiting princess?" he asked.

"Don't talk about the princess," ordered Rolnikov, before picking up his pint and drinking it in a single draught. "And get me another beer."

"Sure," said Pelney, rolling his eyes and grinning. He then became more reflective. "Do you want to know what I think, Rolnikov? You seem undecided. I'll tell you anyway. This repartee of ours, this constant back and forth banter, which to you seems nothing but an irritation, is really the solid bedrock of our relationship."

Rolnikov thought about what Pelney was saying for once. "I believe..."

"Yes," said Pelney, leaning forward eagerly. "Go on!"

Rolnikov shrugged. "The bedrock of our relationship is that you clean my boots."

Pelney slumped back, and pushed his beer over to Rolnikov. "Here, you might as well have this. I'll get another two in a minute." The mad knight nodded his approval, but paused to speak even as he lifted the glass.

"Not that you do a very good job of it."

Once more he drank the pint in a single go.

"Well that goes without saying," said Pelney, glumly. "I mean, as if I could ever mean anything whatsoever to the mighty Rolnikov, mad knight of Uttar Pradesh." He cradled his head in his arms.

Rolnikov broke into one of his rare smiles. It always amused him when he managed to goad Pelney into a depressed mood. It amused him so much that he decided to go to the bar himself for a change. Usually he left anything that involved talking to people to Pelney. He got up from his stool and went up to the bar. Peeking out from his arms, Pelney could not repress a grin. He knew there was

only one surefire way to cheer up his boss. It never failed.

The barman moved to serve Rolnikov immediately. It was a mark of respect, or of fear, the kind of thing which the mad knight was used to – on the rare occasions when he didn't leave the human interaction to his flunky – but this time one of the other patrons took exception to it.

"Hey," he shouted at the barman. "Why are you serving this creep first?"

The barman shrugged. "He killed the exomentarius for us. It had been killing livestock and children around here for the last six months. It even took off one of Hudd's arms." He pointed out a one-armed man with shocking white hair and an exuberant moustache sitting at the end of the bar. Hudd gave Rolnikov a big thumbs up (with his remaining thumb). "We owe him a lot more than we can afford to pay him. So he gets served first."

Rolnikov gave Hudd a thumbs up in return. Maybe it was the dry heat of the day, perhaps it was the two pints, or could it have been, though he didn't dare suggest this even to himself, the prospect of meeting the orbiting princess once more? – but Rolnikov was feeling positively bouncy, by his standards, at least.

The other customer was not satisfied by this, which seemed odd to Rolnikov, as from his behaviour he had clearly been served six or seven times already.

"I don't care if he's killed a dozen of those things. If you needed him to do it that just shows what a bunch of pussies the men in this town are anyway. Doesn't say a thing about him. Now serve me and do it quick, mister! It took me all day to get here and I'm thirsty."

Rolnikov looked at him properly for the first time. "Sir, I'm happy for you to be served first. It is only fair. In fact, I am honoured that you go so far as to let me even drink at the same bar as yourself. Please, though, don't be so rude to the barman, who, after all, acts only out of an exaggerated sense of his danger in my presence."

Having pricked up his ears at the sound of Rolnikov actually getting into a conversation, Pelney's eyebrows were now scampering up his forehead as if they were trying to burrow into his hair. Fancy someone speaking to Rolnikov like that! Perhaps evolution on Melrune had been going more slowly than elsewhere in the galaxy after all, if there were still people that dumb here. Parallel evolution was evidently not all it was cracked up to be.

"Oooh, I'm frightened," said the drunk. "Danger

in your presence?" He threw his head back and laughed in Rolnikov's face. "Look at me, I'm crying because I'm so scared! Boo-hoo!" He pointed a finger at Rolnikov. "The only exaggerated thing around here is what an arsehole you are, craphead."

Pelney winced. This could really end up being painful to watch. He decided to intervene. After all, he reckoned, the man was drunk. He would not normally have been so boorish.

He jumped to his feet and ran over to the bar. Rolnikov was staring at the drunk, immobile as a statue before it falls on someone's head.

Pelney pushed in between the two.

"What's your name, friend?" he asked cheerily.

"What's it to you?" said the man with a sneer.

"Just seems fair to exchange names before there's any trouble, that's all, in case there's any complications later."

"The name is Smad. Are you going to ask the name of this jerk?"

"No need," said Pelney. "I already know it, and I can tell by your actions that you do not." He smiled and leaned in to whisper in the man's ear. As the man's expression turned to horrified shock, Pelney stepped smartly back. He'd seen this happen before.

A dark stain spread across the man's trousers; a dark pool appeared around his feet. The man began to shake and he put a desperate hand to grab his own backside.

At least, thought Pelney, he might keep that much of his dignity.

Unfortunately, he did not.

The one saving grace of the gentleman's accident – luckily for him – was that as the trousers slowly bulged outwards it made Rolnikov smile again. He took the two pints from the barman and went back to his stool without taking further action. As the drunkard ran out of the pub, struggling with his own stool, Pelney handed a few notes to the barman, apologising for the mess, then returned to sit with Rolnikov, whose smile was just beginning to fade.

"You love that, don't you?" said Pelney.

"I don't hate it," replied Rolnikov.

* * * * *

Later that night, they were standing on the highest point within reach that was on the course of the orbiting princess, which happened to be the local boot hill.

"Nice place to meet your date," said Pelney with a chuckle, which he quickly clamped down on after seeing Rolnikov's stern face. "Goodness me. You

really do take this thing seriously, don't you? I think you love her."

Rolnikov was still slightly drunk; drunk enough to enjoy teasing Pelney, at any rate.

"I did once love a woman," he said in what he thought to be a confidential tone.

"Really?" exclaimed Pelney.

"Yes," said Rolnikov. "Her name was Death and we danced the whole night."

Pelney stamped his feet in frustration. "Remind me to put that one in my little book," he told the mad knight. "These little sayings of yours, they're so wise, you know. It's like working with a new Buddha. Or at least a new Oscar Wilde. I don't know why you have to be so cagey all the time."

Rolnikov kept his mouth shut, but his enormous chest rippled with suppressed laughter. After a couple of minutes of Pelney being moody, Rolnikov spoke once more.

"I had to break it off though."

Pelney was sarcastic. "And why was that, pray tell, oh wise one?"

Rolnikov was looking up at the stars in the dark sky, now. Was it his imagination, or was one of them moving?

"She kept leaving with my friends."

Pelney hadn't finished thinking about that by the time a beam of light stabbed down from the heavens and disintegrated them both.

* * * * *

The orbiting princess was one of the most beautiful



women in the universe, according to popular legend. Pelney didn't know about that – after all, there were a lot of women in the universe, and who could say they had seen them all – but as far as he was concerned, there was no doubt she was definitely in the running.

For Rolnikov, there was no doubt whatsoever that the race was run and lost. Her raven hair shimmered in the light as if the stars themselves shone from within it. Even her own hair was in love with her, flowing down to brush the dark brown skin of her lovely neck with a thousand tender kisses each time she moved. As she led the way from the transporter room of her satellite to somewhere more comfortable, he found himself afraid that she would turn to speak to him – he, the most feared man on all Melrune, afraid to look a woman in the eye! He worried that looking into her deep brown eyes he would forget everything, forget how to talk, how to walk, how to breathe. If they reached the observation room before she turned those eyes upon him, he could sit down, forget about walking, leave the talking to Pelney, and just concentrate on breathing; on taking in every molecule of oxygen that might possibly have brushed across her lips.

He worried about that, but also that if she turned she would see how he had been hypnotised by the rolling of her bottom as she walked, the warring for supremacy of the two beautifully rounded hemispheres engaging his almost total attention in a way that made him somewhat ashamed to be male. But then, as she turned a corner ahead of him, he had a moment to reflect that even had he been female it would have been insanity not to appreciate these gentle tyrants of his lustful attention.

Finally they arrived, without, to Rolnikov's relief, any untoward or embarrassing incidents. He had met her just once before, for a moment so achingly brief he still felt the twinges, after he had completed a task for her and beamed up to receive his payment, but they had spoken on the talkoscanner a few times since, and though he hardly dared hope for anything between them, he dared not face the world without that hope.

The two of them sat in opposite chairs, Pelney off to one side, almost forced away, Rolnikov felt, by the magnetic forces that pulsed between him and the princess. He wondered if she felt it too. Would he ever know? At the moment he was so hard, tightly packed, like cement, but if he ever opened himself to her, only to be rejected, he would be scattered forever like grains of sand in a hurricane.

Forcing himself not to look at the princess,

Rolnikov had to admit the alternative view would only look shabby in *this* particular company. The floor and one wall of the observation room were entirely transparent, allowing the visitors the treat of seeing their world from high above. Melrune was stunningly beautiful, the huge red plains in which Rolnikov generally plied his trade just one facet of a multifaceted world which elsewhere shone bright green, blue and yellow.

"How do you feel about the mission?" asked the princess.

Rolnikov continued to look down at the planet – it was the only way he could keep his composure. "It sounds intriguing, princess. Give Pelney the details. He'll do the thinking and let me know when I have to hit something."

She smiled and turned to Pelney, who had become rather engrossed in a little bowl of sweets embedded in the arm of his chair. Although it was off-putting to speak to someone with cheeks stuffed like a squirrel (yes: like Rolnikov himself, the princess originally hailed from our planet), the princess intended to do her best, while Pelney planned to get through the conversation with a combination of all-purpose waves and meaningful grunts. He was hardly about to pass up the opportunity to eat food as good as this.

"The mission is a simple one, Pelney, on the face of it. At least, the instructions are simple. Following them through to the mission's end may prove more difficult. I want you to find the grim thinker."

Pelney blew all the sweets out of his mouth. Fortunately there was not enough power put into the expellation of the items for any of them to reach the princess, but she raised an eyebrow as they scattered over the floor, spoiling the view of Melrune.

"The grim thinker?" hooted Pelney. "Are you mad? He's a myth! And even the myths say he lived thousands of years ago! Have you heard this, Rolnikov?"

Rolnikov didn't move. "She's paying, so we'll look for him. We get paid either way."

"Well, fine then," said Pelney with a laugh. "Should we look for the October fireman and the scarlet noosereader while we're at it?"

The orbiting princess didn't blink. "You can if you like, Pelney, but I'm not paying you to." She shrugged. "But if they should turn up on your travels, let me know and I'll see if I can sort something out for you."

"So why do you want us to look for the grim thinker?"

"It's a rather unusual matter, but among my other responsibilities, I am the representative in this region

of space of an organisation called Ibis – the Interstellar Bureau of Investigation and Skulduggery. It seems that something over 4,000 years ago they did something on Melrune which earned them the gratitude of the grim thinker – he offered them a boon, a boon which they now need to be granted."

"They expect him to keep a promise made 4,000 years ago? Are they completely mad?"

"I don't honestly know," said the princess. "They speculate that the grim thinker may not necessarily turn out to be a single, long-lived individual, but instead a position, or rank, and that the present incumbent may wish, and may be able, to honour the promise made all that time ago."

"What's the boon?"

"You have to ask the grim thinker to free," she consulted a datapad, "Milon the Assassin, Detective Jim Grimmett, and Professor Samson Quigg, if he is still alive."

"Isn't that three boons?" asked the squire. "Are they being held by the grim thinker himself, or something?"

"They're together," replied the princess. "So I think that makes it one boon; but if it comes down to it, ask for Milon the Assassin – he's the important one. And this is the strange thing about the request – they are definitely not being held by the grim thinker – they are in the grip of the tin can brains."

Pelney winced.

She went on, "And they tell me that the fate of the universe rests upon the success of your mission."

"So no pressure then?"

"None at all," she smiled.

Pelney rolled it over in his mind a few times. "Have you got any idea where we might find the grim thinker, princess?"

"I believe, and bear in mind that this is only a hunch, that you might find him there." She pointed to a mountain just passing beneath their feet.

"Why's that?" asked Pelney, always the willing stooge.

"Because," said Rolnikov out of the blue, "it is called the Mountain of the Grim Thinker in the local dialect." In fact, he had only been feigning a lack of attention. Every second of the last ten minutes of his life had been spent studying the princess's reflection in the observation window. "And she didn't tell me that on the talkoscanner."

After a small adjustment to the direction and speed of the station, to bring the mountain quickly back under their feet, Rolnikov was the first back into the transporter room. Meanwhile Pelney hung back a moment, affecting to tie up his bootlaces. The

princess paused for a moment, partly to hurry him along, partly to make sure he didn't steal anything. As she waited, the door to the transporter room slid shut behind Rolnikov.

"Come along, Pelney," she scolded.

"Sorry, princess," he said, quickly getting to his feet. Just before he caught up with her, he asked, "Did you really need to bring us up here for this?"

She pursed her lips and pouted a little. "What do you think, Pelney?"

"What do I think? I'll tell you what I think: I thought so. Not that it's a bad thing, you understand. It's just I have to be careful with the boss, he can be temperamental at times; my role, though you might not realise it, involves a great deal of man-management, and if I'm going to manage that man, it helps

for me to know if his goals are realistic."

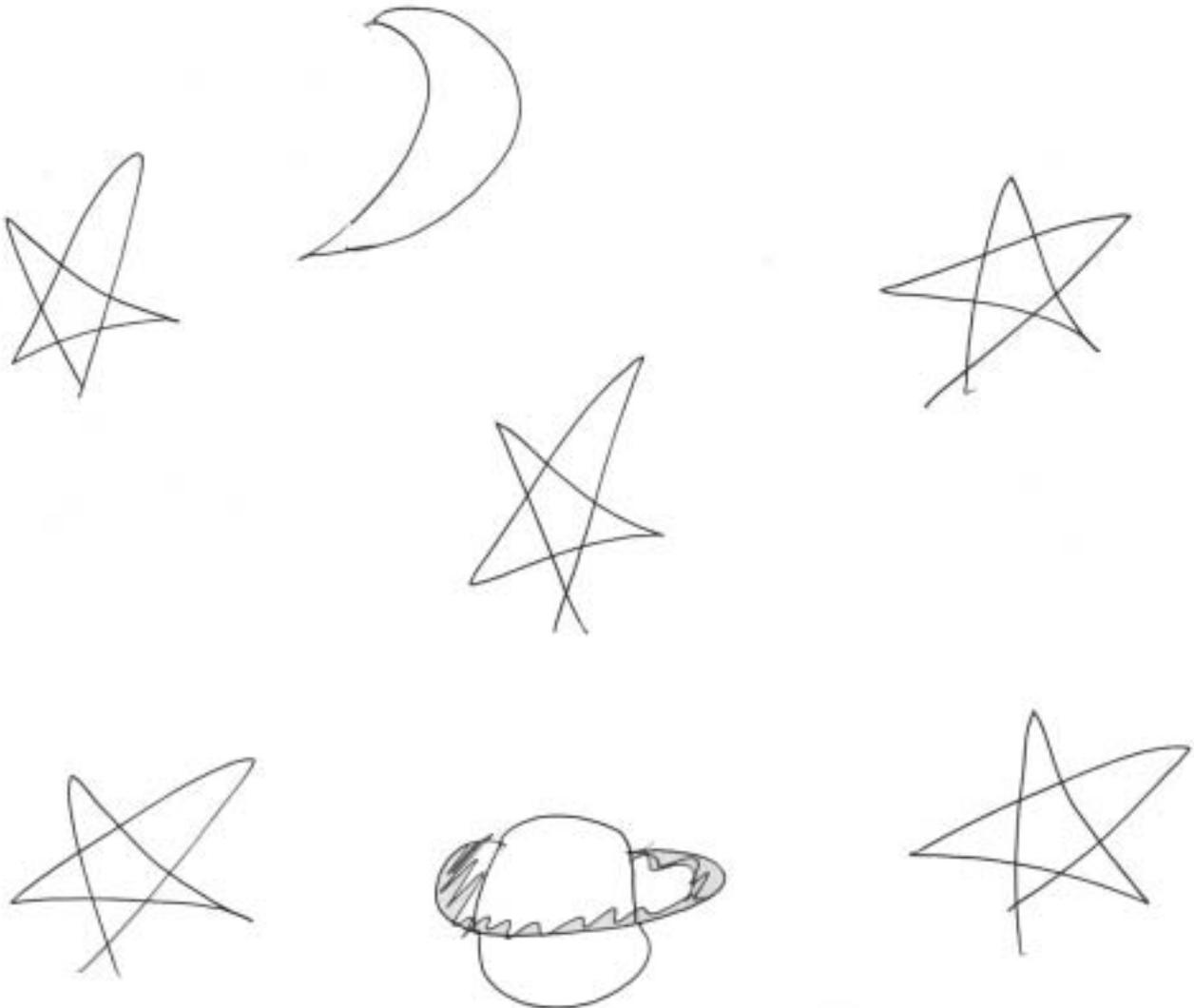
She laughed. "They are realistic, Pelney, stop worrying. There is one thing, though."

"What's that?" he asked.

"Tell him to stop watching my reflection in the window – it really creeps me out."

Pelney laughed too, quietly though; he didn't want Rolnikov to hear and have his feelings hurt. "It's only because he's too shy to look you in the eye; but I'll try and let him know."

"Thanks, Pelney," she said as they went into the transporter room. "I think we are going to be great friends. Especially," she said, as she laid a hand on his shoulder that would put Rolnikov in a foul temper for the next six hours, "if you find the grim thinker and get him to grant this boon."



The Town of Monkey-Monkey

The mountain of the grim thinker was very large, and for the sake of safety the orbiting princess had dropped Rolnikov and Pelney off at the bottom. It was a long way up, but then they had no reason to assume that the grim thinker would be at the top. It just seemed like the natural place for him to be. So they set off. Although it was a large mountain, the foothills were not too demanding, and Pelney had spotted a small village part-way up the mountain, where he hoped they could find a guide, provisions and, if they were lucky, directions. It was up to Pelney to make these decisions, because Rolnikov was not yet back to his usual self. He stumbled around in a lovestruck daze, half out of his mind with passion, and it was all Pelney could do to get him walking under the right direction.

Pelney did worry about him sometimes.

The weather at this level of the mountain was quite temperate, so there was as yet no snow or ice, and there were even patches of mossy grass here and there, which could be just as slippery as ice. Pelney tried to lead Rolnikov around them, and as they trudged along he left the mad knight to his own thoughts for a while. There was no point at this stage in getting him all worked up about it – he didn't want to waste his ammunition. Who knew if at some time over the next few days he might need to really work Rolnikov into a fighting frenzy?

They walked in silence like this for almost two hours. When they had landed at the foot of the mountain it had been early morning, local time, but the two of them were three or four hours past midnight in personal terms. Pelney suggested a rest, and hunkered down on a large flat rock beneath a spindly dried-up tree. Rolnikov shrugged, and joined him.

Pelney opened up his pack and put together a reasonable lunch for them: bread and ham, with a couple of biscuits each. He poured wine into a pair of small cups.

Rolnikov finally spoke. "Isn't it a bit early for wine?" he growled.

Pelney almost dropped the canteen in surprise, but smiled and passed one cup to the mad knight. "I just thought we could finish it off, so we could fill the

canteen with water next time we passed a stream."

"Fine," shrugged Rolnikov. "So long as that's the only reason."

"Of course," replied Pelney placatingly. "Here, let me re-fill your cup for you."

"Thank you," said the mad knight. "I'm as tough as I ever was."

"No doubt in my mind!" said the round-faced squire. "Even if you were in love with someone – not that I'm saying you are – I should think it would only make you tougher than ever, having someone to fight for, to champion, so to speak."

"Eat your bread and ham, buffoon," commanded Rolnikov, with somewhat unnecessary rudeness.

A couple of hours later they reached the village. It was a small place, with no more than ten or twelve small huts gathered round a central space, where a handful of children played shakvi. Pelney's first impulse was to join in, but Rolnikov held him back. "We don't have time for fun," he said. "Remember that the fate of the universe depends upon us being successful in this mission." In any case, the children soon stopped playing to run up and gather round the strangers. There were few other people about, but none seemed hostile; wary and quiet, but not hostile.

As each of Rolnikov's hands were taken hold of by a gaggle of children who proceeded to try and pull off his fingers by swinging on them, Pelney could not hold back a laugh, which earned him a very dirty look from the mad knight. For some reason, children loved Rolnikov; maybe it was just because he was rather funny-looking, with his great height, leather chest-straps, bald head and big boots. As was ever the case, except during fights, and even then only during fights worth the effort of drawing it, the knight's massive sword was strapped to his back, securely in its scabbard and well out of the each of the children.

One kid could not find a spare finger, and so contented himself with coming to meet Pelney. "Hello, sir," said the boy politely, and, to Pelney's relief, comprehensibly. "I am Ronus."

"Hi, Ronus," said Pelney. In the course of their travels, he and Rolnikov had picked up a working

knowledge of most dialects on the continent. The way it usually worked was that Rolnikov would spend a night in deep and private conversation with the most gorgeous of the local girls, before giving Pelney lessons on the trail. It was an arrangement Pelney sometimes considered unfair, but then he could hardly begrudge Rolnikov a few perks of the job, and, if he was being honest, quick talker that he was, Pelney could never have learnt a language in a single evening. Especially with an attractive woman to distract him! "What's the name of this village, son?"

"It's called Monkey-Monkey," said the boy. "Because legend has it that there were once two monkeys here. No other village in living memory has ever had more than one monkey. This is why our village is the best." The boy thumped himself once on the chest, probably a little harder than he meant to, but doing his best not to wince in front of the stranger.

"It certainly seems like a fine old place to me," said Pelney with a smile, as Rolnikov got dragged off by the children to one of the huts; not the largest, but one which had two skulls on poles planted on either side of the door way. He began to walk in that direction – it wouldn't do at all if Rolnikov made a scene of some kind with the village headman.

"Let me guess," he said to the boy, who was making his best effort to keep stride with the interesting chubby-faced stranger. "The two skulls..."

The boy leapt in, more eager to show off his own knowledge than to let the stranger play guessing games. "The two monkeys! You see, there is proof!"

"Heritage is a wonderful thing," said Pelney with feeling, patting the boy on the head. They entered the hut, Ronus leading the way, pulling open the wooden door, allowing Pelney through, then following and closing the door behind them.

The hut was pretty small, just a few metres square, but its owner was evidently very proud of it, beaming with joy as Rolnikov and Pelney sat themselves at his feet. He was bearded, but against expectation, it was not white, but dark brown, virtually the same colour as his sun-tanned skin. Pelney judged him to be in his mid-forties.

It was nice to receive a friendly welcome for once. He supposed that visitors must be fairly rare up here. The half dozen children in the children squeezed themselves against the walls as best they could; excited, but worried they might be dismissed from the historic meeting.

"Welcome, travellers!" said the bearded man, with a wave of his hand. "My name is Garto, and I am the

headman of this village, Monkey-Monkey. So named, because there were once two monkeys here, if you can believe that!"

"I have never heard the like before!" exclaimed Pelney, while Rolnikov remained silent, frowning at a child who was giggling behind a hand pressed against her mouth. "The two of us have visited every corner of Melrune, and we thought we had seen everything! Surely this tale of two monkeys can be nothing but a myth, a tale cooked up by the founding mothers and fathers of your village to justify such a bold, proud and boastful name!"

There were gasps of amazement all around the room.

"Oh no," said Garto, his eyes wide. "It is true, stranger! As you entered this hut, did you not see the evidence, the very skulls of the two monkeys?"

"He did, headman," called Ronus quickly. "I showed him them!"

"Well then!"

"It's true," said Pelney, shaking his head in amazement. "But I could hardly believe such a wonder. I hope you will forgive me."

"Of course we will, stranger!" said Garto with an ebullient laugh. "Why, I remember the first time I was told that each star in the sky is bigger than a dozen Melrunes! I laughed for three days and three nights! Some things are too wondrous to swallow at the first attempt! You shall see, when we have a feast in your honour tonight!"

"My stomach rumbles in anticipation already," said Pelney with what he hoped looked like a smile. "But tell me this, headman, if your village is called Monkey-Monkey because there really, really were two monkeys here once, why is this mountain named the Mountain of the Grim Thinker?"

The room went almost absolutely quiet. No one breathed, no one made a movement – all apart from the one little girl who just couldn't help giggling more and more the more deeply Rolnikov frowned at her.

After a tense moment, the headman spoke, with bulging eyes. "You dare speak of" – he paused before whispering the last three words of his sentence – "the grim thinker?"

"Isn't he just another legend?" asked Pelney blithely.

The headman shook his head slowly. "We don't talk about him. We never have."

"But you named the mountain after him...?"

"An oversight," said the headman, clapping his hands, making everyone in the room jump, even Rolnikov, who had not really been paying attention

to anything other than the war of nerves with his giggling adversary. "Quickly, now, let us put this dangerous topic to one side, and prepare for the feast!"

The children all let out a big hurrah, pulled open the door, and ran out into the town common area, where they began to run round in circles as fast as they could until they fell over. Rolnikov and Pelney were left for a moment alone with Garto, who gave them a wink and said, "Later, my friends, I will tell you the story of the grim thinker, but in private."

Noticing that Rolnikov was about to speak, probably to suggest that Garto close the door and tell them now, Pelney leapt to his feet and thanked the headman for his kindness, before leading the mad knight out onto the common. "We don't want to seem too eager, Rolnikov," he whispered, "or they'll clam up."

Rolnikov shrugged and let Pelney lead him up to a little spur of rock at the edge of the village, from where they could watch the preparations for the feast.

"Is this a necessary delay?" asked Rolnikov as they sat there, Pelney swinging his legs back and forth through the thin air.

"I think it is," replied the squire. "We don't know what we're going to encounter up there on the mountain, and it has been almost 24 hours since we last slept. We can take a quick nap here, eat when we wake, get the information we need, then head up onto the mountain fully refreshed, fully fed, and fully informed."

"I'll leave the decision to you, then," said Rolnikov, lying down on the rock, swinging the sword scabbard up so he could rest his head on it. "But if the universe ends while I'm asleep, you die."

"Sounds fair," agreed Pelney, before moving away from the edge and lying down himself. The rock was obviously hard, but it had been warmed by the afternoon sun, and there were no insects or bugs around, so it would almost certainly make a better bed than any of those in Monkey-Monkey would have done. With that thought, he dropped off to sleep.

When Pelney awoke, Rolnikov was already on his feet, doing callisthenic exercises by the light of the moon.

"Do you always have to be so vigorous?" Pelney asked peevishly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Ask me again the next time your life depends on it."

"Good point," answered the squire. "What woke you up?"

"They're almost ready for us." He pointed to a small dark shape approaching their vantage point.

"Ronus has been sent to collect us."

"So he has," said Pelney. "Do you think they'll send him with us as a guide?"

"He was the only child who didn't swing from my fingers," replied Rolnikov. "So he's obviously the smartest one among them. And there are so few adults here that I doubt they'll want to risk one of them up the mountain."

A few minutes later they followed Ronus back to the common, where the party was just starting to get going. The time the two travellers had spent napping had given the villagers time to summon those who had been grazing animals on other parts of the mountain, and so the full complement of twenty or so adults were there, all together – a rare enough event in itself that the party was bound to be a roaring success even before the presence of the strangers was added to the mix.

Three men had dug out some dusty musical instruments and were banging and twanging away on them without a care, and everyone else was either dancing or eating. Most of the children were running round in circles again.

"That looks like fun," said Pelney.

"Sometimes I feel that's all I ever do," replied Rolnikov.

A long table, quickly put together by borrowing the planks of wood from someone's fence and some stones from the wall of one of his wealthier neighbours, was covered in food, most of which looked intriguing to Pelney – from a biological point of view, less so from a gastronomical one. He could see why other visitors had found it difficult to swallow the wonders of Monkey-Monkey cooking at the first attempt. Nevertheless, nothing ventured, nothing gained, and he couldn't always leave the ventured part to Rolnikov, so he found a spare place to sit and began to test the different varieties of Monkey-Monkey culinary expertise.

Rolnikov looked around, feeling a bit lost. He wasn't hungry, there were no unattached women, and he didn't dance, except in extreme circumstances. (Curiously, though Rolnikov no longer danced, he was in all likelihood the finest dancer on all Melrune, it having formed an inescapable part of his training as a young warrior. In fact, the twist he had performed in the arms of the exomentarius had been learnt on the ballroom floor.)

Suddenly there was a whisper from the darkness off to one side, putting him immediately on his guard.

"Psst! Stranger!"

He turned to see who was there, hiding away from

all the activity, but even his keen eyes couldn't pierce the darkness. Ronus had already tagged along after his new best friend Pelney, so it could not be him.

"What do you want?"

"It's me, Garto, the headman! Come quickly, while no one is looking!"

Rolnikov shrugged, and headed into the darkness. Once out of the lights of the village common, his eyes adjusted, and he could make out Garto clearly. He was not carrying a weapon, so the mad knight relaxed a little.

"You wanted to know about the grim thinker?"

"That's right," said Rolnikov. He thought about what Pelney had said to him, and decided that in this particular situation honesty would probably be the best policy. Pelney was a good fellow, but he did overcomplicate things unnecessarily sometimes. "He granted a boon to someone, and we've been asked to find him and request it."

Garto was flabbergasted. "What? Really?"

"Yes, really," replied Rolnikov. "Do you have information that will help us find him?"

"Well, to be honest," said the headman, rubbing his beard, "I was going to tell you that the grim thinker is nothing but a myth, that he's completely made-up. I just didn't want to say that in front of the children. If we keep them scared of him, it stops them wandering off up the mountain."

"That's disappointing," said Rolnikov. "Because the fate of the universe depends upon us finding him."

"All the universe?" asked Galto, incredulous.

"All of it," replied the mad knight.

"It's a lot to gamble on a myth."

"Well, I'm told that all other bets are off," said Rolnikov, turning to go and collect Pelney.

The headman trailed behind him, deep in thought. "Wait, there might be something after all."

Rolnikov turned. They were back on the edge of the common now, and Rolnikov could see the man's brows were deeply furrowed. He was probably think-

ing harder than he had ever thought before in his life.

"Just because I've always thought it was a myth, doesn't mean it can't be true – you and your friend doubted that there had ever been two monkeys in Monkey-Monkey village, but there were. In the same way, perhaps there really is a grim thinker!"

"Well, friend," said Rolnikov. "If the myths say that there is a grim thinker, where do they suggest that he is?"

The man tugged at his beard so hard a few strands of hair came off between his fingers, searching his memory for childhood tales. "The story said that he lived up there, over a hill, under a stream, erm, after a rock, and between two minutes. I don't know what that means."

Rolnikov was thoughtful. "I think I might. Come, I must tell Pelney what you've told me. If you are agreeable, he has suggested taking Ronus as a guide."

"He's a good choice," replied the headman, nodding. "I have always had the feeling that he is one of the few who was never scared by the tales of the grim thinker. I reckon he knows more ways hereabouts that any of us, especially up there, where we are never supposed to go. Legend has it that if we disturbed the grim thinker, he would send an avalanche down to crush the village." He looked at Rolnikov in sudden anxiety. "So if the stories are true..."

"Don't worry," answered Rolnikov with a pat on the back. "I'm sure he won't punish anyone for collecting on a promise he made."

He was about to go, but had one more thing to say. "Galto, you should know that I always believed that there had been two monkeys in Monkey-Monkey."

Garto nodded his thanks, and shook Rolnikov firmly by the hand. "That means a lot to me. Good luck on your quest. Though the whole universe depends on you, the people of Monkey-Monkey will always be grateful to you, successful or not."

The Way to the Grim Thinker

The next day they started early, and the whole village gave them a big send-off.

On their way up the mountain, Rolnikov did not speak a great deal. Ronus, however, did not stop talking. He had a million questions to ask Pelney about the world beyond the mountain, and the squire was doing his level best to answer them all. But it was worth it: the boy proved to be a more than capable guide, and their progress was good.

Although there were a number of streams which came tumbling down the mountainside, the boy chose one in particular as being the most likely to lead to the home of the grim thinker, mainly because he had followed most of the others to their source. This one, he explained to the travellers, he had never really felt like exploring, which, now he came to think of it, did seem a bit odd, especially as the route was not particularly difficult.

"You know what, Ronus?" said Pelney, coming to a full stop, after they had been working their way up the slope for over two hours. "I know just what you mean. Why bother climbing up here? We should just head back to Monkey-Monkey." He turned and started to head back, wondering why he had ever set off in the first place.

Ronus shrugged and followed him. "I suppose we might as well."

Rolnikov had been bringing up the rear, and he came to a dead stop as he saw the other two heading his way. "What are the two of you doing?" he demanded.

"Going home," said Ronus.

"It's boring up here," said Pelney, "and such hard work."

"I don't know what's got into you fools, but there is no chance of us going back down. Is that clear?"

Pelney and Ronus stopped and looked at each other.

"He's right," said Ronus. "We have to get up there to save the universe." Pelney had seen no reason to keep the importance of the mission from the young guide, just in case they ended up in a situation where he could tip the balance. They had even told him their names, which, oddly enough, no one had asked

them to do in the village – and they didn't usually announce themselves if they could help it. The news had a tendency to send people fleeing to the hills. But their fame obviously hadn't spread to the foothills of the mountain of the grim thinker – the boy hadn't heard of them.

Pelney frowned. "That's the strangest thing. I know we must climb the mountain! Why ever would I decide to head back down?"

"Why indeed?" said Rolnikov. "Cowardice, perhaps?"

"I'm no coward!" said Ronus. "It's sorcery!"

Pelney and Rolnikov looked at each other. "He may not be far wrong," said the squire. "There may be some kind of device there, gently sending out telepathic commands to encourage people to leave."

"That would explain why I never came up here!" said the boy.

Pelney nodded. "If you were not that bothered about getting up there to begin with, you would have no reason to suspect your motives for changing your mind."

"This sounds very plausible to me," said Rolnikov. "Let's try again."

The three travellers resumed their way up the mountain, and soon they reached the point where Pelney and Ronus had begun to have second thoughts. They began to feel them again, but this time, when they turned, they found Rolnikov had quietly removed his sword from its sheath and was barring their way back with it. With this added incentive to press on, they soon found that the feelings began to fade.

"How do you feel, Ronus?" asked Pelney. "Do you still want to go back home?"

"Never!" said the boy.

"Excellent," replied Pelney. "What about you, Rolnikov: didn't you feel it at all?"

Rolnikov slipped his sword back into its scabbard. "I felt it," he growled. But he did not go into detail, and they did not dare to ask. If he had decided to share his feelings with them, he would have said how he had first experienced that feeling as a six year-old boy, when he awoke, after spending six months in a

coma, to find that his parents had been murdered and his home razed to the ground. The desire to go home was something he felt every time he saw a smile, every time he saw a child playing, every time he picked up a cut in a battle. It was a feeling he had learnt to ignore by the age of seven. An unfortunate side-effect was that feelings come as a bundle – you can't ignore one and expect the rest still to function normally – but seeing as that suited his chosen career path just fine, he was not going to complain about his childhood traumas. Certainly not to Pelney; he would rather die than take sympathy from his lackey. And it was important to Rolnikov that Pelney kept a certain image of him in mind: it helped him stay in character.

Five minutes later they came to a little crest in the mountain. The main peak was still far off in the distance above their heads, but Pelney had a good feeling that they were getting close to the grim thinker. Immediately before them the surface dipped to create a small plateau eaten into the side of the mountain, almost as if someone had taken a bite from it. This plateau wasn't the source of the stream, but it was an important point along the way. At the far side of the plateau, some twenty metres or so away, the stream poured down a sheer face, to create the pool that they now faced, of cool, clear liquid. Close to where they stood the edge of the pool lapped over the plateau to begin its long journey down to Monkey-Monkey and beyond.

"Over the hill," said Pelney, using a wave of his hand to show what he meant.

Ronus did a double-take. "You mean this could be it? The home of the grim thinker?"

"Could be," confirmed Rolnikov. "The next bit was that it was under the stream."

Pelney dropped his pack and went to look at the pool. It ran the whole length of the plateau, and though it didn't look too deep at the edges, and it was clear enough, he couldn't see how deep it went in the middle. He couldn't see any monsters in it, though, which was definitely a bonus.

"You think it could be under here?" he asked Rolnikov. "Some kind of trapdoor entrance, or an airlock?"

Rolnikov shrugged. "One of us will have to dive in and take a look." He sat down right where he was.

"You mean me?"

"I'll do it," said Ronus.

"There you go!" said Pelney demonstratively. "The boy will do it!"

"You do it," said Rolnikov. "What if there's something in there? Wouldn't you feel bad if the boy

died?"

"I'd feel a lot worse if *I* died," muttered Pelney to himself, while wriggling out of his jacket and trousers, making sure that he didn't say it loud enough for the boy to hear.

He ran to the edge of the pool and dived in. The water was very cold, his skin developing instant goosepimples all over, but it was very refreshing, especially after the way his mind had been clouded on the way up here. He drank in a few gulps, and it tasted good. He shouted to Rolnikov, who was watching him with a look of dry amusement. "You should come and try it! It's wonderful in here!"

That was enough to spoil Rolnikov's enjoyment of the moment. "You are there to do a job, Pelney. Get on with it, you dim-witted buffoon!"

The squire cheerfully began to swim back and forth across the pool, dipping his face into the water to see the better, but after ten minutes he was forced to admit defeat, and climbed out of the pool, shook himself off like an animal, and came to sit by a fire that Rolnikov had started.

"There," said Pelney, "you do care after all. You lit a fire for me."

"The boy complained he was cold."

Pelney looked over at the boy, who gave him a wink.

"Ah well," said Pelney, taking off his underclothes so that they could dry by the fire, and putting his trousers and jacket back on in the meantime. "At least it shows there's a heart beating in there somewhere."

"There's nothing in there," said Rolnikov.

"Nothing?" said Pelney. "Nothing at all? My, you really are as hard as they say, Rolnikov."

"I meant the pool, numbskull."

Pelney laughed. "Well, in that case you're right, Rolnikov. From inside the pool I could see right down to the bottom, and there was definitely nothing there. There wasn't even any dust in which a trapdoor could be hiding – it was solid rock at the bottom."

"Then it looks like your swim might have been a waste of time," apologised Rolnikov.

"No problem," said Pelney. "I enjoyed it, really. But where do we go now?"

Rolnikov pointed to the other end of the plateau.

"This is just a guess, but I think if we go over there, and look under that waterfall, we'll find that part of the rock wall there will swing open if we apply enough force to it."

"Under the stream and beyond the rock!" said Ronus.

"Good work, Rolnikov!" Pelney was impressed, despite himself. Rolnikov so often made comments about leaving the thinking to Pelney that the squire sometimes forgot just how smart his boss could be when he put his mind to a problem.

Five minutes later, the three of them were standing in the entrance to the home of the grim thinker. The cave looked very dark and musty. There were cobwebs everywhere, and dust covered the floor. It was easy to believe no one had been there for 4,000 years.

"Shall we go in?" said Pelney.

"Maybe I should wait outside," suggested Ronus. "Just in case the grim thinker is in a bad mood."

"Oh, don't worry about him," said Pelney. "In all likelihood all that's left of him will be a pile of old bones and, if we're lucky, instructions on how to do the impossible and free some people we don't know from a place which we don't know!"

"I'm not so sure," said Rolnikov. "I think there's a chance he might be waiting for us. Follow me."

The mad knight led the way into the cave. The other two followed, more warily, but at the same time not keen to get separated from the toughest of the group. Rolnikov could just about see, once his eyes had adjusted, but he was going to ask Pelney to light a torch anyway, just so no one tripped over and set off any alarms or anything. Just as he turned to speak, though, lights flashed on, first directly above their heads, and then all the way down a long smooth corridor leading into the heart of the mountain. Only the area by the cave entrance was rough-hewn and cobwebbed; the corridor beyond was spotlessly clean.

The three explorers exchanged a series of glances, but by mutual and silent decision agreed to continue: this did not really change anything. They set off down the tunnel. No end to it was currently in sight – though cylindrical, the tunnel was perfectly straight, and came to a vanishing point far off in the distance. It angled slightly downward, not so much that they were in danger of slipping down, but enough so that if they began to forward roll down it they'd soon pick up a breakneck speed.

"This is incredible!" said the boy, a little too loudly. His voice echoed down the tunnel, growing more distorted as it went, eventually becoming nothing more than an incoherent moan.

"Wow!" said Pelney, very quietly – in his time with Rolnikov he had got used to sneaking around places, so he was an old hand at this kind of thing.

It seemed to be taking a while to get anywhere, and the mad knight of Uttar Pradesh was only too

aware that time might well be of the essence for the captives of the tin can brains. "Let's run," he said to his companions, and so they did, Rolnikov leading the way. At first Pelney lagged behind, as the boy kept pace at Rolnikov's heels, but underneath the chubbiness, Pelney had the stamina that Ronus lacked, and overtook him, though both were by that point lagging some way behind Rolnikov, who, after almost ten minutes of running at his best speed and finding no change in the tunnel (other than that he could no longer look back and see the cave entrance), finally found himself with a destination in sight.

He stepped up the pace. The others might fall behind, but there did not seem to be any danger, and they would catch up eventually. In the meantime, time might well be of the essence. After another five minutes of running, he was there, standing at a windowless metal door, upon which was mounted a gigantic metal wheel as wide as the corridor itself. Trying the obvious route first, Rolnikov tried pushing the door. Nothing happened. He shrugged; the door might well have been left open by the last person to go through it. Looking more closely at the wheel, he saw that cogs at its centre bit into holes in a massive locking bar that was obviously holding the door shut. He put his impressive weight into pushing on one of the spokes of the wheel. It gave a little, then a little more. Pelney and Ronus were still some way up the corridor, so Rolnikov took a deep breath and tried again. This time it seemed looser, and he was able to turn the wheel a full quarter of a turn. Standing back up straight and shifting his grip, he pushed again, then again, and again, and one by one the teeth of the cogs pushed their way through the notches in the locking bar, before, eventually, the bar was completely clear and the door swung open.

Rolnikov took a moment to wipe the sweat from his forehead, just as the other two finally arrived, out of breath and twice as sweaty as he was.

"Well," panted Pelney, "what are you waiting for? Let's go inside!"

"Hold on," said Rolnikov, stopping the others from getting by. "This sanctum has been undisturbed for 4,000 years. We can't just barge in like riotous children. Gather yourselves together, and make sure you are ready to meet the grim thinker with all due decorum and deference."

"Sorry," said Pelney. "I just got over-excited, as usual."

They stepped through the door, into the inner sanctum of the thinker, and there he was, right in front of them, suspended in mid-air, in the literal centre of the spherical chamber. They stood on a

small walkway that went right round the circumference of the room. A small flight of steps ran down to computer equipment at the bottom of the sphere, another flight went up to meet a transparent bubble, in which sat the thinker, in the very pose in which Pelney had imagined him: his thin legs crossed beneath him and his scrawny arms crossed over his flat stomach, wearing nothing but a wrap of white cotton around his loins. He didn't move a muscle as they came in, though a length of his long white beard, which fell from his chin over his crossed legs, and through a hole in the bubble, right down to the bottom of the room, where it curled like an albino snake among the computer equipment, was swaying in the breeze from the door.

Ronus began to move along the walkway to see the thinker from a different angle, but there was still no reaction. Pelney tried waving, without success,

then called out, "Hello there, thinker!" For his efforts, he received nothing but a clout on the back of the head from an annoyed Rolnikov.

"Perhaps you recall what I said about decorum?"

"Oh, what does it matter?" said Pelney, moving out of range. "He's dead to the world, anyway. Probably just a statue or a hologram."

"Think so, eh?" replied Rolnikov, quickly darting forward and clipping Pelney on the back of the head again before he had a chance to react. "Don't you recall what Gorto said? Between two minutes?"

"I thought that was just primitive gobbledegook," said Pelney in surprise. "I never realised it could actually mean what it said!"

"Well," said Rolnikov, "I think it does. I think that the grim thinker has been in some kind of suspended animation for the last 4,000 years! And we must wake him!"

A
SILVER
AGE BOOKS
PRESENTATION

The Cosmic Butterfly

The three of them spent a little while poking their noses in and amongst all the bewilderingly advanced technology that filled the sphere of the grim thinker, hoping to discover a way to wake him from his ancient sleep. His beard made getting about in the lower level quite difficult, and there was some discussion as to whether it should be removed. In the end, despite the protests of the other two, whose weaker physiques made it harder for them to press through the piles of silver hair, Rolnikov decided not to. For all he knew, the grim thinker might well have gone into suspended animation for precisely the purpose of growing an exceptionally long beard! The others laughed, although they had to admit it must have been difficult to design a suspended animation system that *would* let the beard continue to grow while the man remained the same age, and more than that: actually untouched by time, living between two minutes.

Eventually, though, Rolnikov came to the conclusion that there was no immediately obvious way of waking the grim thinker. The mad knight was one of the most intellectually advanced men on all of Melrune, but Melrune was not the most advanced planet in the universe, and this technology was quite beyond him. For one thing, there were no buttons to press, no switches to pull, no visible way at all of interacting with the machinery. He was baffled.

"Any ideas?" he asked Pelney.

"We tried shouting, didn't we?"

"Yes, you tried shouting, buffoon." Luckily for Pelney, there was a sea of crispy white hair between him and the mad knight. "What about you?" asked Rolnikov, turning in desperation to Ronus. The boy looked thoughtful. "What do you think we should do?"

"Well," said the boy, putting a finger to his chin, "when I was a little kid, I used to wake my dad by pulling his beard."

"Genius," said Rolnikov in disgust. "They raise real geniuses in Monkey-Monkey, don't they?" He sat down to think.

Pelney did not think it was that bad an idea. It was worth a try, anyway. They had disturbed the beard a little, of course, when wading through it, but all three had been careful not to deliver any sharp tugs to the grim thinker's chin. The breeze from the entrance,

too, had made it swing back and forth slightly, but again without effect.

"It's not so dumb," said the squire. "I'm going to give it a try, Rolnikov."

Rolnikov looked at him sourly. "Go ahead, Pelney. Show the boy how *full-grown* idiots behave."

Pelney shrugged, and Rolnikov went back to his thoughts, which by this time were principally concerned with the effect of the failure of the mission upon his relationship with the orbiting princess. Would she care for a man who had failed at the last hurdle? And if the universe really did depend upon his success, would it matter anyway? This was perhaps the major flaw in the mad knight's character. His dark and brooding nature sometimes got the better of him, leading him into bleakness and defeatism, especially at times like this, when the enemy was ineffable, diffuse, and impossible to attack with a sword. In the midst of a fight, his anguish would disappear, sword stroke would follow head-butt, and problems were resolved by the twist of a knife. Left to brood, he easily fell into inaction – but then it was not as if he was blind to this fact. At some level, this must have partly accounted for the way he kept the otherwise irritating Pelney around. Despite what he always said, it couldn't be just about boots.

So Pelney pulled the beard. He grabbed hold of it with both hands, made sure the grip was firm, and gave it three hard, quick jerks.

The effect on the grim thinker was unusual: delayed, and taking place in slow motion. Long after the chubby squire had released the beard from his hands, the chin of the sleeping thinker was being pulled forward, millimetre by millimetre. His body rocked forward – Rolnikov was glad to note that the head had not simply come off at the neck – and after ten minutes or so it seemed that there was a hint of an opening eye. Ten minutes later it was clear; the grim thinker was slowly waking from his long, long sleep, and Pelney and Ronus were shaking hands in satisfaction, while Rolnikov was shaking his head in disappointment. Why did the universe conspire against him in this way?

After an hour, time in the grim thinker's bubble seemed to be back in synch with the rest of universe. As two of the trespassers gazed in awe, and the third

sat nursing his pride, the grim thinker staggered to his feet, still bleary-eyed and apparently unaware of his visitors. He got to the exit from the bubble, to the top of the flight of stairs, but stumbled and fell. Quick as thought, Rolnikov leaped to catch the falling thinker, but the man's beard, twisting through the hole in the base of the bubble and the steps, caught, and the wisest (so legend said) man in the galaxy hung in the air, suspended over their heads by his chin.

Fortunately, his neck did not break, and Pelney ran up to the walkway, and then up the staircase, to the bubble entrance, and cut the beard with his knife. Below, Rolnikov gently caught the thinker, and then laid him on a bed of his own erstwhile beard.

"Thinker!" said Rolnikov, insistently. "Are you all right?"

At first there was no response; the thinker's eyes seeming to stare almost sightlessly, but in reality simply waiting for the brain to wind up to the point where it would be able to make sense of the input it was receiving.

Pelney had a go. "O grim thinker, tell us, how does it feel to be in the future?"

The old man's eyes suddenly seemed to focus.

"Fancy that," said Rolnikov with a dry laugh. "The first thing he sees after 4,000 years is your face, Pelney. I bet he wishes he stayed asleep."

The grim thinker pushed himself up, and looked around at the bed of beard he lay on. "4,000 years, has it been? Well I never! And it feels just the same!" This last bit was addressed to Pelney.

"Did you expect to be asleep for so long?" asked Ronus, finding his voice, although it did crack a little at one point.

The grim thinker got to his feet and climbed the stairs to the walkway while answering. He was pretty steady on his feet now, but just to be sure Rolnikov shadowed him closely.

"Oh no, boy. But then I understand there's a saying: don't tug on the grim thinker's beard, is that it?" Behind the thinker, Rolnikov looked angrily at the boy, who shrugged in mock innocence. "That one was going around before I even went to sleep. So I knew no one would wake me frivolously. Once Ibis gave me the technology to put myself in suspended animation, I had no idea how long it would take for them to send someone to wake me. But then that was all I wanted, to take a nap for a while, just till it was time for me to help out. The universe didn't need me then. It took 4,000 years for it to need me again." He looked over his shoulder at Rolnikov, and then at Pelney. "That isn't so bad, is it? Some people the uni-

verse never needs."

"Ha ha," said Pelney, to Rolnikov's irritation.

Leading round the walkway, the grim thinker came to a point opposite the entrance to the tunnel. He waved his hand and a part of the wall faded away, to the surprise of those who had only just searched the room.

"Come in," said the grim thinker. "Have a cup of tea. And tell me how I can help you."

Rolnikov, Pelney and the boy followed him through the opening, which re-solidified behind them. They found themselves in a comfortable and spacious lounge, a small food preparation area off to one side, sofas for sitting on in the centre, and shadowed doorways leading off here and there.

"It's amazing," said Pelney, "that all of this lasted for 4,000 years."

"It didn't," replied the grim thinker, pouring some tea for each of them. They went and sat on the sofas. The grim thinker took great pleasure in stretching every bit of his body as far as he could in every direction. "None of this existed until you opened the cave entrance – none of it, that is, apart from the spherical room in which you found me, which was built by Ibis on my behalf all those centuries ago. The second you opened the cave door, billions of magnificent nanorobots sprang into action, creating the tunnel that led you down to me, constructing this entire suite of rooms, turning the lights on, and even boiling the kettle." He sipped his drink. "I told them, you see, that I'd like a cup of tea with my wake-up call."

"Will you go back to sleep?" asked young Ronus.

"When you're done with me, yes, I'll go back to thinking – not sleeping, thinking, but thinking very, very slowly – there are problems that can't be solved any other way. Now, to business, what do you want from me?"

Rolnikov was the one to answer. "We have a message from Ibis. They want you to free three people, if they are still alive – Milon the Assassin, Professor Quigg and Detective Jim Grimmatt, all of whom are in the clutches of the tin can brains. I do not know how you can help, but—"

The grim thinker cut him off. "I can help. Don't worry about that. That's why they sent you to me, even after all these years."

"How?" asked Pelney, leaning forward in excitement. "You don't even know where they are. They could be virtually anywhere in the universe!"

"I have a few tricks up my sleeve," replied the thinker. "Let's finish our tea before getting onto that. And do you want anything to eat?"

Since Pelney and Ronus started immediately to salivate like Pavlovian dogs, Rolnikov said he wouldn't mind. The grim thinker was obviously keen to eat something too, now that a few sips of tea had settled his stomach, and he rushed off back to the food preparation area, leaping over one of the sofas in his haste to get there.

Soon they were all having an excellent meal that thrilled even the overused taste buds of Pelney, and which to Ronus seemed the feast of a king. The grim thinker, clearly no ascetic, tucked in as heartily as any of them. Before ten minutes were up, his tray was clear, and he hurried the others into finishing off theirs. He got them all to their feet, and led them off to one of the shadowed doorways.

The light switched on as they entered. It was a simple, bare and small room, with only one interesting feature: a stone pillar, upon which rested a glass jar, within which was a butterfly. Rolnikov leaned forward to take a better look at the insect. It was not, however, the most lovely butterfly he had ever seen – its wings were not particularly brightly-coloured, and the pattern was positively drab.

"Here we are!" exclaimed the grim thinker. "This butterfly was something I earned a long, long time ago. Deconstructed and stored in the memory of the nanorobots all these long centuries, it now stands ready to help solve your little problem." He took the lid off the jar, then turned to Rolnikov. "What did you want, again?"

The mad knight looked at the old man queerly, but repeated the problem. "We would like Milon the Assassin, Professor Quigg and Detective Jim Grimmett to be freed from the grasp of the tin can brains."

"Fine," said the thinker. The others stared at him, but he directed their attention to the butterfly as it beat its wings a single time. The grim thinker smiled, and put the lid of the jar back on. "It can only do that once in a millennia, so I hope that was worth it."

"What?" demanded Rolnikov. "How will that free anyone?"

"Don't get testy," the old man said. "Listen, have you ever heard the idea that the beating of a butterfly's wings on one side of the world can cause a hurricane on the other?"

Rolnikov admitted that he had, although Pelney and Ronus were stumped.

"This is the cosmic butterfly, created thousands of years ago by intelligences long since departed from the universe to control events at every level of reality. Its mastery of cause and effect is absolute, so well-defined that a single beat of its wings can make

virtually anything happen anywhere in the universe. Your friends will be freed."

"Wow," said Pelney. "That's pretty cool."

"Thank you," said the grim thinker. "Now, I think you should leave. I've been thinking something over for the last 2,314 years and I really think I'm on the verge of a breakthrough. Make sure you go quickly – I wouldn't want the tunnel to be deconstructed by the nanorobots while you were still within!"

He led the way back into the spherical room, and behind them they could already see the lounge area dissolving as billions of the invisible beings swarmed over it, packing it away all neat and tidy, ready for the next visitors to come a-tugging on the grim thinker's beard.

The grim thinker climbed back into his bubble, and waved goodbye to Rolnikov, Pelney and Ronus, who waved back and then began the long trudge up the tunnel.

So that was it, thought Pelney. The mission was complete, and, to the extent that they could tell, successful. Hopefully this would leave the orbiting princess and Rolnikov happy enough to spend a bit of time together. Meanwhile, he could get on with cleaning the mad knight's boots, which were covered in long, white strands of hair.

Imagine that, thought Pelney, the mission done, and Rolnikov never even had to use his special power!

* * * * *

When the butterfly beat its wings, ever so gently and slowly, a small bit of cobweb from the cave entrance; a piece that had travelled down most of the tunnel stuck to Ronus's backpack, before being knocked off him in the lounge area when the thinker leapt over the sofa, and had then been blown about in the air until it floated into the butterfly's room; that piece of cobweb, which had been dropping into the glass jar, was reversed in its direction by the breeze from the butterfly's wings. So thin and light that it was imperceptible, the web flew back up out of the jar and settled upon Pelney's cheek.

Back out of the mountain plateau, panting with breath after having had to outrun the nanorobots' destruction of the long tunnel back to the surface, Pelney wiped the back of his hand across his face, unwittingly dragging the cobweb across his nostrils. It tickled him and he sneezed, extravagantly.

With nothing else to do while the others caught their breath, Rolnikov had been sharpening his sword with a small grinding stone. When Pelney sneezed, it

made Rolnikov drag the grinding stone across the back of the hand holding the sword. The mad knight let out a massive roar, as much from annoyance at Pelney as from the pain.

Further up the mountain, an accumulation of winter snow, loosened by the warmer summer weather, shook to the echo and begin to plummet down the mountain. Fortunately for Rolnikov, Pelney and Ronus, it missed their position, though they were able to watch as it gathered speed, snow and debris as it continued on its destructive route. Rolnikov glared at Pelney, who shrugged and ate a sandwich.

In the village of Monkey-Monkey, a man on the look-out for the return of the adventurers saw the avalanche begin its descent, and quickly raised the alarm. Everyone within reach rushed to the common area, and at the order of the headman emergency procedures were followed, and so the town of Monkey-Monkey lifted off, a powerful force-field – Melrune was not a very advanced planet, but it goes without saying that every village had at least the basic amenities – slicing off the little chunk of the mountainside upon which the huts sat and trapping a bubble of atmosphere for the people to breath.

The sudden emergency had left Garto a little shaken, though – especially as he thought it might be the result of tugging on the grim thinker's beard, so to speak, and because he had every reason to think his son might have come a cropper – and he was little too forceful in manipulating the controls of the emergency anti-gravity apparatus. The village flew up into space.

A passing asteroid, which had been on its way to incinerate itself in the uppermost reaches of the atmosphere of Melrune, was knocked off course when it was struck like a billiard ball by the shooting

village of Monkey-Monkey. The asteroid shot off into space, while Garto tried to guide Monkey-Monkey back down to the surface.

Amazingly, as luck would have it, literally at that very moment a wormhole, one which was due to exist for no more than a handful of seconds, came into being in the route of the asteroid, which flew down it, before emerging in a different galaxy altogether.

The last of the tin can brains to have left the home planet were at that point on a ship which was preparing to dock – preparing to dock with a craft so terrible that it threatened the whole future of the universe. On board the ship were the two prisoners, Milon the Assassin and Detective Jim Grimmett, held fast by robotic bands, their bodily functions – the tin can brains had learnt their lesson! – being dealt with by painfully inserted catheters. A tin can guard was nearby, its sensors straining to detect any hint that the prisoners were trying to escape their bonds.

The asteroid hit the ship, just as it let down its shields to dock, but in the millisecond before the shields of the dark matter destroyer reached out to protect it. The rear of the ship exploded, and shock waves ran through the whole of the structure. The guard watching over Milon and Grimmett, not having a firm grip on anything, was flung across the room and it smashed into a hundred pieces when it hit the wall. The bonds that held the two Ibis agents exploded, leaving them free, though with rather sore wrists. Removing the catheters left them even sorer elsewhere.

In another part of the explosion-wracked ship, a man banged his head against a doorway, and remembered that people had once called him Professor Samson Quigg.

Better Living Through Cannibilisation

This time, rather than leaving a purely mechanical guard-droid to watch the prisoners, the enemy had left a fully-fledged tin can brain, and as Milon and Grimmatt removed themselves from their bonds, they couldn't help noticing the brain itself, lying in the shattered remains of its body, rudimentary tentacles flailing about for the connections which had been destroyed.

"Do you think it can still see us?" asked Grimmatt.

Milon the Assassin shook his head. As ever, he was immaculately dressed, the weeks in captivity having done nothing to wrinkle his black suit or to knock his carefully lacquered eyebrows, which extended two and a half centimetres (he measured it each morning, or at least each morning that he did not spend being tortured by his enemies) beyond the sides of his head, out of place. His bald head shone as if freshly polished, and the smartly cropped strip of black hair that ran around the base of his skull was as tidy as it had been when he had first left the house, all that time ago, before his unwitting destruction of half of Golgokkamok.

Thinking of that reminded Milon of his small friend and assistant, Zaaloon the Robotoface, who had after all been responsible for the cataclysm. Now that he was free, he would have to try and make contact.

He supposed he'd better pay some attention to his "rescuer". They had not spoken much over the last few weeks, largely because of the danger of being overheard by the tin can brains. Milon did not want to give away how much he knew of their plans, and he did not want Grimmatt to give away how much Ibis knew or did not know – the very piece of information for which he assumed they had been tortured every day. There had never been any danger of Milon succumbing to the torture – he was too much of an egoist; if he had submitted to the demands of the tin can brains, the automatic Ibis hypnotic programming would have kicked in, erasing his personality – rather the universe die than that, he thought.

"Doubt it," he replied. "They didn't evolve into this. They were human, most say, but packed it in." He walked over and stamped on the brain. "Never

know, though, it might have raised the alarm." Grimmatt gawped.

"It was defenceless! That was really cruel."

Milon looked at him with a raised eyebrow – with eyebrows like his this was a very striking expression. "They don't call me Milon the Assassin because I like fluffy bunnies."

"Even so," said Grimmatt, "I thought you were on the side of the angels!"

"Sorry to disappoint you," replied Milon. He began to root around in the innards of the tin can body, and managed to put the creature's blaster back together, and jerry-rig a power source for it. He began to head off. "This baby should help us get out of here." He saw that Grimmatt was still holding back, a frown on his face. "Listen," said Milon, realising that a little tact was necessary, especially given that this guy had not been an Ibis agent for very long; that this was his first mission in fact; not to mention his first time in space and all the rest. He had to make some allowances. "Within twenty minutes that brain would have been back in a new tin can body blasting away at us as we tried to make our escape. Would you have shot it then?"

Grimmatt had to admit that he would have done.

"Well, come on then, don't be so queasy."

"You're right," said Grimmatt. "It just looked pretty disgusting, the way the brain gave way under your boot and everything."

Milon punched his shoulder. "Chin up, old boy. There's no time left to lose." He ran off down a corridor, and Grimmatt followed him.

As they made their way through the ruined ship, dodging sudden explosions from left and right, zipping as quickly as they could past disabled tin cans and murder-droids, blasting the occasional one who looked like it might be a threat, Milon could not help reflecting on how he had got into this situation. Naturally, sometimes getting captured by the enemy was a sure-fire way to get taken to their most secret bases and lairs – although he could not be sure, he thought it pretty likely that this had happened in the present case – but more often than not it was a one-way route to sudden death, or, worse, torture and a

long, *lingering* death. He thought he had been pretty unlucky back there on the planet of the tin can brains. It had not been his fault that Zaaldoon had left the mega-wave on, after all, so he was not really responsible for the damage done to Golgokkamok, or for the subsequent vow of Nanotus the giant to pursue him to his death. He had not even had time to eat the eggs Zaaldoon had made in the mega-wave that fateful morning!

The mission had been going pretty well till the giant showed up and spoiled things. As the tin can brains had hunted him all over the galaxies he had slowly gathered information on them, and made his way to their home planet, where he had spent weeks hiding under the surface of the planet, tunnelling here and there, with Zaaldoon's help, and leaving listening devices secreted in each of the major war rooms of the metallic maniacs. Although the tin can brains were close-mouthed even with each other, Milon had soon worked out that the major thrust of their plan was the destruction of the universe, and shortly after that, even as one by one the audio pickups went silent, as the tin can brains abandoned their home planet, he had discovered the means by which they intended to implement that plan. That, of course, was when the psychotic Nanotus the Giant had shown up, ripping up everything in sight in his attempt to get at Milon. The tin can brains, alerted by the presence of the new intruder to the presence of the first, had soon come close to capturing both. At the last, Milon had shared a little of what he had learnt with the giant, had managed to get through the rage that had been dominating his will, and had seen real repentance in the giant's eyes as he used the dimensional opener, on his way, as Milon had then hoped, and as he now learnt from Grimmiett in a quickly whispered conversation while they fled down the corridors had actually been the case, to get word to Mrs Challenger. Milon was pleased that the information-carrying microbes had worked so well.

"We've been everywhere," said Milon, after twenty minutes of running around, "and there's no sign of any escape pods on this ship. The tin can brains may well just rely on their metal casings to protect them out in space if necessary."

"So what do we do?"

"I have an idea, but it is slightly mental."

Grimmiett didn't seem to mind. "If the alternative is falling back into the hands of the tin can brains, mental sounds good to me. Do you mean some kind of astral projection?"

Milon laughed, the short cynical laugh which was the closest he ever came to genuine good humour.

"Not that kind of mental – I mean the crazy sort of mental."

"Whatever gets us out of here, Milon!" said Grimmiett with feeling. "What's the plan?"

Milon led him off back in the direction they had just come from. They soon reached the tin can brain which he had most recently finished off. It was still pretty much in one piece, the assassin having held the blaster to its head and boiled its brain on a low power setting. Grimmiett had not laughed when Milon asked if he was hungry.

The assassin took firm hold of one of the tin can arms and began to drag it down the corridor.

"Again I ask," said Grimmiett in a slightly exasperated tone, "what is the plan?" After all his years in the force it was rather galling to him to be treated like a raw recruit, even though he recognised the authority of the other man, and was willing to be guided by his superior knowledge of the situation they were in.

"I take back what I said before," replied Milon, indicating that Grimmiett should take one of the other metal arms. "Upon further reflection I have come to the conclusion that my plan is actually one that only such a refined master of the secret agent arts as myself could have come up with." Now it was Grimmiett's turn to raise an eyebrow, though he did grab an arm and start pulling. Soon they reached a second dead tin can. "The tin can brains don't have escape pods, do they? We think it's because they can go into space, don't we? So we'll slice a few of them up to create our own spacecraft. What do you think?"

Grimmiett thought about it – the plan didn't seem so stupid, especially when the ship they were already in seemed to be on the point of breaking apart, and the only other option was to head into even greater danger – whatever the ship had been docking with when the explosion had occurred. He knew Milon had an idea what it was, but that he did not want to say – there was always the possibility that their whole escape had been staged for precisely the purpose of finally getting him to talk. Perhaps that was why he had taken such sadistic pleasure in finishing off the wounded brains, thought Grimmiett. It was just in case they thought they were playing him for a fool. He resolved not to play any pranks on Milon at the Ibis office party.

"I suppose it is worth a try," he said out loud to Milon. "Although in my experience their bodies haven't been that tough – I've blasted holes in a few with bullets. Plus, back in prison on their planet, Quigg and I managed to short one out by throwing, erm, liquid over it."

Milon thought about what Grimmiett had said – he

did respect the detective from Earth, even if, in his opinion, he could do with being a little more ruthless. After all, rookie that he was, he'd made it this far.

"You probably caught it by surprise: I imagine they wouldn't be completely airtight when they go about their normal day-to-day evil business. But shot into space, or even going underwater, they would probably clam up to protect the brain within the casing. As for the bullets – it's a good point. We don't want to get out of here only to be blasted by the first micro-meteorite that shoots by. I'll double up on the thickness of the shell, and see if I can put together some kind of rudimentary shield."

"Great," said Grimm. "How can I help?"

They chose a suitable place in which to do their butchering. It was either a storage area for shipped goods or soldiers, or a hangar of some kind, although it was at present empty, apart from the two escapees and their raw materials. At the far end was a huge bulkhead door which, although it was sealed tightly shut, with no visible means of opening it, Milton was pretty sure would give way to space if blasted hard enough. At the other end of the hangar, the two of them began to pull apart the tin can bodies, threw the brains off to one side, and turned up the power on the blaster Milton had scavenged in order to use it as a welding torch. The assassin took out his sunglasses – "I've looked into the hearts of suns with these on," he told Grimm proudly – and got to work welding the body parts together, while the detective set off to drag extra bodies back to the work area.

It was not long before Milton, working at a frantic speed, and onto his fourth blaster, had put together a pretty decent outer casing for their ship. They had still not been discovered by any active, fully functioning tin can brains. Milton speculated that the explosion must have damaged some central electronic nervous system shared by the robot bodies on the ship – probably something that saved a lot of wear and tear on their internal processing equipment, but which in this case, by a million to one chance, had left them wide open to a devastating blow.

"What do you think it was?" Milton asked Grimm, who for a while had been sitting with his back to the assassin as the welding continued, to protect his eyes. He had already gathered enough raw materials for their miniature ship and was using a sliver of metal to work the panels of the tin can bodies apart, so that they were ready for Milton to work on.

"I don't know," said Grimm, surprised to be asked. "Did they crash instead of docking?"

"It seems possible," replied Milton, speaking

loudly to make himself heard over the noise of the blaster as it seared together segments of the tin cans to create airtight joints. "That would explain why tin cans haven't poured into the ship from over there."

Grimm began to ask where that was, but Milton shushed him.

"But the original explosion was at the back of the ship. It could have been some ship attacking, but if it was, it was quickly destroyed because there were no follow-up blasts. It could have been a long-range missile. I suppose it might conceivably have been my pal Zaaldon, although I doubt he would have the sense to do anything quite so effective. It seems most likely that it was an asteroid smashing into the ship."

"That was a lucky break," said Grimm.

"Yes," said Milton, pursing his lips. "It was, wasn't it?"

"So that's why you're so suspicious?"

"You got it," the assassin called back. "But you never know, so we have to take the chance if it's there. If we get to kill a few tin can brains along the way, the afternoon won't have been a total failure!" He laughed, switched off the blaster, and got to his feet to admire his handiwork. "And who knows, maybe we have just been lucky – and it would be stupid to pass up the chance of escape."

The shell he had created was a simple cylinder, with just enough room inside for two people to sit fairly comfortably. One panel had not yet been welded into place, leaving room for them to climb inside. In effect, it looked just like a giant tin can brain's torso – on many of the recycled bodies they had left the blasters intact, with the power packs and controls inside the ship – these formed a belt around the centre of the cylinder, ready to blast it in whichever direction was necessary.

"Okay," said Milton. "Get inside."

Grimm excitedly climbed into the ship, taking with him the welding blaster Milton had set down. Inside he couldn't see a thing – he had faith that Milton had given some thought to the method they would use for navigating the ship.

Outside, the assassin was gathering together all the other blasters that were at hand, both the ones for which he had expended the power packs, plus half a dozen which he had saved for this very purpose. (In all, fully seventeen tin can brains had given up their bodies for this project.) Piling them up by the bulkhead door, Milton began to flick each of those still with power to the highest power setting. Each had been rigged to blow once a critical level was attained, and the ones without power he had added to the pile just in case they had any combustible bits

that might add that little something to the explosion.

He began to head back to the ship. A few metres away he saw Grimmitt peering out of the ship at him, and gave him a wave. But then, suddenly, he was stopped in his tracks by a guttural shout from off to one side, from an entrance that led off to a part of the ship they had not explored.

“Stop there!” called the voice.

Some part of Milon’s brain, the part not considering the possible outcomes of the hundreds of different combat opportunities open to him at this point, noted that the voice was in English. However, he did not recognise the helmeted figure that now stumbled from the shadows, gun in hand and pointed firmly at the assassin’s chest. That was the first thing Milon noticed about him. The second was his unusually enlarged cranium, and the strange, tightly sealed opening that sat in the middle of the huge forehead, almost as if a third, outsized eye was there in hiding. The last thing Milon noticed, before leaping for the opening in the ship, was the man’s peculiar clothes, made of a sort of hard, black metallic material. It looks pretty cool, thought the assassin, even as a blast from the man’s gun scalded his heel, though it does make him look a bit like a tin can brain on legs. As Grimmitt held up the single remaining piece of the shell for him to weld into place, Milon decided to have a word with his tailor.

“Who was that?” asked the detective, whose field of vision had been restricted to seeing Milon and his reaction to the attacker. He had not recognised the voice.

“I’ve no idea,” said Milon, dropping the blaster and moving to take hold of two of the blaster controls that ringed the inside of the cylinder. Unfortunately there had not been time to rig a centralised control panel, so each of them would have to be switched on by hand. Grimmitt grabbed two others, ready to go on Milon’s mark. Of course, if the interloper outside managed to prevent the explosion, there would be no point in switching them on at all – there was no way they would be powerful enough to get the makeshift spacecraft moving if gravity and atmosphere kept their hold on the hangar bay.

There were several tense moments, and then they heard an explosion which shook their little craft, but didn’t appear to damage it – although the test was still to come.

“One, two, three, ...” counted Milon, but then they were both thrown flat on their backs as the little ship was sucked out into the darkness of space, along with all the other contents of the hangar: chunks of the blasted bulkhead door, the atmosphere, leftover bits and pieces of tin can bodies... Milon wondered if the guy who had attacked them had made it out before the explosion, but he didn’t think about it long – he didn’t really care.

“The plan is go!” said Milon. The two of them resumed their places. “One, two, three, go!” Each of them switched on two of the blasters, and they felt the pull on their bodies as the cylinder began to pick up speed. Milon hoped that they were not just heading straight back whence they had come.

Smouldering Coals

As the blasters pushed the ship into the inky blackness of space, Milon and Grimmitt held their breath for a few moments. But there was no collision, and both let out a deep sigh. They had successfully managed to pull away from the wrecked ship of the tin can brains.

“Looks like we made it!” cried the detective.

“This far, at least,” said Milon, trying his best to contain the ebullience that he, too, felt. “I guess it wasn’t such a crazy plan after all.”

“There is one thing,” said Grimmitt. “How are we going to navigate when we can’t see a thing? I mean,

I’m sure you have it all worked out and everything...” He trailed off.

“Don’t worry,” said Milon, clapping him on the shoulder. “I think our eyes and ears are out there, somewhere. He drew Grimmitt’s attention to what looked like a watch on his wrist. Before he could continue the explanation, Grimmitt had leapt in.

“What a fancy timepiece!” he said with enthusiasm, looking at the small display, with flashing numbers and symbols which meant nothing to him. “Is it able to tell us where we are?”

“Actually, no,” replied Milon, “although it would,

coincidentally, have been able to if I had had the opportunity to download the appropriate galactic data to its memory banks. Unfortunately I had no way of knowing where this quest would end up taking me, so at the moment it is still full of information about the galaxy in which Golgokkamok and Earth are located."

"Ah," said Grimmatt, disappointed.

"However," said Milon, with a vocal flourish, "it will allow me to communicate with my great friend, Zaaloon the Robotoface, who has hopefully been following at a safe distance, ever since my capture by the tin can brains! Let's see if he's out there!"

Milon started to fiddle with his watch. At first all Grimmatt could hear was the hazy buzz of empty space, and Milon's voice as he called into the void.

"Zaaloon," said the assassin, "Zaaloon, faithful friend, are you there?"

For a minute or two there was no reply, but Milon kept on trying. Then, when Grimmatt was all too ready to give up, and resign himself to a slow, blind death in the depths of space, a tinny voice piped up out of Milon's special spy watch.

"Hi boss, it's me, Zaaloon! I'm here!"

"That's great!" shouted Milon, the suddenness of the noise making Grimmatt jump a little – just enough to make him bang his head a bit on the roof of their cylindrical ship. "Can you see us? Where are you?"

"Yes, sir, Zaaloon is here! Ready to help!"

"I know you are, Zaaloon," replied Milon with patience. He was used to dealing with his over-exuberant robotic pal. "Where are you?"

"I'm stuck to the ship of the tin can brains, Milon. I glued myself to it back on their home planet. I knew if I waited long enough you'd get out. Are you in that cylinder over there? The one that's about to hit a slowly-spinning piece of jagged wreckage?"

Milon and Grimmatt looked at one another in alarm. "That would be us," said the assassin hastily. "Could you scoot over here and give us directions? Just perch on the bonnet, and lead us to safety?"

"No problem, Milon," said the voice. "In the meantime, turn left."

Grimmatt switched off the blasters on his side for a few seconds, then switched them back on again. Confirmation of the operation's success came over Milon's watch. A few seconds later there was a clunk on the nose of the cylinder.

"Is that you?" asked Milon.

"It is, sir!"

"Great," said the assassin. "Now you can give us directions to get us out of here. First, just tell me, is

it finished?"

"Is what finished?" asked Grimmatt, but Milon shushed him.

The voice took a moment or two to speak. "It certainly seems to be, boss." Milon shook his head in sadness.

"Is it what we thought it was?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so, boss. It stretches as far as the eye can see, an ocean of smouldering coals covered in a spider's-web of tin can construction. They're still building stuff, but that just looks like the icing on the cake. It looks ready to set off any time."

"Cack," said Milon.

"Tell me what it is!" demanded Grimmatt. "What could possibly be so dangerous that it could destroy the whole universe? What was it that started this whole insane quest? That it was worth the lives of Nanotus and Quigg to stop?"

Milon was shocked. "Nanotus is dead?"

"Er, sorry, yes," said Grimmatt rather sheepishly. He would not have wanted to break the news this way. He had just forgotten to tell Milon, in all the rush and hurry. "At least I think so. He was left in the travelling dimension, surrounded by vicious void-wraiths."

Milon shrugged, locking the image away in a part of his mind which he did not visit very often. "No matter. He had been trying to kill me for months, anyway, when you think about it. Okay, we've got to get going now, before the tin can brains notice we've escaped. Zaaloon, which way? Anything nearby?"

"We passed one solar system on the way in, and I remember seeing a planet there that looked pretty decent. We should be able to reach it in a few hours. I don't know what it'll be like when we get there, though. The dark matter destroyer is messing all nearby solar systems up bad."

"We'll have to take that chance," said Milon. "We need to land somewhere, take stock, and see if we can contact Mrs Challenger and Ibis somehow."

Zaaloon told them which blasters to switch on, and they were on their way, but Grimmatt hadn't forgotten his questions, and once the course was set, he went through them once again. Before talking, Milon broke radio contact with Zaaloon, just in case the tin can brains were listening in. He had not yet discounted the possibility that the whole escape might be a plot to find out how much Ibis knew. But though Milon was a natural cynic and pessimist, he knew from experience that the harder he pulled on the leash, the better the chance that the captors would drop it.

"If you need us for anything," he said to the robot-

oface, before breaking contact, “just knock.”

Then he turned to Detective Grimmett.

“Basically, it’s this. The tin can brains have built something they call the dark matter destroyer. You don’t know what dark matter is, do you?” Grimmett shook his head. “The mass of the universe cannot be explained by the number of visible objects in it. At some point in the future, scientists on your world will surmise, and be at least partly correct, that this means there must be matter in the universe which we cannot see – dark matter. Highly dense stuff, it’s the matter that never got it together in time to make stars. There are patches of it out in space, in between the galaxies, at the edge of the universe, at the middle.”

“Have the tin can brains built something that can destroy it?”

“Oh no,” said Milon. “Although if they had it would not have been much worse. *They’ve built a spaceship out of it!* Can you imagine what that means? They have picked up a chunk of some of the heaviest stuff in the universe, reignited it somehow, kept it ticking over, and turned it into a big ship which can go wherever it pleases – any obstacle in its path, any planet, any star, will become a smear on the forward bow.”

“My God!” exclaimed Grimmett.

“It might as well be,” said Milon. “It’s the most powerful artificial object this universe has ever seen. It will plough through the galaxies, serving the colossal blood lust of the tin can brains. Nothing will stand against it.”

Grimmett was awe-struck. “And now it’s operational.”

“We were brought on the last ship to leave the planet of the tin can brains. Apart from those left behind on already conquered worlds, every single tin can brain is here, now, ready to take on the galaxy.”

What can we do?” asked the detective, squeezing his nails into the palm of his hand.

“Just what I said before,” replied Milon, ever calm in a crisis. “We contact Mrs Challenger, see what she can do.”

They continued talking for a couple of hours, Grimmett telling Milon everything that had happened up to that point, Milon answering any questions the detective had.

Suddenly there was a bang on the nose of the cylinder. Milon quickly switched on his watch communicator. “Milon here!”

“We’ve got company, Milon!” said Zaaloon. “Tin can fighters!”

“Marvellous,” said Milon to Grimmett. “Tin can brains fitted out in special suits, with added



weaponry and propulsion capabilities. Shame we couldn’t have got a couple of those to power this ship! We could have been safe by now!” He turned back to the communicator. “Zaaloon, how far to the planet?”

“We’re almost there, but the brains are gaining on us, sir!”

“We’re going to full thrust, hang on out there!”

“Sure thing, sir!”

Milon and Grimmett both took hold of the controls of the blasters, and turned the whole lot to full power. It would burn the power sources out quickly, but there was no other option. They felt the pull against their bodies, and then there was an explosion, and an electronic shriek from Milon’s communicator – “I’m hit, Milon!” – and somehow Grimmett came to be sprawled on the floor, blood streaming from a wound to the head.

Milon flexed his fingers, said a quick prayer to the grim thinker, and took hold of as many of the blasters as he could. Landing, without eyes, ears or a co-pilot, and with a squadron of special tin can space fighters on his tail, would be hellishly difficult. But then he needed a challenge, the mission having been such a breeze up till now. He laughed bitterly, and gave it his best shot.

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Milon dragged Grimmett along, his hands locked under the unconscious man’s arms. It was difficult, the earth shifting beneath his very feet, in response to the gravitational pull of the dark matter destroyer, but

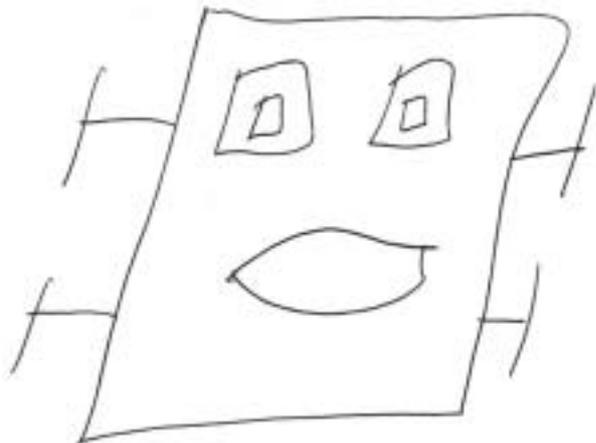
he struggled on. He thought that he had seen a cave halfway up the hill, and if he could get Grimmett there safely, they might have a chance.

There had been little he could do to hide the wreckage of their makeshift spaceship, though. Less than 500 metres away at the foot of the hill, he had not even been able to put out the flames that had engulfed it moments after he had got the detective out. There was a small chance, though – he had left the damaged Zaaldoon behind to clear up the mess as best he could. If the robotoface did not go on the blink again, maybe he would be able to cover the cylinder with earth before the tin can brains made their appearance in the purple sky above. Milon kept going. As long as there was even the slightest chance, even if that chance depended on the efforts of his half-baked robot pal, he would keep going. The universe, not for the first time, depended on him.

Every step seemed to take an eternity. Out in the open like this, he would be a sitting duck for the first enemy to discover him. Of course, he had thought about abandoning the Earthman, but that was not Milon's style, and without his style, Milon would just be another run-of-the-mill intergalactic secret agent assassin with a robotic chum, and god knows there were enough of those around already. Plus, there hadn't been time to dig a hole to put him in.

Milon reached the cave opening. He picked up a nearby rock and chucked it into the darkness. There being no response, he took the risk and plunged in and dropped the detective to the ground. If there were wild animals inside, Grimmett would have to take his chances. Better for Ibis, reflected Milon, in any case, that he be eaten by local fauna than be captured again by the tin can brains, given how much he now knew.

He spent a moment trying to make the detective comfortable – though grumbling and groaning,



Grimmett was still unconscious, or delirious. He did not have a temperature though, and the wound to his head was not serious. Milon quickly wiped it and tore a strip from his own shirt for a bandage. He reckoned that his fellow Ibis agent would come round soon enough. In the meantime, he had work to do.

He went to the cave opening to see how Zaaldoon was getting on, but the news was not good. The wiring in the robotoface had always been somewhat shaky, and the hit from the tin can guns had obviously done nothing to improve the situation. Zaaldoon was currently preparing food for a horde of expectant lizards that had gathered around him. One by one he doled out little insects grilled on the flames of the makeshift spaceship, to the glee of his little friends, who had doubtless been finding it harder to feed themselves in the changing conditions of their world. Milon clapped a hand to his head, just as the first streaks across the sky indicated the arrival of the tin can brains.

“Zaaldoon!” he called. “Get up here!”

The robotoface looked up, saluted, and tipped the partly-cooked contents of his grill over the lizards, who leapt into the air to try and snatch them from each other. One insect – Milon's eyesight was exceptionally good – which had obviously been only recently added to the grill made a brave attempt to flutter away, but was caught by a long, flicking tongue. Zaaldoon quickly flew up to the cave entrance.

He was a curious-looking kind of robot, having been designed to Milon's particular specifications. He looked a little like a microchip blown up to child-size proportions, and had three arms on each side of his stubby, squat body. He moved about by means of a small but powerful anti-gravity unit at his base. The whole of his front side was a big, stupid grinning face. Milon had a very testing life – you should not be surprised that he went out of his way to create comic relief for himself.

“How are things, chief? We were having a real shin-dig down there, but I brought you a doggy-bag!” He held out a toasted insect for Milon to try. It was thick and crispy, with a hairy, singed body, and cracked wingshells of hard chitin.

Milon took a bite. “Not bad,” he admitted. “Now let me have a look at you, Zaaldoon.” He turned the robotoface around and opened up his back. The damage was not extensive, but neither was it fixable. He would just have to try to keep his pal close by and under careful supervision.

“Okay, Zaaldoon,” he began, “this is what we're

going to do. Do you remember back on the planet of the tin can brains?" He stopped, because his robot pal had stopped paying attention, and was instead staring out of the cave entrance. Milon realised that it seemed to be getting very dark out there, and he pushed past Zaaloon to take a look.

From his vantage point he could see that the lushly covered ground everywhere was slowly rippling, like a tide on a world of half-frozen seas, and everywhere it was falling dark. He looked up at the sky, and saw the stars going out, one by one, as a huge black mass blotted out the sky. Here and there, lines of livid red

broke through the pitch blackness, shudders of heat running through the dark matter. Before long, all the stars were gone, and the red streaks ran uninterrupted from one horizon to the other across an expanse of solid darkness. Then, from one end of the sky to the other there began to fall, like tiny steel raindrops, drops of silver death, jetting down to search for Milon and Grimmett.

"Damn!" said Milon. "The tin can brains have found us! And they've brought the dark matter destroyer!"

Milon Does What Milon Does Best

This was the lay of the land: Milon stood at the entrance to a cave, half-way up a hill. At its bottom the hill lazed out into miles of overgrown vegetation, though a space had been cleared by a crashing cylindrical spaceship, now burning and the focus of the attention of a dozen tin can brains and their attendant murder-droids, some of which were on the ground, while others flew about it the air. All – Milon, cave, hill, vegetation, clearing, cylinder, and tin can brains – were on a planet of which I don't know the name – no one had ever lived there – but which was roughly Earth-sized, with a breathable, if somewhat stuffy, atmosphere. Not that Milon knew, not having seen the view on the way in, but there were no seas, the water on this planet being circulated through vast underground rivers, into which the long, long roots of certain, ancient plants descended. Animals and other plants were forced to live parasitically on those massive plants, which, seeing as he discovered them, we might as well call zaals, after Zaaloon, but all in all, it had been a happy little world, as they go. Things had been working out all right – right up to the point when the tin can brains chose a nearby spot in space for the construction of their dark matter destroyer. As the building blocks of the great ship were towed past, enormous tsunami would run through the underground routes of the rivers, ripping the roots of the zaals to shreds, and seriously damag-

ing the flow of water to the surface. That had been bad enough, but now the dark star destroyer had actually moved into this system, and its gravitational weight was putting an gigantic strain on the planet's integrity. One thing was already clear to Milon, looking at the visible tumult in the planet's crust: if the planet did not actually break into pieces and form a new asteroid belt, its orbit would be so badly affected that all life on this planet might well be destroyed within the year. And worst of all was the thought that unless he could extricate himself from this impossible situation, this planet would only be the first.

It looked tricky. He had no weapons. They outnumbered him six million to one (at a conservative estimate). And they were only looking for him for the sake of extra information. If, at some point, they could no longer be bothered, they would just stomp on the planet like an elephant steps on an ant.

On the other hand, he was Milon the Assassin. Killing was his business. For them, it was just a hobby, however enthusiastically they pursued it.

The first thing was to camouflage the cave entrance – if he had seen it from down there, it was only a matter of time before the tin cans did too. He reached up to grab hold of a tree branch that drooped overhead, and pulled it down, slowly, slowly, so that no one was alerted by the sudden movement, and tied

it, using its own rubbery twigs, to a spike of rock just below the entrance. Maybe it would help, maybe it would not. He would have to make sure the tin can brains were looking elsewhere before long.

He gave Zaaldoon strict instructions and got him started at the back of the cave, then continued to watch the tin can brains. He lay flat on his front, peering through the branches of the tree. Were it not for the cracks of red lightning that intermittently opened up the sky, and the lights emitted by the tin can brains themselves, Milon would no longer have been able to see a thing.

The tin can brains seemed to be dismantling the makeshift spaceship piece by piece, almost reverently, having put the fire out. I suppose it is made of the bodies of their comrades, thought Milon to himself. Or maybe they just want to recycle the bits... Then he did something of a double take – standing off to one side, partly hidden by some hanging purple fronds, so that Milon had not immediately noticed him, was a humanoid figure. Milon was sure that this newcomer had not been there when he left to speak with Zaaldoon – he must have been brought down from the dark matter destroyer to supervise the search, guessed Milon, and so it proved. The figure turned to look around, letting Milon get a good look at him – it was the guy from the hangar – and waved the tin can brains off in different directions. One zoomed up in Milon's direction, causing his alien heart to flutter like a hummingbird's wing, but it continued on past the cave at speed, obviously intending to start its search at the very peak of the hill. A handful of murder-droids and tin can brains stayed nearby, waiting for his instructions.

He was a strange-looking person, thought Milon. In most respects he looked reasonably normal, slightly overweight perhaps, and well into middle age, but still fairly normal, apart from that devilishly-tailored silver suit, but it was that head that would have made him stand out from a crowd in Piccadilly Circus – it was bizarrely distended, the forehead rising to a height twice that normally found among humans. What's more, there was that third eye in the centre of the enormous forehead! Literally to cap it off, he was wearing a funny green shell-like helmet. An odd fashion accessory for a servant of the tin can brains, thought Milon. But he knew immediately that this guy might well be his only chance to get off the planet safely, whoever he was.

He turned back to look at Grimmatt, who was still dazed, and only barely conscious.

"Hey, Grimmatt," he said. The detective swung his

head at the sound, but gave no sign of having understood. "I don't know if you can hear me, Grimmatt, but I'm going to go for a little stroll. The tin can brains are out there, but there's a guy that I might be able to take hostage. I don't have a gun to leave with you or anything, but just try to hang on in there. I'll be back soon."

He gave his fellow agent a slap on the arm, then went to the back of the cave to see how Zaaldoon was getting on. He had already dug a fair hole for starters.

"Good work," said Milon. "Are you ready to really get on with it?"

"Sure thing, sir," said Zaaldoon. "This hole goes right down to ground level, and a bit lower after I overshot." He started to tell Milon what he'd found out about the planet's ecological system, but Milon cut him off.

"Fascinating as it will be to hear about that later, Zaaldoon, we really must get on, before the tin can brains have a chance to discover our unconscious colleague."

Zaaldoon led the way, floating down the shaft he had dug, while Milon clambered down the series of handholds which Zaaldoon had been good enough to cut into the walls. There was danger – at one point the shifting of the ground in response to the presence in the solar system of the dark matter destroyer threatened to crush Milon, but for that few moments he dropped onto the shoulders of his robotic pal, who was just able to support him long enough to avoid the danger. Soon they were down at ground level.

"Which direction?" asked Zaaldoon, eager to get on with digging again.

Milon, relying on his memory of the big forehead man's location, set Zaaldoon to work again, now heading in an easterly direction, although he angled the tunnel downward a little, so that rather than emerging from the side of the hill, they would end up just beneath the target. This had been how they had managed to successfully spy on the tin can brains for so long on their own home planet – under Milon's direction, Zaaldoon had dug a series of tunnels that ran under all the most important buildings of the tin can effort.

After ten minutes of Zaaldoon's frantic attack upon the planet's shifting crust, Milon asked him to redirect his efforts. "Let's go up a bit, but slowly."

Zaaldoon followed the orders. Milon was pleasantly surprised that there had been no further problems as a result of the damage to his systems. He supposed that it might be to do with this being such a basic, mechanical function. Minutes later,

Zaaldoon reached a layer of mud. Leaving the earth untouched, he cleared a space in the rock large enough for Milon to be able to get through, then dropped down to collect his master.

“Good work, Zaaldoon!” whispered the assassin. “They never stood a chance, did they?” The robotoface simply beamed. “Now give me a leg up!”

It wasn’t far up, just a couple of metres, so it didn’t put too much of a strain on the little robot’s anti-gravity unit to carry Milon up to the top of the shaft. Using his fingers, Milon began to quickly dig away at the earth. He could have left this bit to the robotoface, but there was no sense in taking risks. After a few minutes of scrabbling away at the earth, he felt a draught of air upon his face. He lifted his eye to the tiny hole.

Perfect! He had come up right beneath the supervisor of the tin can brains! He had expected him to move at least a little, but Milon figured his efforts so far had earned him a lucky break.

He slowly pulled at the earth, bit by bit, leaving just the thinnest of crusts beneath the supervisor’s feet. Milon could tell that Zaaldoon was beginning to tire, but that would not be a problem for long. He bent over to whisper instructions to the robotoface, and then straightened again. Taking a deep breath, he burst up through the earth, grabbed the startled supervisor, and dragged him down through the hole. He didn’t bother to hold onto him, but let him drop down the shaft, before pulling himself up through the hole. Meanwhile, if Zaaldoon was following his instructions, he would be dropping down to give that oversized cranium a good solid crack, making sure the fellow was out for the count, before dragging him off through the tunnel back to the cave.

Milon, meanwhile, had to make sure there was no one to follow them there. Pushing himself out of the hole with such force that he rocketed into the air a good four metres before landing on the ground, he quickly took stock of his surroundings. There were two murder-droids to his right, one to his left, and a pair of tin can brains studying the dismantled wreckage of the makeshift ship.

Before any of them had even registered the disappearance of their supervisor, Milon had somersaulted through the air to land between the tin can brains – who, he had decided in the split second before leaping, posed the greater threat to the mission, because of their superior intelligence and reasoning ability, making it more likely that they would work out where the supervisor had been taken, as well as their being able to communicate meaningfully with others of their kind – the murder-droids, left with no

leaders, and no visible enemy, would neither investigate further nor be able to communicate any concerns, even if they had them, to anybody else.

A single finger of his right hand extended in the shape of the solid hammer, Milon thrust it into the casing of the tin can brain on the left, putting the full force of his landing behind the blow. The finger went right through the metal, the fist followed through, and the brain of the tin can was mush. Extending his left arm to its full length and swinging to his right, Milon made the shape of the scissors, his arm slamming against the left hand side of the other tin can brain just as his stretched out right leg hit it from the other side. The tin can fell the ground in a crumpled heap.

“Mamma!” shouted Milon. “I’m on fire tonight!”

The noise finally attracted the attention of the three murder-droids to his location, but even as they fired he was already in the air. Expelling all the air from his body as he rose, he assumed the pose of the waterfalling log, legs straight out, arms crossed over his chest. His two feet hit the top of the solitary murder-droid with the force of a battering ram, knocking its head unit right into its body. As it fell to the ground, he spun off into the darkness, dodging the shots of the pair of remaining murder-droids, and threw his jacket over a small bush. It was a shame about that, he had time to think, before emerging from the vegetation just behind the two murder-droids who had been advancing, firing all the while, on his poor old jacket. He channelled his feelings about the jacket into his next blow, the shining shimmer hand, vibrating his hand through super-tension and slicing through the two of them in a single go.

Milon dropped to the ground to take a deep breath. That stuff was hard, which was why he always used a gun when there was one to hand. He dragged himself back over to the hole he had burst through, and dropped down. It was hard to see anything, without Zaaldoon shining his luminous robot face around, but he took the fact that Zaaldoon and the captive were not there to be a good sign, and, after checking himself over, finding nothing but a few minor cuts and bruises, he headed up the tunnel himself, back to the cave.

He arrived, having struggled to make it up the vertical shaft, but having been unwilling to call Zaaldoon away from the prisoner, to find Grimmitt still unconscious, though wearing rather more tattered clothes than he had been when Milon had left, and the supervisor tightly bound and gagged with strips of cloth. Zaaldoon rested nearby, eagerly

waiting for a sign of approval from his master and hero.

"Good work, Zaaldoon," said the assassin. "I knew I could trust you."

The robotoface could not hide his happiness. "Thank you, boss!" Milon smiled, and plumped himself down on the cold stone floor, opposite the captive, who was only now beginning to come around. Quite apart from the circumstances in which they had met, Milon did not like the look of the man. Every line of his face betrayed self-interest, self-absorption, and, if Milon were to be as blunt as he usually was, self-abuse.

Milon gave him a slap across the face. "Wake up," he said through gritted teeth, trying to convey menace without actually raising his tone. There were still tin can brains flying around out there. "Wake up!" He pinched the man's cheek, and the eyes abruptly opened. At first dull, they soon shone with terror. Mmm, thought Milon, perhaps he knows who I am.

The eye in the middle of the forehead remained closed, though, and somehow the helmet had stayed on throughout the abduction. Milon tried to flip it off, but it seemed to be stuck. Perhaps it was some kind of biomechanical implant.

"Well," said Milon, "what do you have to say for yourself?" The man, still gagged, just glared at him. Milon searched the pockets of the strange silver suit, and found a small pistol. "I'll look after this, if you don't mind, sir. And then I'll ransom you in exchange for our freedom. It may not work, of course, but if they don't agree, what the heck, I'll still get to kill one of their chief lieutenants, so the day won't have been a complete wash-out!"

Milon left the man for the moment, seeing as he was securely tied, and went to check on Grimmatt. He seemed to be getting back to full consciousness, although he had yet to speak. Finally, his eyes opened for the first time, focusing first on Milon, then on the smiling face of Zaaldoon, who he had never seen before, and then upon the tied up figure of the tin can supervisor. All of a sudden his face turned to alarm, and Milon tried to reassure him, saying, "Don't worry, we have him hog-tied, he isn't going anywhere."

But Milon's over-confidence was his undoing.

Without a sound being made, other than the warning grunt of Grimmatt, Milon found the pistol wrested from his grasp and pressed against his spine. He put his hands up. Behind his back he heard the sound of a robotoface being kicked very, very hard. It sounded as if poor Zaaldoon had been kicked into the hole he dug himself. Milon gritted his teeth.

"Well then," said the supervisor, in perfect English. "If you would care to take a few steps forward, Milon, and then turn to face me, we can resume the conversation you were so eager to begin."

The assassin walked toward the entrance to the cave. "How," he asked calmly, "did you escape?"

"Oh, you shall see," said the supervisor with a laugh. "Just as Detective Grimmatt already has."

Milon turned around, to be greeted by one of the most incredible sights of an incredible life. He realised now that the helmet was no helmet at all, but a shell, and the third eye was no eye. The aperture was now open, and out of it protruded a small reptilian head on the end of a long, thin scrawny neck. Pieces of tattered cloth hung in shreds from the creature's mouth.

"What the hell is that?" asked Milon.

"It's a tortoise," said the man. "The tin can brains implanted it for me; I have had the theory in place for years; my grandfather and father before me had toiled long and hard on it; but it only became possible thanks to the marvels of tin can technology! And now, like the tortoise, I shall live forever!"

Milon shook his head in horror. "Who are you?"

"You mean, who was I, before I became what I am today? Why not ask Detective Grimmatt, who seems to have finally returned to his senses, such as they are? I think he knows, and I think he was trying to tell you."

Milon looked to his prostrate colleague. "Who is it, for crying out loud?"

Grimmatt struggled to get his breath together, and said in a single violent expulsion, "It's Professor Samson Quigg!"

Milon stepped back in horror, as Grimmatt slumped back down.

"That is who I was," said the man, grinning evilly. "But that was long, long ago. Why not call me... Tortoisio!"

The Original Tin Can Brain

There was not a lot Grimmatt and Milon could say to that. As they sat in stunned silence, Tortoisio, formerly Professor Quigg, the man Grimmatt had once considered, if not a friend, at least a trustworthy colleague, summoned a squad of murder-droids to escort them to his ship.

On the way up from the surface of the planet, which by this point was beginning to come apart at the seams, Quigg was kind enough to answer some of their questions.

Although Grimmatt had worked closely with their new enemy in the past, Milon was more surprised to find him working for the other side. "There's one thing I don't understand – the automatic programming implanted into all Ibis agents – why wasn't your memory wiped clean when you went over to the tin can brains?"

"Oh, I did. I thought it was a price worth paying, in order to live forever. But amazingly, I took a bang on the head when the asteroid hit the tin can brain's ship, and it was as if I was set free – I remembered everything! And, of course, I then gave every bit of that information to the tin can brains! All your fortitude, Milon, all your efforts, Grimmatt, were in vain! I gave them everything! Mrs Challenger and the rest will soon die – my allies have promised me that our first port of call will be the hated planet of Earth!"

As he reached the end of his rant, there was a loud clank. The ship had reached the dark matter destroyer. Tortoisio cackled with glee.

"Now, my tin can brains, take hold of them – they are to be taken to the very bridge of the dark matter destroyer, where they shall meet: the original tin can himself!"

Grimmatt and Milon bit back any feelings of fear that might have tried to assail them. There was no room for those kind of emotions. It's a terrible thing to face the end of one's own life, but they had a lot more than that to think about. Dragged through the endless corridors of the dark matter destroyer by the tin can deputies – literally dragged, in fact, and at high speed, their knees, shins and feet being scraped raw as the malicious metal beings deliberately held them lower than necessary – while Tortoisio proceeded ahead on some kind of hovercar, there was no time for them to come up with even the glimmering

of a co-ordinated plan. Milon, though, did have two options in mind, though he thought each as likely to fail as the other. Grimmatt was wondering how he could have misjudged Quigg so badly, and kicking himself for the grief he'd felt after the professor's apparent self-sacrifice – he realised now that that had been the point at which Quigg had sought out his new allies, and their comradely handshake the point at which he had stolen the dimensional opener.

Soon they found themselves in a gigantic and cavernous hall, the forward wall of which was a huge viewscreen showing the route ahead of the dark matter destroyer – right in the middle of which, Milon and Grimmatt saw to their dismay, sat the planet from which they had recently been abducted, and on which, Milon thought with sadness, remained the bits and pieces of his old friend Zaaldoon the Robotoface. But that grand, magnificent and yet terrible view was not the main feature of the room. Not at all.

Fully one quarter of the space in the room was taken up by an enormous, rattling, clanking, seemingly steam-driven tin can brain, which must have been seven or eight times the size of the makeshift spaceship Milon and Grimmatt had put together earlier that day. It wheeled about, making the noise of seven hells from each of its grief-stricken gyroscopes, to face the newcomers.

"Well," said the original tin can brain, in a metal voice that seethed with malice. "At last we meet! The famous Milon the Assassin! And the slightly less famous, despite his reputation in his own backyard, Detective Jim Grimmatt!"

"At last," said Milon, unenthusiastically. "The moment I've been waiting for. I've discovered what happens to dead central heating systems."

"Ha ha," laughed the original tin can brain. He waved a long, fibrous antenna at one of his attending brains. "Let's set off."

The tin can lieutenant inclined itself forward, then moved off to implement the order.

"No!" shouted Grimmatt. "You can't destroy that planet!"

The entire misshapen body of the original tin can shook with laughter, so much so that here and there a few rivets made their bids for freedom, propelled

by jets of superheated steam. As a couple of unfortunately close by tin can brains melted into slag heaps, others, attendant technicians, rushed in to fix the leaks.

"I can," said the worst monster of them all. "And I will. And after I've done it here, I'll do it to every planet in this universe! Won't we, my soldiers?"

Every tin can brain in the room joined together in a bizarre affirmation, an electronic keening noise of increasing intensity and rising pitch. Even Tortoisio had a go, though his voice was somewhat out of key. Just as it threatened to crack Grimmatt's skull, the original tin can wave for them to stop.

"I want to enjoy this moment," it said, as the planet on the viewscreen began to break apart into first two, then four, then eight, then a multitude of pieces, as the dark matter destroyer drove right through it.

"Monster!" accused Grimmatt.

"Thanks," said the original tin can brain. "It's nice to be appreciated."

One of the tin can brains asked for new co-ordinates. Tortoisio leaned forward in excited anticipation, but was unhappy with the answer the original tin can gave.

"But, you said we were to destroy Earth first," said the former Professor Quigg in a peevish tone of voice. He was immediately made to regret doing so, as the original tin can brain lashed a single antenna viciously across his face. Tortoisio was thrown back against the wall, his hands to his lacerated face. His resident tortoise, having seen the blow coming, had retreated back into his skull before it struck – it now, tentatively, poked back out of its hole, and began to tend its master's wounds with little flashes of its narrow tongue.

"Do not dare to question me, you fool," said the original tin can. "It's a long road I've travelled," he said, turning his attention back to Milon and Grimmatt. "So many centuries, so many deaths..."

"What a shame it has to end!" shouted Grimmatt, feeling pretty brave for a man held tight in the grasp of killer robots.

"I don't know what you mean by that," said the original, slowly wheeling its massive bulk over more closely to poke its antennae into the detective's face. "How do you intend to stop me?"

"We'll come up with a way," said Grimmatt with a growl. "We have to, and we will." From the corner of his eye he saw Milon giving him a wink. From somewhere he dredged up a spark of hope: perhaps his resourceful colleague might find a way to take the words beyond mere bluster.

"Original tin can brain," said Milon. "Tell me, how did you get into this line of work?" Grimmatt sagged against his bonds, despondent.

The original tin can brain snorted, a disgusting noise for an electronic creature to make. "Not that old chestnut?" It dragged itself over to poke its antennae in Milon's face. "Well, you are my guests. I should play along – it's only polite when I'm about to destroy your universe!" It laughed, and the pitilessness of it made Grimmatt's stomach churn. There really wasn't any hope... but then, all of a sudden, Milon swung into action!!!

Twisting his head with all his force, the assassin slashed against the original tin can brain's front with the edge of his eyebrow, which was, as ever, lacquered to a point an inch beyond the edge of his head.

Grimmatt held his breath in anticipation as sparks flew up and around the combatants, dazzling him and obliterating the view! When his vision returned, he saw, to his infinite despair, that there had been no effect on the tin can brain's body whatsoever.

"Damn!" said Milon, shaking his head, less forcefully this time.

"Ha ha!" laughed the original. "Thought you'd get me then, eh? With your razor sharp eyebrows? Tough luck, Milon, that was your last chance."

"I don't believe it," said the assassin in disgust. "My final, secret weapon. All these years of having such ridiculous eyebrows, and for what? Nothing."

The original tin can brain rumbled with pleasure. "I too planned ahead, Milon, and took care to specially reinforce my metal body. I knew you would try the eyebrows."

"How could you?" said Milon. "I never told..." He was quiet for a second, his brow furrowed, before he spoke again. "Oh, forget it."

The original brain rolled off elsewhere to oversee the progress of the dark matter destroyer toward its new destination. Grimmatt wondered whose fate it was to die next, if not Earth's. Then he remembered what Milon had said to the original tin can.

"What did you mean by that?" asked Grimmatt, when it seemed to be out of hearing range, but Milon had obviously decided to say nothing. Grimmatt took the hint and shut up.

The journey seemed to take days, but it must only have been hours, Milon and Grimmatt held there on the bridge like idiots, their knees and shins bleeding through the scraps of their trousers, forced to watch as their hated enemies proceeded to victory without a care in the world. Every so often Tortoisio would leave the bridge, presumably to have a nap, or get a

bite to eat, but he always made sure he was back in time for the ritualistic taunting of the captive Ibis agents, and the insane bouts of piercing electronic cackling that broke out every forty minutes or so.

Eventually they arrived, although it was not immediately clear where. "Right," said the original tin can brain, "here we are."

"What is the target, sir?" asked Tortoisio, as meekly as he could. "There's nothing here."

The tin can brains all looked to their leader.

The original tin can looked around with his optical unit, then laughed. "Ha ha! You've finally caught me out, after all these millennia!"

"What do you mean?" demanded one of the tin can brains. The others shrieked in agreement.

"You've really caught me out. I'm in the soup now! I don't really want to destroy anything. I'm actually a secret agent of Ibis, planted in your organisation to destroy you all."

"You will never succeed!" shouted Tortoisio, leaping forward, as all about the bridge the tin can brains reluctantly raised their weapons to fire upon their leader.

"Shut up," said the original tin can brain, lashing out again with an antenna, which caught Tortoisio in the stomach and left him sprawled on the floor,

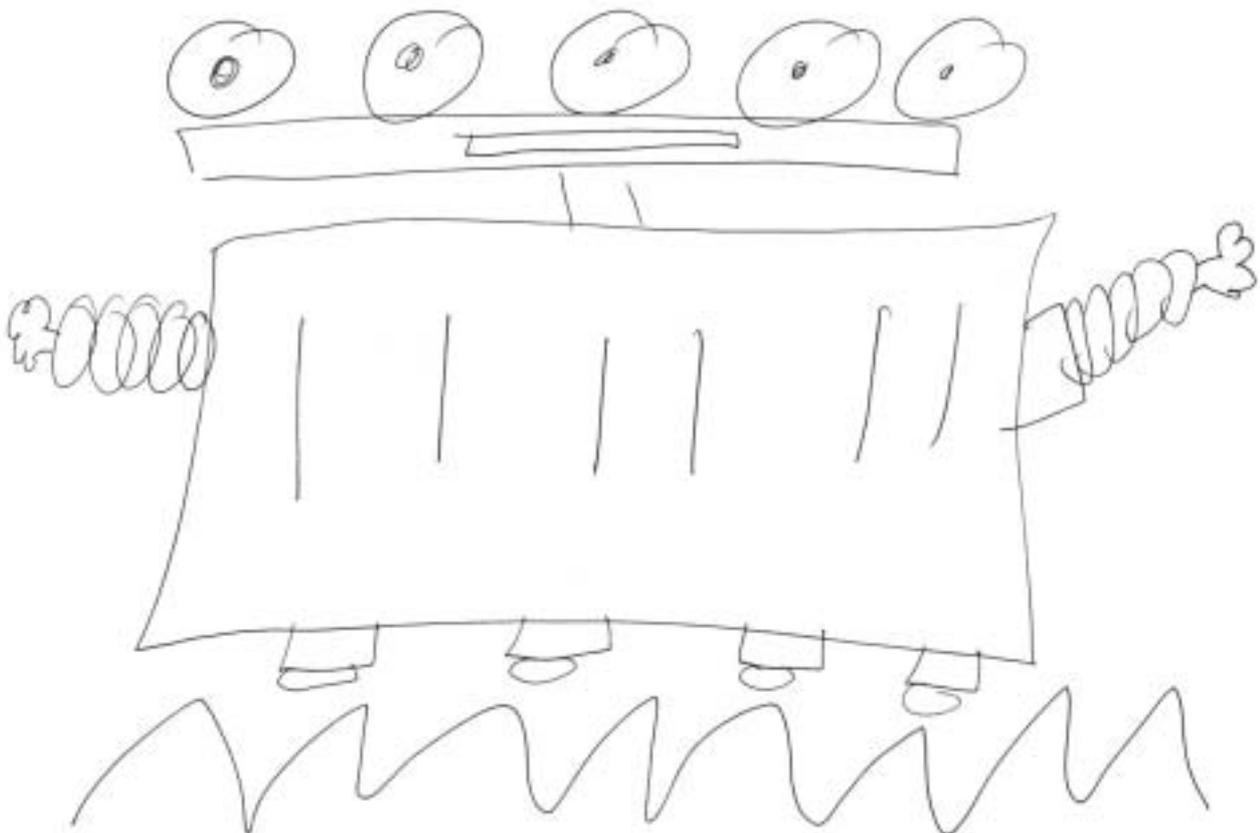
winded. "I will succeed." And at that, he flicked a switch on his body, a unobtrusive and seemingly insignificant switch, which no tin can technician still living had ever thought to question, and disabled virtually every power source on the ship, other than his own. Why do you think he had kept such an old and decrepit body, when everyone else was zipping about in sexy new high speed models?

Every tin can brain and murder-droid on the ship slumped to the ground. The brains would continue to live, but only for a matter of minutes, trapped in their metal shells. The forces that held it together decommissioned, the dark star destroyer would soon begin to drift harmlessly apart, and the original tin can brain had made quite sure it would do so in a decently empty part of space.

"Wow," said Milon. "That's pretty cool. Who are you?"

"It's me, Milon," said the original tin can brain. "Nanotus the Giant! Although I can see why you can't recognise me. I did it, Milon, I saved the universe!"

"So that's how he knew about the eyebrows," said Grimmett. Milon nodded. The detective turned to Tortoisio, who was just getting up from the floor. "So it must have been the same for you, Professor Quigg?"



You crafty old dog! I should have known you wouldn't have sided with these metal morons!"

Tortoisio looked at the detective for a moment, a million thoughts running through his mind as he weighed up the options. Would it be worth pretending that he *had* merely pretended to join the tin can brains? Would he be able to convince Mrs Challenger of that? After all, he had what he wanted – eternal life, or near enough. What did he have to gain by pursuing a life of crime?

But in the end, he did not have the choice. Grimmett had looked into the tortured eyes of a thousand criminals, and he knew, almost immediately, that Quigg had truly turned evil. "Wait, you did side with them, didn't you?"

Tortoisio scowled and ran out of the room, unfortunately managing to make good his escape, despite the efforts of Milon and Grimmett. He knew the ways of the dark matter destroyer too well, and seeing as Nanotus could not very well help in the search, they soon had to give up and return to the bridge.

"Don't worry," said Nanotus. "There's nowhere for him to go. In a matter of hours this ship will have broken into a million drifting pieces. There's nothing he can do to prevent that, nothing he can do to escape it."

"And what about us?" asked Milon.

Nanotus laughed again, although luckily this time he didn't rupture any rivets. He reached into one of the many compartments in his bizarre body.

"We owe this to Professor Quigg, who, after stealing it from you back on the planet of the tin can brains, was good enough to pass it to me upon joining our team," he said to them, pulling out the dimensional opener. "Good thing it *was* me, and it's all thanks to you Milon – your plan worked. You knew there was only one way that this could possibly work out, only one way in which the universe could be saved, and that it was for a friend to be waiting for you here on the bridge. What's more, you knew that for a friend to be waiting here, for a friend to have the

power to save the universe, that friend would have to be the one in control of the situation." A few moments passed, silent but for the clanking of his internal machinery. "And you knew that that friend would have had to have been responsible for everything the tin can brains have done over the last few thousand years, for every murder, every outrage, every conquest, every death."

Milon was sad, but happy. "I'm sorry, Nanotus. I would have done anything I could have to have taken your place."

"That's the problem," said Nanotus. "You would have. And you would have enjoyed it too much. By this time, you would have been as truly evil as any tin can brain – you don't have the self-control necessary for something like this."

"But you did?" said Grimmett, surprised. "The first time I met you, you had just been chasing Milon across the galaxy in a murderous rage."

"That's right," said Nanotus. "But the last time you met me, I was in a fight with the void-wraiths, if you remember?" Grimmett nodded. "And after that fight, I lived with them for many years; I achieved an incredible level of spiritual enlightenment; without which, this mission would have been an impossibility."

"So I suppose," said Milon, "you wouldn't want Mrs Challenger to assign you the mission until you're ready for it."

"It could be a few years down the line. She'll know when it's the right time – that's her job, and she's very, very good at it. The plan worked, after all! Plus, she needs a chance to find some time travel technology."

"Of course," said Milon. "I doubt if she'd be allowed to use Zangpan's World for a mission like this..."

Nanotus then activated the dimensional opener and the three of them skated back to Earth, and Mrs Challenger's house. Every so often, though, Milon and Grimmett had to wait for Nanotus to catch up, despite the bleeding of their legs.

Dinner with Mrs Challenger

So that was just about it for the adventure of the tin can brains. Grimmett was overjoyed to get back to London. He had enjoyed his big space adventure, but from now on he expected to stick to his usual patch.

“That’s quite all right,” said Mrs Challenger, when he brought it up with her. “That’s why we have Milon on the team!”

Whenever there was a big adventure of this type, Mrs Challenger always loved to wrap things up with a big dinner party, and this time was no exception, even if the guest of honour hadn’t eaten for so many thousands of years that he had forgotten what he used to enjoy about it! They had a big surprise for him, though, so he would not leave the party unhappy.

Mrs Challenger *was* slightly sad about one thing: that she could not include Rolnikov, the mad knight of Uttar Pradesh, and Pelney, his faithful squire, in the celebration, seeing as they had played such a huge part in saving the universe. Melrune was just too far away from Earth for it to be worth the trouble. Nevertheless, she sent a message by way of the orbiting princess to let them know that everything had worked out so well. The princess had said she would let Rolnikov know over dinner.

Despite the absences, there were plenty of people at the table. To begin with, of course, there was Mrs Challenger herself, who had worked up quite an appetite waiting for her agents to return. Beside her sat Milon the Assassin, who had been dying for a good square meal ever since he arrived on the planet of the tin can brains. On her other side was Detective Jim Grimmett, who tucked into the meal so heartily that Mrs Challenger had to reprimand him for his manners. Beside him sat the sad-faced Mrs Quigg, and though Mrs Challenger had made an effort to provide comfort, the news of her husband’s madness and ghastly transformation had done much to rattle her already shaky foundations. At the other side of the table, the bay doors had been thrown wide open, so that the original tin can brain, his bulky form causing havoc on the Challengers’ back lawn, could squeeze his head unit inside.

Oddly enough, Nanotus the Giant, the un-tinned original version, was there too. He had finally managed to make his way out of the travelling dimension, to be reunited with his friends and colleagues. It could have been quite awkward, what

with everyone else knowing he was shortly destined to wage war on the universe, even if it was in a good cause. For the time being, it had been agreed by Grimmett, Milon, Mrs Challenger and the original tin can brain that he should be left in the dark as to his fate. As far as the original tin can brain could remember, he still had years of gradual self-enlightenment to go. Once that had been achieved, Mrs Challenger would approach him, quietly, with the offer of the crucial mission.

But that was for the future. For now, as far as Nanotus was concerned, the original tin can brain was just another Ibis agent, whose name no one happened to mention. That afternoon, they all ate a delicious meal, principally of roast beef and potatoes, although there were many, many side dishes, providing a myriad of mouth-watering choices to each of those sitting at the table, as they savoured the after-taste of a job well done.

After allowing herself to enjoy the general chit-chat for a while, Mrs Challenger decided it was time to perform one of the many irksome duties imposed upon her by her position as head of Ibis. It might have been rude to bring up such a matter over dinner, but then she knew that, given half a chance, Milon would be out of the door and on his way to entirely unregulated adventures before the dinner plates had even been cleaned!

“So,” she said to the assassin at her side, “what are your plans?”

Milon thought carefully about his answer – if it looked like he had nothing to do, he would end up having to perform some irritating, undemanding task that could be handled by any old Ibis agent. Better to get himself out of the way, and wait for something really juicy to turn up on his plate.

“I think I should go and see if my electric buddy, Zaaldoon the Robotoface, managed to survive the destruction of the planet we were stranded on.”

“I’m really sorry about that, by the way,” interjected the original tin can brain.

“It can’t be helped,” reassured Mrs Challenger, patting one of his antennae. “You were only doing your job.”

“Still,” he said, “if there’s anything I can do to help...”

“That’s very good of you,” said Milon. “I thought

I'd search through the planetoids left by the break-up of the planet. It might take a while, and I know he was an annoying little git sometimes..." Mrs Challenger and Nanotus the Giant raised their eyebrows in unison. "Okay, I know he actually did a fair bit of damage, but that was just bad programming, and he did save our necks over and over during this mission."

"That's true," said Grimmett, speaking with some difficulty past a mouthful of brussels sprouts. "He did."

"I feel terrible about the whole thing," said the original tin can brain. "But there was no other way to prevent the other tin can brains, not to mention that little rat Tortoisio, from revolting. I had to destroy at least one planet, otherwise they would never have let me drive off into the middle of nowhere. Still, I wish there was something I could do: I doubt I'm really mobile enough nowadays to help you in your search..."

"Well, actually..." began Mrs Challenger. "There might be something we can do to help. All of Ibis owes you for your efforts in this mission – the whole universe owes you! – and after discussing your case with two of my friends, the engineers Klothe and Melenkius, we think we might be able to transfer you into my husband's old spaceship, *The Rocket*. We would have to refit it somewhat, and reinstall the galactic-level engines, but in a couple of weeks you would be able to fly anywhere in the universe!"

"What a marvellous idea!" exclaimed the original tin can. His excitement was such that it took quite an effort not to begin the electronic keening which had so grated on the ears of Milon and Grimmett. "And then I could take Milon to search for his little friend!"

"Now everyone's happy!" said Grimmett. "Is there anything for dessert?"

"Well!" said Mrs Challenger. "Haven't you had

enough yet, detective? You've eaten enough for a team of horses!"

Suddenly there was a heavy-fisted knock at the door, and a voice bellowed, like an elephant caught by a blunderbuss, "Will somebody damn well let me into my own home!"

Mrs Challenger had taken the precaution of locking the dining room door, thinking of the potential embarrassment should a visitor unexpectedly barge in on their little group – a robot, a giant, a man with the most peculiar eyebrows on Earth, not to mention the wives of two prominent academicians and a detective from Scotland Yard! Questions might well have been asked in Parliament!

"Who could it be?" asked Milon the Assassin.

"I think I know," said Mrs Quigg, pulling a shawl over her shoulders.

"It is!" said Mrs Challenger, throwing the door open. "It's George!"

"Hullo, there! What's this?" said Professor Challenger, striding in and looking at the assembled heroes and heroines with a pair of mad eyes. "Would someone be kind enough to explain what the devil is going on here? And did I hear something about someone giving my spaceship away?"

Mrs Challenger smiled sweetly. "Later, darling! First, tell me about *your* day."

THE
END