

THEAKER'S

QUARTERLY FICTION

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Stephen William Theaker

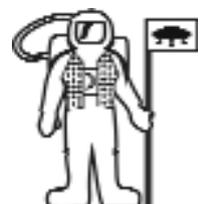
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Editorial

Stephen William Theaker

Editor and marvel

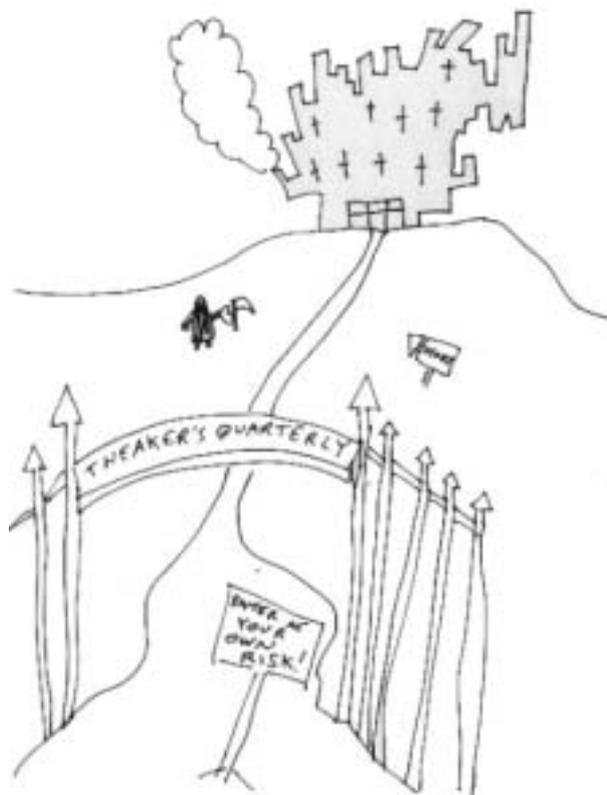
This is the fourth issue of this marvellous magazine, and I have yet to meet a single person who has disliked it. That I have yet to meet a single person who has read it is entirely beside the point – the potential is there!

As mentioned in previous editorials, this is our first non-reprint issue, and so you may be surprised by what is on offer. Did you think our writers had stagnated during the long hibernation of the super S.A.B.? More fool you! They are back and firing on all the cylinders they have! Would that they had more, but beggars cannot be choosers, and since I prefer to remain a chooser I chose the stories within, rather than submitting to the humiliation of begging real writers to submit something worthwhile!

I joke, but it is at my own expense – it costs me nothing save dignity, and that is a reasonable price for the entertainment of my readers – since the second story to feature in this issue is my own tale of the *Terrible Trio*, a set of youthful adventurers whose exuberance, inventiveness and refusal to give up take them from one exciting incident to the next as if they were careering through a child's waking dreams. Originally intended as an early instalment in a biography of the great hero Rolnikov, Mad Knight of Uttar Pradesh, these tales overflow with such innocent vim and vigour that the rest of his life may well have to wait its turn. Readers are allowed their own opinions, of course, but remember whose name stands guard at the front of the magazine, all too ready to bar entry to those looking to make trouble for my creations! All are welcome within, but doff your hats and scrape your forelocks on the floor.

Our first story is something of a bizarre experiment by Howard Phillips, a man slowly feeling his way back to the light. Some may find its unusual

style off-putting, but try to make some allowance for the poor man's state of mind. Once a promising young poet, he has spent more than one year since in



the embrace of old father booze, and the stink has not yet faded. With this publication we hope to give him a little encouragement, and if you do not feel he has earned it, remember the times when good turns were done for you, and take pity on a man who can get so much from so little.

*Lots of love,
the Editor!*

The Power of Death

Transcript of a Film I

Directed While Sleeping

Howard Phillips

Drunken Master of the Macabre

Ravitrāj, a young man, is running through the woods, pursued by a relentless enemy – The Snake, although we don't see his face yet; just his feet – he isn't even running. Ravitrāj is panicky, terrified, and he doesn't think he has a chance of escaping. At the same time, he can't believe this is happening.

He's running and running, stumbling here and there, looking behind him, then looking ahead desperately for a way out, but the landscape is just more of the same. If anything, he's getting deeper into the woods.

There is another shot of the pursuer, then Ravitrāj stumbles and falls to the ground. The Snake catches up, stands on the edge of the clearing. Ravitrāj turns to face him, and tries to scramble away; he backs into the legs of another man – Mohander.

Mohander says (off screen, except for legs, speaking in a friendly, patrician voice), "Hello."

Ravitrāj turns around, grasping Mohander's legs desperately. He thinks he's found someone who can help him.

Ravitrāj says (getting to his feet, hasn't yet see Mohander's face), "Thank God, please, you've got to help me – he's been chasing me through the woods..."

He tails off as he sees Mohander's face, the camera pans towards it so we can see. While he wears a normal Indian suit, his face is covered by a strange occult tattoo.

Mohander says (patting Ravitrāj on the shoulder), "It's all right. We're all friends here!" (laughs)

Although we still don't see his face, The Snake steps up behind Ravitrāj and grasps his upper arms. The signs of relief that had appeared on Ravitrāj's face disappear, replaced by utter terror.

Ravitrāj says (struggling in vain against The Snake's steel grip), "What is this? Who are you

people? I don't even know who you are!"

Mohander says, "It is obvious that you don't." (Close up on him) "Because if you did, you would be much more frightened..."

Close on Ravitrāj, who doesn't look like he could possibly be any more frightened than he already is. Fade to titles.

The scene changes.

Amardevita in her house. She's bustling around, making a drink and putting a few biscuits on a tray – a typical domestic scene. Once she's ready, she takes the tray and goes out of the room – the camera follows her. She goes through the living room and on to another room with a padlocked door. She puts the tray down, unlocks the padlock, opens the door, picks up the tray again and goes inside. The camera is inside waiting for her, so we are looking at her face when she says:

Amardevita says, "Would you both like some tea?"

The camera pans around to show The Snake sitting malevolently in an armchair, and Ravitrāj gagged and bound hand and foot on the floor. The room is just a normal lovely living room. The Snake nods, stands up and takes the tray from her.

Amardevita says, "Will he be staying long?"

Snake shakes his head. He points to the calendar. Tonight is a full moon. Ravitrāj starts to scream, although it's muffled by the gag. The Snake gets up reluctantly and starts to kick him until he shuts up.

Amardevita says, "Not a very friendly boy, is he?"

Snake shrugs sadly and shakes his head.

The scene changes.

Location could be a pub inside or outside, or failing that, someone's living room. Characters present: Savita, Veronica, Jason, Samantha, anyone else we can round up, possibly me (Bill). At the

beginning people are just chatting as you would in a pub. Savita looks at her watch and frowns.

Savita says, "Ravitraj was meant to be here by now."

Jason says, "He must have been too busy."

Savita says, "He's usually one of my more reliable friends, though."

Veronica says, "And he's got a mobile, so he could have rung the pub or something."

Savita says, "It isn't that important, really. I just haven't seen him for a few days now."

Veronica says, "Me neither."

Bill says, "Most likely he just couldn't be bothered."

There's a lull in the conversation while everyone sips their beers and tries to think of something dazzling to say. Samantha hasn't seen Savita for a while, so she wants to catch up a bit.

Samantha says, "So Savita, do you still see Cornelius Gilligan at all?"

Savita says (laughing semi-bitterly), "Oh, don't talk to me about him!"

Jason says, "Why's that? You seemed to be really close back at university?"

Savita says, "Yeah, we got pretty close, close enough for me to find out what an asshole he was!"

Samantha says, "So you dumped him?"

Savita says, "Yeah..." (She takes another gulp of her drink.) "Well, we were never really going out, but we used to hang around together a lot. Most of the time he was just too full of himself. He thought he was something really special, and that it was only a matter of time before everyone else noticed. The rest of the time he spent depressed over the fact that he was just ordinary like the rest of us. Anyway, he went off to Brighton to live the bohemian lifestyle, I came here to Birmingham, and we haven't seen each other since."

The scene changes.

Mohander's front room. It's dark, night. Snake is still in the chair. Ravitraj is still on the ground, although following the kicks he received he's now facing away from Snake. He slowly starts to take his mobile phone from his jacket. Struggling all the way, he manages to get it out. He thinks for a moment, His eyes staring into the darkness. There's no time to dial; the beeps would give him away; he has to speeddial, and hope someone hears and answers before Snake gets to him. He presses one of the numbers. It speeddials a number. The Snake hears the noise and twists his head towards it.

Cut to: Savita's home. She's there talking to a friend – Veronica. The phone rings. She puts it on

speakerphone.

Veronica says, "Hey, that's cool!"

Savita says (laughing), "Hello, who's there?"

Cut back to: Mohander's front room.

As the Snake gets up, Ravitraj tries desperately to say something into the phone, but it is too muffled.

Cut back to Savita's home:

From the phone is just coming a load of muffled grunts. The two women look at each other and grimace.

Savita says, "Well, that's made my evening!"

Veronica says, "That is exactly why you bought a speakerphone..."

Savita says, "Yeah, so I could share my perverts with my friends."

She hangs up.

Veronica says, "I think we should look at it as a bonding experience..."

Savita says, "Sounded more like a bondage experience to me!"

Veronica says, "Oh that's a bad one, Savita."

Cut back to Mohander's front room:

Ravitraj is desperately holding the phone, the realisation that they have hung up on him, that he has lost his last chance at getting away, proving almost too much. Snake casually swats the back of his head, knocking him unconscious, then picks up the phone. He presses redial, and raises the phone to his head.

Cut to Savita's room:

The two women are sitting on the sofa, watching TV, and the phone rings again. Savita winces.

Veronica says, "It's okay, I'll get it."

Veronica gets up, Savita watches her go to the phone. Veronica picks up the phone, not bothering to put it on speakerphone (which they had just been using as a novelty anyway).

Veronica says, "Hello?"

She pauses, listening to the person on the other end of the line. She begins to smile, visibly charmed.

Veronica says, "Yes."

Savita is frowning.

Savita says, "Who is it?"

Veronica shushes her, waves her away.

Veronica says, "That's right, yes."

Savita holds her hands up in frustration and goes back to watching TV.

Savita says, "If she wants to talk to perverts..."

Veronica says (grinning widely, one might say she looks like she's in love), "My name's Veronica... Veronica Holden, seeing as you asked so nicely!"

Savita is completely amazed.

Savita says, "What are you doing? That could be anyone!"

Veronica says (putting her hand over the mouth-piece), “Sshhh! He’s lovely!”

Savita says, “Have you gone mad? That’s probably the pervert who just rang!”

Veronica says (ignoring Savita, entranced by the voice on the phone), “Birmingham, what about you?”

Savita says, “That’s enough!”

She pushes Veronica to the side, grabs the phone off her, and slams it down. She turns angrily and virtually shakes Veronica.

Savita says, “What’s got into you? That could have been anyone...”

She trails off – Veronica hardly seems to be hearing her – she seems dazed – as if she’s about to fall over.

Savita says, “Are you all right?”

Veronica says (letting Savita sit her back on the sofa), “I think so; I just feel a bit dizzy. There was a voice on the phone...”

Savita says, “You gave him your name... you were about to give him your address.”

Veronica says, “Was I? I don’t remember... There was a voice; I don’t remember what it said... It was lovely; no one ever spoke to me that way before...”

Savita says, “And you can’t remember what it said? This is too strange...”

She goes over to the phone and dials 1-4-7-1. Veronica is watching; she’s obviously still shaken. Savita notes a number down on a piece of paper. She puts the phone down and passes the number to Veronica.

Savita says, “It looks like a mobile number. Do you recognise it?”

Veronica thinks for a minute.

Veronica says, “Isn’t it Ravitraj’s number? I think it is.”

Savita takes another look at it, then flicks through her address book.

Savita says, “I think you’re right. Was it Ravitraj on the phone?”

Veronica says, “No, it definitely wasn’t. I don’t know who it was.”

Savita tries to ring the number, but the line is unavailable. Savita and Veronica look at each other and shrug; weird things happen every day; then both settle back down on the sofa.

Veronica says, (she looks at her watch) “When is Captain Mutant on?”

Cut to: Mohander’s front room. Ravitraj is still unconscious. The phone is switched off. Snake is looking through a phone directory...

The scene changes.

In the street. Savita and Veronica walking along, chatting. They are approaching camera, and are walking past Katherine, who is walking away from the camera. As they walk past her, Katherine stops and turns, becoming the focus of the shot. As the two women walk away, she stares at them for a moment, thinking hard. Veronica turns to make eye contact; but Veronica’s eyes seem dead, almost as if they are not her own. Katherine then gathers her coat around her with a shudder and hurries off.

The scene changes.

Katherine at home. Spread out around her on a desk are the paraphernalia of a mystic, runes, astrological charts, etc. Ideally, also a big pile of pizza boxes. As we watch, she casts a handful of runes, and is obviously not pleased with the result.

Katherine says, “There’s not enough time... not enough time...”

She goes to a desk and takes out a map of the UK. She holds above it a plumbline; it swings over Birmingham, and then moves to Brighton, then moves back and forth between them. She puts it down. Thinks. Picks up her phone book and goes to G. She’s about to dial when there’s a knock at the door. Thinking nothing of it – they couldn’t have tracked her down already – she goes to answer it. She opens the door. The Snake stands there. He smiles and nods...

The scene changes.

Mohander’s living room. Our villain sits on his favourite sofa, in his favourite spot, watching the news. Amardevita comes in, and starts to berate him.

Amardevita says, “How long are they staying?”

Mohander says (impervious), “They’ll go, soon. Soon.”

Amardevita says, “I hope so – you invite guests; but who has to make food for them, drinks, eh? And I don’t like that Snake boy... And today I had to look after this man when Snake went out on one of your silly missions...”

Mohander nods and waves her arguments down. Slowly he gets to his feet and goes to the front room, where the Snake still sits in his armchair and Ravitraj is still bound and gagged. Outside children are playing.

Mohander says, “Is everything all right?”

Snake nods.

Mohander says, “The psychic – did you kill her?”

The Snake smiles and nods.

Mohander says, “Good. She could have been a problem. What about the girl?”

Snake shrugs.

Mohander says, “Well make sure. We can’t afford

any interference. I want that done before tonight's sacrifice."

The Snake nods affirmatively and looks at his watch.

Mohander says, "Good, good. You want olu prunti? No? You go then. I'll watch our guest."

With obvious eagerness, the Snake uncoils from the armchair and leaves the room. Mohander takes his place and watches Ravitraj.

The scene changes.

Detective Grimmatt is at home, playing a variety of Bust-a-Move on an Xbox. His phone starts to ring; he leaves it a minute, then sighs, pauses the game and answer it. He listens for a moment.

Detective Grimmatt says, "Is that all? Someone not answering the door. Come on, I'm rushed off my



feet these days. I stayed at home today to avoid this kind of piddling call..."

He listens again.

Detective Grimmatt says, "What am I doing? Important background research, that's what. Collating evidence. Something big is going to blow and I want to be ready..."

He listens again.

Detective Grimmatt says, "Well, if you put it that way, yes I do still want my job. I'll finish up here,

then go round there right away. But I want you to know that this kind of tyrannical behaviour allows no room at all for inspiration!"

He puts the phone down and unpauses the game; plays for a minute, then loses. He looks at the final score, picks up the phone and dials the score/number. It rings, then is answered.

Detective Grimmatt says, "That you, Cracker Smith? Detective Grimmatt here. Look, we know you did that job last night ... Yeah, that's right, so be a good little crook and present yourself to your nearest station, would you? ... Good lad."

The scene changes.

Inside Katherine's room. Looking at her table; it still has the astrological tables, runes and the map of the UK laid out on it. There's no sign of her (she's on the floor behind the camera). There is a knock on the door. Then another, more urgently.

The Pizza Boy says (offscreen - behind the door), "I know something's wrong; she always answers right away; half the time before I even knock... I don't know how she does it. She orders a pizza every day for lunch."

Detective Grimmatt (off-screen, behind the door), "Okay; stand back."

The door bursts open and Detective Grimmatt comes in, followed at a distance by the pizza boy.

Detective Grimmatt says, "Looks okay to me... No sign of breaking and entry... No signs of a disturbance."

He moves further into the room, and sees her body behind the table.

Detective Grimmatt says (pointing behind the camera), "Look, there she is. Looks like she choked on something."

The camera pans around to show Katherine's body. Her clothes are covered from top to bottom in blood. It is clear that she has not choked on something. Painted in blood across her face is a sigil. This is what stops them from seeing the true picture. Detective Grimmatt goes over and puts a finger on her throat, getting his hands covered in blood.

Detective Grimmatt says, "She's dead, all right. I'll call an ambulance for the body. And I suppose I should call this in as death by natural causes."

Frowning, he strokes his chin with a blood-covered hand, and then wipes his brow with the other, smearing blood across his face.

Detective Grimmatt says, "But I can't help feeling there's something I'm missing..."

The scene changes.

Veronica at home. She seems disturbed. She's sitting on the sofa, tossing and turning. (Possibly

close up on one eye and solarize?) There is a knock at the door. She goes to answer it. It is the Snake. He smiles and nods. She lets him in.

The scene changes.

A hillside. A tree. Ravitraj tied to a tree. Mohander stands there. On one side is the Snake, holding an axe. On the other is a masked woman – it is Veronica in disguise, although we don't know that yet.

Mohander says, "I am very sorry about this, young man."

He waves for Snake to pass him the axe. He takes it, holds it up against the sky, then brings it down heavily against Ravitraj. Blood splashes up across his face and suit. He takes a few more swings. Then he passes the axe back to Snake, who wipes it down with a towel. He puts the axe back in a bag, then offers the towel to Mohander.

Mohander says, "I'm not finished. Give me your knife."

Snake passes him a knife, and Mohander bends down over the body of Ravitraj, slicing and cutting away until Ravitraj's innards lie exposed to the sun. Mohander looks at them intently, holds some intestine up to the sun for a better view, then gets up, nodding to himself. Snake offers him the towel again.

Mohander says, "Give me a clean one!"

Snake gives him a clean towel from his bag, and looks quizzically at Mohander.

Mohander says, "The omens are very, very bad... Just the way I like them! Ha ha ha!"

(Keep him laughing as long as possible, then fade to black.)

The scene changes.

Savita's bedroom. Morning. A bright new day beginning. She's fast asleep. Someone is ringing the doorbell. She makes a weary effort to get up and answer it. She's living in a flat. When she gets to the door, the paper has been delivered; she looks at the headline as she opens the door: "LOCAL PSYCHIC DIES AT HOME She Didn't See the Pepperoni Coming". Savita looks at it with interest though without particular horror since she didn't know Katherine, then notices the photo, and recognises the woman from the street. She frowns and opens the door. It is Detective Grimmett with bad news.

Savita says, "Hello?"

Detective Grimmett says, "Good morning. I'm Detective Grimmett; could I come in for a moment, please?"

The scene changes.

Savita at the morgue, accompanied by Detective Grimmett.

Savita says, "I can't believe it. He was like a brother to me; he never seemed unhealthy; I can't understand how he could have had a heart attack..."

Detective Grimmett says, "It can happen to anyone, I suppose. Like I said, they just found him slumped against a tree in the park; no signs of foul play; it must have happened suddenly.

Savita says, "It's funny though, no one had seen him for days, but you say he only died last night?"

Detective Grimmett says, "Mmm, that's right. I'd better look into that, see if anyone had seen him going in or out of his flat during the last few days. Just to tie up the loose ends."

He makes a note in his pad.

Detective Grimmett says, "Are you ready to identify the body?"

Savita says, "Yes, I think so."

Detective Grimmett holds the door open for her and she steps through. Ravitraj is laid out on a slab. He is absolutely drenched in blood. He looks terrible. He has the same sigil drawn in blood on his face that was on Katherine's face. Savita looks at the body in shock and horror.

Savita says, "Is this some kind of sick joke?"

Detective Grimmett says (genuinely worried because her upset is obvious), "Sorry, what's



wrong?"

Savita rushes forward to the body.

Savita says, "Do you call this natural causes?"

Detective Grimmatt says (coming forward to look more closely – he thinks that she must have spotted something), "What? Can you see something?"

Savita says, "What do you mean? Look at all the blood! Look at the blood! He's been ripped to pieces!"

Detective Grimmatt takes a step away, then checks himself, realising that this is very traumatic for her, and that such an outburst is not that remarkable in the circumstances.

Detective Grimmatt says, "There's no blood, miss... do you want to sit down outside? Have a cup of tea or something?"

Savita puts her hand in the blood, and holds it up to Detective Grimmatt's face.

Savita says (utterly astonished), "Can't you see it?"

Detective Grimmatt says, "Sorry, I can't."

Because Detective Grimmatt seems so sincere and concerned, Savita starts to doubt herself; maybe it is the shock of seeing a friend dead... she lets Detective Grimmatt lead her out of the room. Detective Grimmatt takes another look at the body as they leave... there's something he's missing...

The scene changes.

Savita is back at home. She tries to ring Veronica, but there is no answer.

Savita says, "Veronica, where are you when I need you?"

She looks up Jason and Samantha's number, and phones them.

Savita says, "Do you want to meet me for a drink? Thanks..."

She puts the phone down; goes off to get ready.

The scene changes.

Savita at the pub with Samantha and Jason. In the background we can see the Snake, drinking a Gin and Tonic. Savita doesn't recognise him – why would she; she hasn't met him – but we do, although the camerawork doesn't make a song and dance about the fact that he is there. There's a woman sitting opposite him with her back to us (Evil Veronica), but they aren't interacting at all. Savita has obviously just finished telling her friends about Ravitraj.

Samantha says, "I don't know what to say, Savita."

Jason says, "Yeah, we didn't really know Ravitraj, but for him to die so suddenly... What do you think happened?"

Savita says, "I don't know... maybe he'd been on a bender or something, and his body just couldn't take it..."

Samantha says, "And you really freaked out at the morgue?"

Savita says, "I don't know what happened... it just seemed like there was blood everywhere, but the cop couldn't see it. Anyway, look, I've got to get to the gallery; thanks for listening."

Jason says, "Are you sure you'll be okay? We've got to go back to London today."

Savita says, "Yeah... I'll give you a ring."

Samantha says, "You can always pop down for a day or two if you need to rest."

Savita says, "Thanks, guys. See you later."

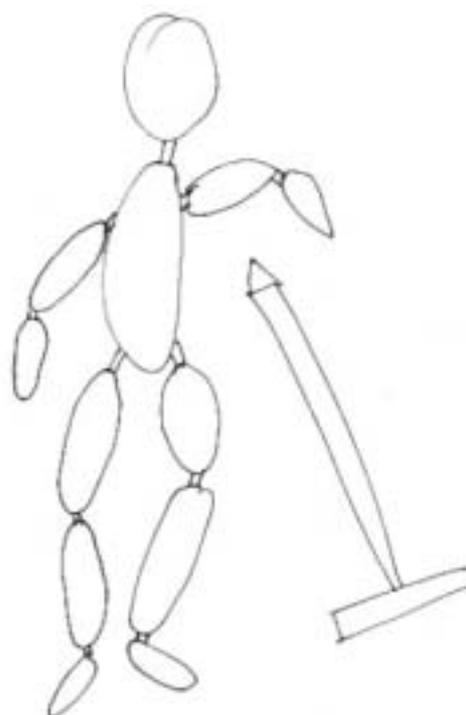
Savita gets up and goes off. As Samantha and Jason talk quietly about what Savita said, the Snake watches Savita leave. Evil Veronica gets up and follows Savita. The Snake then examines Jason and Samantha.

The scene changes.

Much later in the day, Savita gets home. She unlocks the door and lets herself in. The camera doesn't follow. A few moments later we see Evil Veronica arrive. She looks at the house; looks at the windows, looking for a means of attack. There's an artist's doll in one window. That's it. She walks up to the house, takes a piece of paper from her pocket and sticks the paper to the door – it bears a strange sigil. She walks away unhurriedly.

The scene changes.

Savita walks over to her bed, going past the



window in which the artist's doll stands. She gets into bed, pulls the covers over her, and is soon asleep.

The artist's doll begins to move. At first gingerly testing its new ability, it then stretches out its feet to push itself off the pedestal it is attached to by a spike. The spike comes free from the pedestal, and the doll falls to the floor. It begins to drag itself across the ground, and climbs up onto her bedside table. It stands up, looks at her to make sure she is still sleeping, then turns to Savita's electronic alarm clock. It rips out the power lead and wraps the wire around its body. It then climbs up onto the bed, uncoils the wire, and prepares to press the bare wires against Savita's back. At the last possible moment, there is a noise outside, and Savita stirs; she looks toward the window, to where the doll normally stands by Godzilla; sees the doll missing, and leaps up from the bed in terror, sensing rather than knowing that the doll is there beside her. She runs to the light and switches it on; the doll has dropped lifeless onto the bed, the bare wires beside it; Savita reaches out to touch them in curiosity, then comes to her senses and switches everything off at the plug socket. She runs to the window and looks out, but sees no one.

Savita says (looking at the Godzilla toy that sits on her dressing table), "What the hell is going on here? There is no way I imagined that! And why the hell am I asking Godzilla? This is going to take more than nuclear-powered breath... I need help from someone who knows about this kind of thing..."

She grabs a bag and begins to put enough clothes in it for a weekend. She picks up Godzilla and puts him in the bag.

Savita says (speaking to Godzilla, a very nervous note in her voice), "Thanks for waking me up, little fella. You keep up the good work!"

The scene changes.

Savita in her coat, bag ready; on the sofa, feet pulled up; cooking knife in her hand; eyes darting around the room. Every light in the room is on, and the TV is on, showing BBC News 24. A clock is on the table right in front of her. She's waiting for it to be time to go for the train to Brighton. In the meantime, she's playing at Ripley waiting for the aliens... Any wooden dolls come near her she'll slice them into matchsticks!

The scene changes.

Six o'clock; she can go for the train. She gets up and runs out of the house. On the way out she notices the sigil stuck to her front door. She rips it off and throws it on the floor. She starts to dash off, has second thoughts, comes back, picks up the screwed-

up paper and tucks it into her bag – evidence!

The scene changes.

Savita on the train, looking moody.

The scene changes.

Savita arriving in Brighton. She looks around her in the station.

Savita says, "This is stupid. As if he'll be able to help... As if he'll even want to."

But she shrugs, there's no one else who would even take her seriously. She sets off toward the exit determinedly.

The scene changes.

Cornelius Gilligan's flat. Gilligan asleep, looks like an idyllic morning scene (it is about 9.00 am, meaning Savita is on her way). Birds are singing (if available) and the world is new. Then a woman, out of shot – Dottie – begins to talk to him.

Dottie says, "Cornelius? Cornelius, wake up..."

Gilligan's eyes stay determinedly shut. The camera turns to show Dottie, who seems to have just finished getting dressed. She shakes her head and leans over to wake him up tenderly.

Dottie says, "Wake up, it's morning!"

Gilligan says (without opening his eyes), "And don't I know it... If I had my way there'd be a lot fewer mornings in the day."

Dottie says (laughing), "Let me give you my number, so you can call me sometime?"

Gilligan says (opens his eyes and lifts himself up onto his elbows), "Dottie, last night was special... let's keep it special... but unique..."

Dottie stares at him.

Dottie says, "You arsehole."

She stamps off toward the door to the room, gathering her things as she goes.

Dottie says, "Well, it might have been special for you, but I'll tell you right now it was far from special for me; I've had better times sitting on the corner of a washing machine!"

She leaves the room.

Gilligan says (frowning), "Women don't really do that, surely?"

He picks up a calendar which shows that last night was the full moon (not the same night as Ravitraj's sacrifice; the night after; remember that full moons last for more than a single night; or at least they always do in werewolf movies).

Gilligan says, "No, you're wrong, Dottie. Last night was very special..."

He gets out his first cigarette of the morning and starts to smoke, leaning back against the wall and thinking.

The scene changes.

Savita is making her way through Brighton in the morning (at about 10.00 am).

The scene changes.

Cornelius Gilligan alone in his room, round about 10.00 am. He's had time to get properly dressed, but he might not have done anyway. He's doing some research, with occult books spread out around him, including but not only the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Souls of the Damned (a fictional grimoire) (or photocopies of pages from it), a map of England with ley lines drawn across it. Eventually and somewhat sadly he begins to write a letter:

"Dear Savita, Go to..."

(This is the letter that Savita will later find stowed among the CDs in her house – although Gilligan will profess ignorance when Savita arrives at his house, when she finds the letter the viewer might realise that Gilligan was expecting this; creating a nice sense of tragedy when thinking back over the film...)

The scene changes.

Outside Cornelius Gilligan's house. Savita arrives, pauses, looks around as if looking for another option, then resolves to go in. She hitches her bag up on her shoulder and strides forward. She's about to knock, when Cornelius Gilligan opens the door to her. This immediately infuriates Savita.

Savita says, "How do you do that?"

Gilligan says, "Last night I kind of had a psychic boost; you know what I mean..."

Savita says (wincing), "More likely you just always sit by the window in your pants watching the girls go by... You going to let me in?"

Gilligan says, "I don't know, Savita; I was up most of the night; not a lot left in the engine room right now. But I suppose if there's demand, I'll do my best to supply... But it's been a long time; you never called, you never wrote... I've been stuck in a mire of one-night stands, casually explosive sex and adorable women." (becoming a little angry) "Women, I might add, who have never kicked me in the teeth and told me to fuck off out of their lives."

Savita says, "Things weren't working between us; you knew that; and you weren't treating me properly. Anyway, it sounds like you're very happy here."

Gilligan says (relaxing again), "Oh the casual sex is great, but we're being honest, I have received the occasional fuck-off..."

Savita says (pauses before speaking, starting to smile despite herself; but still remembering that things are very serious), "So!"

Gilligan says, "So! What are you here for? Couldn't keep away from my king-sized loving?"

Savita says, "Ha ha! Still the joker! No, I'm not

here about us – and I am definitely not here for sex. I'm here because I need help. I'm in real trouble, Gilligan."

Gilligan says (frowning) "What kind of trouble?"

Savita says, "One of my friends murdered kind of trouble. Wooden dolls trying to kill me in the darkness kind of trouble..."

Gilligan lights a cigarette, takes a studied breath of it – remember he's playing a role to perfection here – he's had time to work out how he's going to act. He tilts his head forward and looks at her.

Gilligan says, "Go on, say it..."

(Savita is more or less biting her lip; she knows that he's pushing her into a certain role, but at the same time, she knows that by playing that role, she gets him to play the role she needs him to)

Savita says, "Your kind of trouble..."

Gilligan says (taking command; becoming more serious), "Come in, tell me about it."

Savita says, "Only if you promise to put your clothes on."

Gilligan says, "You really think I'm some kind of pervert, don't you?"

Savita says, "I think you're too many different types of pervert to count, and they're all struggling to make their voices heard..."

The scene changes.

Inside Cornelius Gilligan's place. The two of them are at his desk – he discreetly tidies away the letter he was writing her; she doesn't notice, and neither does the camera, particularly. Gilligan is dressed now.

Gilligan says, "Happier now? Does my body make you uncomfortable?"

Savita says, "Do you mean in the sense that it is too bony when one is on top of it or in the sense that it seems to be an affront against all that I, as an artist and student of the human form, believe to be right and proper?"

Gilligan says, "One snappy answer would have been enough... two just spoils the effect. Do you think we could go out and find somewhere else to talk? I've got a real hangover and I could do with getting some of that salty sea air."

Savita says, "Are you taking me entirely seriously?"

Gilligan says (sitting down opposite her, sincere now), "If you *want* the scary version: just from what you've said already I can tell we're dealing with bad bad people. You could have been followed; I'd rather keep on the move... just telling me stuff can create ripples in the ether that could be traced."

Savita looks down, obviously frightened. Gilligan

gives her a friendly punch on the arm.

Gilligan says, "Anyway, I want to get some doughnuts for breakfast!"

Savita smiles.

The scene changes.

Gilligan and Savita in some nice place in Brighton, by the beach. Savita is eating doughnuts, Gilligan is thinking hard and not eating any. Every so often she offers him one but he doesn't take it.

(Could this be like Ford Prefect and Arthur before the Vogon destruction of Earth – maybe the doughnuts include an ingredient that acts as a psychic block – or maybe he just thinks she needs the energy!)

Gilligan says, "So you saw the body and it was covered in blood?"

Savita says, "Yeah, I put it down to shock, because the cop didn't see a thing, and I don't think he was trying to freak me out or anything. He seemed really worried.

Gilligan says, "You saw blood all over Ravitraj's body, right?"

Savita nods.

Gilligan says, "Was that because of the wounds?"

Savita says (thinking for a moment), "No, I don't think it was. I mean, the wounds were bad enough, like from an axe or something, but the blood was just smeared everywhere."

Gilligan says, "Now think carefully... were there any pictures or symbols drawn in the blood?"

Savita says (thinking back – remember that cool as she is, it was quite a traumatic incident for her – she's scratching at the back of her mind), "That's right, there was, I can't describe it; I didn't even think of it till you said..."

Cornelius Gilligan sketches the invisible sigil on a piece of paper.

Gilligan says, "Is that it?"

Savita nods.

Gilligan says, "Watch."

Gilligan makes a small scratch on his finger and smears blood across the sigil.

Gilligan says (pointing off to the side), "Hey, look, free ice-creams!"

Savita looks, realised she's been duped, then looks back.

Savita says, "So where's the paper?"

Gilligan is holding it in front of her face.

Savita says, "Well?"

Gilligan says, "It's right here. Watch."

He tears it in half and she blinks as it reappears.

Savita says, "Explanation?"

Gilligan says, "It's a mixture of hypnotism, misdirection, a dash of rune magic, etc. The people after

you must be very powerful. This is pretty easy: on a subconscious level you don't really care if you see the piece of paper or not, so it's easy for me, sitting here, to persuade you not to notice it. But to do the same trick on a dead body, to leave the spell in place while you go on about your business, and to have it last long enough to get the body safely buried... that's good voodoo..."

Savita says, "So how come I could see it and the cop couldn't?"

Gilligan says, "Hmm... that's a good question... Could be that you have natural psychic defences..."

Savita says (kidding), "Natural sidekick defences? Like Dr Watson or Robin, you mean...?"

Gilligan says (frowning at her lack of gravity), "The other possibility is that they let you see on purpose..."

Savita says, "Why?"

Gilligan says, "Think about it: what happened when you saw the blood? You completely freaked, right? So, off you go, driven half-mad by the death of your friend... who would then be surprised if you felt you had to end it all...?"

Savita says, "... by electrocuting myself with the wire from my clock radio..."

Gilligan says, "Well, it's not a common method, admittedly, but the point is that they wouldn't feel inclined to investigate further..."

Savita opens her bag, and gets out the picture that had been stuck to her door.

Savita says, "Yeah... so what do you think about this? I found it stuck to my door this morning."

Gilligan says (taking it and looking closely), "Same kind of magic. This is a kind of curse; it's from the dark ages. It would have been put on a kid, who would then have accidentally choked on a toy or something... I never would have guessed that it worked by actually bringing the toy to life... fascinating!"

As she closes her bag, Savita notices the newspaper and pulls it out. Gilligan is still concentrating on the animation sigil.

Savita says, "I almost forgot about this; it just seemed fishy... a psychic died, choked on a slice of pepperoni... I thought there might be a connection."

Gilligan says (absently), "What's that? Let's have a look."

He scans the headline, then looks at the picture.

Gilligan says (shaking his head – things are not as under control as he had thought), "Oh no, Katherine..."

Savita says, "Did you know her?"

Gilligan says, "Yes, we'd been contacts for a

couple of years. You need allies in this game..."

He looks at Savita sharply.

Gilligan says, "Did *you* know her?"

Savita says, "I was thinking about that on the train. I think she walked past me and Veronica on the street yesterday... I wouldn't normally have noticed or remembered her, but she seemed to stare at us..."

Gilligan says, "This is worse than I thought... much worse... Have you seen Veronica since then?"

Savita says, "No, her phone was just ringing out..."

Gilligan says, "This is very bad. I don't think it's just one killing, one cover-up. I think it's something big, and I think they're trying to wipe out any opposition... It's a good job you came here."

Savita says, "Who are *they*, anyway?"

Gilligan says, "I'm not sure... whoever it is has been keeping their cards close to their chest so far, hoarding their power for a big push... Remember I've only been on the scene a few years; there are a lot of players I haven't even been allowed to learn the *names* of yet."

Savita says, "So what do we do now?"

Gilligan says (leaping to his feet), "Are you kidding? Where else – we've got to go back to Birmingham!"

Savita says (slowly getting to her feet), "Cornelius, I just want to get away."

Gilligan says, "They'll come for you, Savita, wherever you go. And now they'll be coming for me, too. Our only hope is to get to them first."

Savita says, "But if they're as powerful as you say..."

Gilligan says, "Hey, don't worry, kid! I've got a few tricks up my sleeve!"

Savita says, "Yeah, your scrawny arms leave plenty of room up there..."

He laughs, punches her on the shoulder, and they walk off, leaving the cameraman behind. She punches him on his shoulder. He pushes her, she pushes him back...

(Fade to black.)

The scene changes.

Cornelius Gilligan and Savita going for the train in Brighton. Savita points to the ticket office, but Gilligan grins and shakes his head. They go to the platform gate. Savita shows her ticket but the guard doesn't even look at Gilligan. On the platform Savita looks at him quizzically:

Gilligan says, "One of the perks of the trade... almost makes up for the eternal damnation bit!"

The scene changes.

Savita and Cornelius Gilligan on the train. We

watch them travelling for a minute, then something occurs to Gilligan, "Did you tell anyone else about any of this?"

Savita says (thinks for a moment), "Oh no! Yes I did, Jason and Samantha! Do you remember them from university? I told them about seeing the blood at the morgue. Oh my god, do you think they're in danger? They were going back to London, and I forgot all about them!"

Gilligan says, "Look, don't panic. We have to change at London anyway. We'll phone them, check they're okay."

Savita says, "Okay."

Gilligan reaches out to hold her hand. She lets him for a minute then snatches it away.

Savita says, "Things might be very confusing for me right now. I'm in mortal peril, half my friends are dead or missing, and I may well be going mad. But one thing I do know is that there is no way I'm going to let you pick up where I left off."

Gilligan says (feigning innocence), "I'm just trying to offer some comfort."

Savita looks at him askance.

Gilligan says, "Physical comfort *is* the best kind..."

Savita says, "If you were able to give any other kind we might still have been together..."

Gilligan says, "Ooh, nice one... So all that emotional stuff aside, you were pretty happy with the, you know, physical side of things?"

Savita says, "Are you fishing for compliments? I wouldn't have thought you cared."

Gilligan says (crossing his arms), "What can I say? I've had a few bad reviews lately... It starts to affect your performance."

Savita says, "You only ever call when the moon is full – a girl can get testy."

Gilligan winces.

Savita says (laughing), "Don't tell me that's still how it is?"

Gilligan says (shrugging), "It's like boxers saving themselves before big fights..."

The scene changes.

In a station in London, at a call box. Savita is dialling. Cornelius Gilligan has bought a paper and is on his way over. The phone is ringing as Gilligan arrives, but there is no answer. Savita puts the phone down.

Savita says, "No answer. I'm very scared, Cornelius."

Gilligan says, "Everyone should be. Look at this."

He shows her the newspaper. The headline for the main article is "WAVE OF UNEXPLAINED

DEATHS ACROSS NATION". There is a smaller article headed "MOTHER OF ALL STORMS BREWING OVER NORTH SEA", and at the bottom of the page, "RIFT IN UK/US RELATIONS". Savita takes a look.

Savita says, "Unexplained deaths? Do you think it's the same thing?"

Gilligan says, "There's no doubt. Like I thought, they're eliminating the opposition... I didn't realise they were working on this scale."

Savita says, "We should check on Jason and Samantha."

Gilligan says, "Okay. Let's get going; we could still make a connection later on."

The scene changes.

Outside Jason and Samantha's flat. Gilligan and Savita run up. Gilligan points out a sigil pasted onto the door.

Savita says, "What's that one for?"

Gilligan says, "I'm not sure; it's very old though. And it definitely isn't good..."

They try the bell three or four times, but there's no answer."

Savita says, "This is bad. How can we get in?"

Gilligan holds up a finger. He bends down to the lock, and knocks on it three times, muttering something under his breath. He opens the door with an inappropriate flourish, and Savita pushes past him and up the stairs. The camera follows Cornelius Gilligan as he follows her; he's not hanging back deliberately, he's just thinking hard. She gets to the top and round the corner, and we hear her voice off-screen.

Savita says (tough but frightened), "Cornelius, I think you should get up here right now."

Gilligan rushes up the remaining stairs, and the camera follows him. Savita stands at the doorway to Jason's flat. The two of them move inside, leaving room for the camera to show what they see. Jason crouches at the end of the corridor, a bloody knife in hand, his face crudely daubed in a rough approximation of the look of a samurai. Savita screams, pointing to the door to the bedroom, where Samantha's lifeless and outstretched arm and hand can be seen, blood pooling on the ground.

Gilligan says, "Jason, is that you?"

Jason says (speaking in Chinese), "I am Lord Dragon of the Four Winds. I do not know where I am, and I do not know who are these creatures that beset me."

Savita says, "Jason, it's us! Remember!"

Jason says (in Chinese), "I shall kill you if you do not leave."

Savita says (to Gilligan), "Can't we just destroy the sigil?"

Gilligan says (to Savita), "It wouldn't help; I think the sigil summoned a Chinese demon or ghost. Now it's possessed Jason; I don't know how to get rid of it."

Savita says (to Jason), "Jason, remember me! What have you done to Samantha?"

Jason visibly reacts at the mention of Samantha's name.

Savita says, "That's it. Samantha, where is Samantha?"

Jason says (in Chinese), "The idiot human speaks a name which means something to this body."

Gilligan says (pointing toward the bedroom), "Yes, Samantha. Look at Samantha."

Jason says (in Chinese), "I should kill these insects..."

Despite himself, he looks into the bedroom, looks at the body, begins to shake a little, and a tear emerges from his eye.

Jason says (in Chinese), "This body weeps." (begins to shout) "Why do I weep when I live! I live again!"

He weeps even more, and suddenly his eyes seem to clear (the magical effect of running water).

Jason says (in English), "Samantha, what have I done?"

He rushes to her side (although he hasn't dropped the knife). Gilligan and Savita move forward to watch.

Jason says (in Chinese, taking the knife in both hands), "This unworthy soul must pay for this crime!"

Savita says, "No!"

Jason plunges his knife into his stomach and collapses across Samantha. Almost despite themselves, Gilligan and Savita grasp each other in horror.

Gilligan says, "We have to go... we can't be connected to this."

Savita says (pushing him away), "How can you think about that?"

Gilligan says, "Someone has to. Think: by the time the police finish with us this will all be over; and I don't mean in a good way."

Savita says (staring at him, then turning to go), "You might be right. But there's something you've lost... Or maybe you never had it."

Gilligan watches Savita go, pauses a moment, then goes into the bedroom, gets a blanket from the bed and lays it over Jason and Samantha, leaving them looking as if they are sleeping.

Gilligan says, "Bye, friends." (In a whisper:) "See

you soon.”

The scene changes.

Savita and Cornelius Gilligan at Birmingham New Street station, at a call box.

Savita says, “Thanks, Detective Grimm.”

She puts the phone down.

Gilligan says, “Did he tell you?”

Savita says, “Yeah, he was really helpful. I said we just wanted to go and pay our respects.”

Gilligan says, “Good work, let’s go.”

He dashes off, Savita wearily following.

The scene changes.

In Sutton Coldfield Park, Cornelius Gilligan and Savita are climbing wordlessly up to where Ravitraj was killed. Eventually they get there, and Gilligan gets onto his hands and knees and looks around. Savita just stands, looking around the park. Suddenly she shouts as the Snake leaps from cover to attack them. (The Snake must be wearing gloves for this scene, for reasons that will be apparent.) She stumbles back away from him, and Gilligan gets to his feet to grapple with the attacker. But the Snake has the advantage and gets his hands around Gilligan’s throat; Gilligan struggles to pull the deadly fingers away but the Snake is too strong. As Savita looks around for a branch or a rock she can use to attack the Snake, an unexpected ally arrives on the scene: Detective Grimm. He grabs the Snake from behind and tries to pull him away; as the Snake twists to face him there is a snap; one of his fingers comes away in Gilligan’s hand; disgusted, Gilligan drops the bloody item. The Snake frees himself from Detective Grimm, looks at the number of people ranged against him, and runs off. Detective Grimm tries to run after him, but returns after a moment having lost his quarry in the woods.

Gilligan says, “It’s good to meet you, Detective, if a bit of a surprise...”

Detective Grimm says, “I knew there was something weird about this case right away. When you said you were coming up here I decided to follow my nose... I thought something might happen.”

Gilligan says, “I came here for just the same reason.”

Savita says (pointing at the finger on the ground), “Seeing as you’re here, do you want to collect the evidence?”

Detective Grimm says (picking it up and putting it in a plastic evidence bag; speaking to Savita), “You realise that I need an explanation for all this for my report. And you should introduce your mysterious friend.”

Savita says (to Gilligan), “Aren’t explanations your thing? And you can introduce yourself. You don’t normally need so much encouragement.”

Gilligan says (to Detective Grimm), “Come back with us to her place... We’ll tell you everything, but you won’t be putting any of it in a report.”

Detective Grimm says (suddenly formal), “Is that a threat?”

Gilligan says, “Hardly. But take my word for it, you won’t put it in a report.”

Savita says, “Not unless you want to spend your early retirement in a padded cell...”

The scene changes.

Savita’s living room. Detective Grimm is there and so is Cornelius Gilligan. Savita is just making them a drink. Gilligan is nosing through her CDs.

Gilligan says (calling to Savita), “Nice place you have here. Superhero chic?”

While Detective Grimm automatically looks up at the superhero posters on the wall, Gilligan unobtrusively takes a folded piece of paper from inside his jacket and puts into a CD – let’s say Violent Femmes. Savita comes back in with cups of tea before he has a chance to put the CD back.

Savita says, “I was thinking more of neo-mythic grandeur...”

Gilligan says, “Not bad... boyfriend just moved out?”

Savita says, “Two months ago. But I resent the implication that they aren’t mine.”

Gilligan says (ignoring her), “So this guy put these up and left your paintings to rot? Nice guy.”

Savita says, “The posters are mine, buster. What are you doing with my CD?”

Gilligan says (holding it up for her to see), “Wasn’t this our song?” (sings) “Let me go o-on...!” (not singing in the face of disapproval from both others) “My voice isn’t so bad...”

Savita says, “It is.”

Detective Grimm says, “No, it’s worse.”

Gilligan says, “Well, thanks... never got around to buying the album, myself... guess it didn’t mean as much to me as it did to you...”

Savita says (coming and grabbing it off him), “Oh, I’m still so hung up on you, you know... I play this album every night and cry that you’re not here... Shall I put it on, we can test those embers...?”

Gilligan says (grabbing it back and putting it away), “Not right now.”

Detective Grimm says (clearing his throat), “I know the two of you have more important things than multiple homicides to discuss, but if you don’t mind...”

He takes the plastic bag from his pocket.

Detective Grimmatt says, "For a start, who was that nine-fingered man?"

He stops there, and takes a closer look at the bag.

Detective Grimmatt says, "That's odd."

Savita says, "What is it?"

Gilligan steps forward and grabs the bag. He takes a look and opens it despite the protests of Detective Grimmatt:

Detective Grimmatt says, "Hey that's evidence!"

Gilligan says (holding the gloved finger), "I'd say this evidence has already been contaminated, wouldn't you, officer?"

Holding the finger out for both the others to see, Gilligan takes off the part of the glove that remains on the finger. Despite the blood on the glove, the finger is made of solid wood. Gilligan passes it to Savita, and sits back to think. Savita and Detective Grimmatt just look at each other in puzzlement.

Gilligan says, "There is another option. I think that our killer might be a golem."

Savita says, "What's a golem?"

Detective Grimmatt says, "It's like a zombie."

Gilligan says, "Nearly, but not quite. A zombie is a dead person's body reanimated without a soul. A golem supposed to be an artificial body animated by the spirits of the dead. They're supposed to be a Jewish invention, and originally they were used to gain revenge on those who had abused the Jewish people. But like any technology, inevitably it fell into the wrong hands at some point."

Savita says, "Great, so we're talking Chucky."

Gilligan says, "Or Pinocchio on a particularly bad day... Once the finger was disconnected from the body, it began to revert to its normal state."

Savita says, "Why didn't they bring him back in his own body, with the soul and body together?"

Gilligan says (almost imperceptibly wincing), "It is possible to do that, apparently, but the reanimation never lasts for long."

Detective Grimmatt says, "So what now?"

Gilligan says (looking at his watch), "Well, I need to get some sleep. I've had a really bad day. I'll let Savita fill you in all the details –"

Savita says, "Thanks!"

Gilligan says, "– while I get some well-deserved rest. Then tomorrow, we have to do some preparatory work before we make our move... For one thing, I want to check out the famous buried church of Birmingham, referred to in almost every one of the great works of occult literature, from the Necronomicon to the Unnaussprechlichen Kulten of Von Junzt..."

Detective Grimmatt says (drawing Gilligan out, not really wanting to let on that he knows about a lot of this stuff already), "But it's only been like that a few years..."

Gilligan says, "Then wouldn't you say it is surprising that the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, knew about it centuries ago? Either he saw the future, or someone created the buried church with those books in mind... Either way, I think it could be important."

Gilligan starts to go off to bed.

Savita says (racking her brains), "Where should I start?"

Then Gilligan turns back to them.

Gilligan says, "There are a couple of other things, detective. When we're ready to make a move, we'll give you a call – and it'll be best to come alone, because the guy we're up against could easily turn somebody... well, turn them bad... The fewer of us involved, the smaller the chance of that is. The other thing: Savita might call you sometime before that with an unusual request –"

Detective Grimmatt looks at Savita, who shrugs.

Gilligan says, "Please grant it and help her as far as you can."

Detective Grimmatt says, "I'll do my best."

Gilligan goes off to bed, discreetly swiping the Godzilla from Savita's bag on the way, and Savita gets ready to tell Detective Grimmatt all the details of this murky business.

The scene changes.

Birmingham city centre. Savita and Cornelius Gilligan are walking across the square, starting from the steps near the lions going up past the fountains, and then in the direction of the buried church.

Savita says, "Do you really think this place is relevant to all this?"

Gilligan says, "Not really. But I've got a feeling about this place; plus, it's just darn interesting – a half-buried church! Who would have thought it? We have to find a way to pass the time before we make our move..."

Savita says, "Now that's the bit I don't understand. Why do we need to wait?"

Gilligan says, "Well, for starters we don't know who we are moving against. In theory it would be possible to trace the golem through its finger, but I'm just not powerful enough to do that yet."

Savita says, "I thought you could do anything... especially after screwing during the full moon..."

Gilligan says, "Against a regular Joe like you, maybe, but a powerful guy like the one we're up against has powerful defensive magic."

They get to the buried church.

Gilligan says, "Isn't it terrific? It's, like, buried!"

Savita says, "Yeah, amazing. So what are we waiting for?"

Gilligan says (glancing over his shoulder), "When I say run, run. We're waiting for them to attack us."

Savita says, "You what?"

She looks around and sees the Snake advancing towards them rapidly. If at all possible, it would be great to have Amardevita and Mohander sitting around in shot, having ice lollies or something.

Savita says, "Oh, fucking great plan, Gilligan!"

Gilligan says, "Run!"

She runs, he doesn't, at least until he's sure that the Snake is coming after him. Then he starts to run, toward the left-hand library doors. The Snake pursues him.

Gilligan runs out the back of the library, stops to catch his breath and looks back to see if the Snake is close behind. Out of the shadows steps Veronica.

Veronica says, "Gilligan, here!"

Gilligan says, "Veronica! We thought you were dead!"

Veronica says (stepping toward him), "No, I'm not."

She steps back.

Veronica says, "But you are..."

Gilligan looks down in horror at his stomach, where blood is spreading from a stabbing wound. The Snake slides through the doors, and smiles at Veronica, who smiles back. They stroll off as Gilligan slides to the ground.

Gilligan says (looking at the blood on his hands), "I didn't think it would be like this." (he winces) "Who'd expect it to hurt so much..?"

Savita bursts through the doors, and stops in shock: this is very nearly one trauma too many for her.

Savita says, "Cornelius!"

Gilligan says (losing his strength), "Yeah, they got me... but it isn't as bad as it seems."

Savita says, "You mean you'll be all right?"

Gilligan says (even weaker), "Um, no; can you see all this blood!? I'm going to die, Savita, I'm afraid."

Savita says, "You can't die now; I need you; the world needs you!"

Gilligan says (on the verge of death, but with a smile), "The moment has been prepared for; brave heart, Tegan!" (He reaches into his jacket and gives her Godzilla.)

Savita says, "You can't do this to me..."

Gilligan says (as he dies), "Take him, it'll give you some protection, and might prove useful... Remember our favourite song... play it... one

more... time."

Savita stands looking at him.

The scene changes.

Cornelius Gilligan's grave. Savita is there alone, in black, with some flowers. She puts the flowers down.

Savita says, "They couldn't wait to get you buried, Cornelius ... they said you died from natural causes and Det Vijay said it was safer to let it go... that he would do what he could to protect me..." (she begins to almost cry) "Why did you let them do this? I was relying on you, Cornelius. I trusted you to look after me... .. I guess that's pretty lame... But things aren't looking good..."

The scene changes.

Back at Savita's house. She's just collected the newspaper from the letterbox. She's maudlin and talking to Godzilla again, slumping on the sofa.

Savita says (reading out the headline to Godzilla), "Chaos spreading over the country... They'll come for me any day now... I know Cornelius said you'd protect me, but for how long? Pretty soon they'll be in control."

She switches on the TV, and watches a bit of Captain Mutant's Radioactive Half Hour.

Captain Mutant: "Now is the time, kids! This is the day, this is the hour, this... is this! The apocalypse is here! Soon you will all live in my radioactive world! Isn't that great?!"

There's the sound of kids cheering off-screen. Savita switches off, shaking her head wearily.

Savita says, "There's nothing I can do; I don't have any contacts in the occult world, I have no secret knowledge; I don't even know who I'm fighting! A rubber dinosaur just isn't going to tip the scales in my favour... however handsome it may be..."

She's pretty dejected, and goes over to get a CD. Looking for something to lift her spirits, she remembers Gilligan's last words...

Savita says (smiling sadly), "'Remember our song...'"

She takes the CD from the rack and goes over to put it on. By the stereo, she opens the case and takes out the CD without really looking; she puts it on (the track is Blister in the Sun); it starts to play, as she turns, something falls out of the case. She puts down the case and bends to pick up the thing. It is a note, folded up. She looks at Godzilla (he's not responsible) and begins to open it.

Savita says (puzzled), "It's from Cornelius..." (thinking) "He must have put it in here the other day. 'Dear Savita, Go to Randolph Street, love Cornelius.

ps. Don't worry.' Well that's wonderful. Very helpful. I suppose he was going to meet me there... There's no point going now..." (Savita takes a good look at Godzilla) "Like I have better things to do... Maybe he's set up a meeting for me or something."

Godzilla still has nothing to say; but Savita resolves to go. She grabs the monster, pops him in her pocket, grabs her coat, and leaves in a rush.

The scene changes.

Savita arrives on Randolph Street. Nothing is happening, other than all the usual craziness. She looks around, then notices an occult shop, which she had never noticed before. She steps inside.

The scene changes.

Interior of an occult bookshop. (We can film part of this in Brighton, even if it is set in Birmingham.) Savita enters the shop, looking around aimlessly. But she seems to be drawn to the back of the room.

Cut to: studio shot. Savita coming in through a curtain into a dark and dusty back room. She's drawn to one item. An ancient-looking book, tied up in thick string. Trying to move away from it, she cannot. This is it! She picks it up. Suddenly she is startled by a shopkeeper who enters the back room behind her.

Savita says (a bit panicky and scared), "Sorry! Am I allowed back here? I promise I wasn't going to steal it!"

The shopkeeper says (smiling in a kind way), "Is that all you want? You can have it."

Savita says, "Are you sure? It looks very valuable."

The shopkeeper says, "Nonsense – it's nothing more than scrap paper to us..." (she leans forward and speaks more quietly) "...because we don't have a use for it, and I think you do."

Savita says (stepping back), "What do you mean? What do you know?"

The shopkeeper says, "Look, don't panic... we heard on the grapevine that someone would need the book."

Savita says, "That would be the psychic grapevine, right?"

The shopkeeper says (smiling), "Um, I suppose. Although initiates tend to call it the internet..." (more seriously) "I'm just sorry there isn't more we can do to help..."

Savita says (tucking the book into her bag), "Well, thanks then. I have to go now; not that I know why or where..."

The shopkeeper says, "Let the book do the work..."

Savita says (looking at her oddly), "Right.

Thanks."

Savita dashes out through the curtain, leaving the shopkeeper shaking her head sadly.

The shopkeeper says, "I hope she will be strong enough."

A ghostly Katherine steps out of the shadow.

Katherine says, "She will be. She has to be. For all of us... If she fails, even the dead will suffer."

The scene changes.

Savita's home. She has taken the still bound-up book to her little study. Setting Godzilla on the desk beside it, she takes some scissors and begins to cut the strings which hold the book shut. She's still puzzled, obviously, not knowing what the book holds, but suspecting it might be a weapon she can use. There is no title on the outside. She opens the book once the string is removed. On the first page is the author's name, Howard Phillips, the publication date, and title, all of which are handwritten. She reads out the title.

Savita says, "(In German:) The Souls of the Damned. (In English:) The... something... of the... something..." (she notices the date) "1401!"

She turns the page... there is a single line of German, the rest is blank. She turns another page, then another, and another; all are blank. She slams the book back onto the table.

Savita says, "Damn!"

Not one to give up, she opens the book back onto the page with one line. She tries to read it out.

Savita says (in German), "Which damned soul reads this book?" (she gets to her feet) (in English) "I'm sure I've got a German dictionary around here somewhere, from when I went skiing in Austria as a kid..."

The scene changes.

Savita surrounded by a massive pile of books. She continues to dig through the boxes, and finally, triumphantly, she lifts out a German dictionary.

Savita says (triumphant, but trying to keep her own expectations low), "Like this is going to help anyway..."

She rushes back to the desk and begins to look up the words of the title.

Savita says, "The... Souls... of the... Damned. Lovely." (she turns to the single line again) "Which... damned... soul... reads this book?"

She sits back and thinks for a moment. Then she takes a pen and writes her name at the end of the line. Suddenly she's pushed back and the camera focuses directly on the page: it is writing itself. Words appear in English, beginning with the title: Resurrecting the Dead... There's a diagram, of a man on his back in a

shallow stream. When it is done, Savita returns, and looks at the finished page in astonishment. At first she is just surprised at what has happened; then she notices what the page actually says...

Savita says, "I can bring Cornelius back to life? I don't believe it." (she reads from the text) "'If the necessary preparations were made; that is, if part of the soul was left on the material plane as an anchor, arrangements made to conserve the body, and a willing resurrector found, a damned soul, otherwise lost to the pits of hell, may be forced to return...'"

Savita says, "I'm going to need help to get the body. And what does it mean, an anchor..." (she trails off, looking at Godzilla) "Ahh, a bit like Star Trek III..." She grabs the monster and dashes for the phone.

The camera looks at what she was reading; the page blows over: there was a part she missed... "But this return will only be temporary, for hell does not give up a trophy fairly won..."

The scene changes.

Near the graveyard, Detective Grimm, carrying a shovel, being led by Savita to the graveyard.

The scene changes.

At a stream in Sutton Coldfield Park. Detective Grimm is dragging a bag in which is Cornelius Gilligan's body. Savita is badgering him to hurry.

Savita says, "Come on, hurry up!"

Detective Grimm says, "I don't know why I'm doing this... if things weren't so desperate..."

They get to the bank of the stream, and Detective Grimm opens the bag, to reveal Cornelius Gilligan's bloody corpse – because no one could see the blood, no one cleaned it off.

Detective Grimm says, "Okay, what now?"

Savita says, "Put him in the water."

Detective Grimm rolls the body into the centre of the stream – it's very shallow, so Cornelius Gilligan's face isn't underwater or anything. If the weather is just too cold for this, we could use one of the little bridges, and have his hands and feet in the water, in a way reminiscent of an electrical connection. Savita tucks the Godzilla figure into his shirt.

Savita says, "It's something to do with the running water... it acts like a gateway to the spirit world... you know like in old King Arthur and Cu Chulainn stories...?"

Detective Grimm says (shaking his head), "Of course not... policemen don't know about things like that." (his phone rings, he answers, listens, then speaks) "Okay." (he puts the phone away) "I've got to go. This thing is escalating everywhere, and they need me firefighting in six different cities at once..."

Will you be okay here?"

Savita says, "I'll be fine. Hopefully he will be too. Thanks for your help, detective."

Detective Grimm says (leaving), "Give me a call when it's time to kick ass!"

Savita laughs and nods.

The scene changes.

Savita sits with Cornelius Gilligan through the night. She isn't sure why. She's desperate, so she's clutching at straws. But is there any love for Gilligan there? Sometimes she takes hold of a hand, and we see the conflicting emotions on her face. Other times she's pacing up and down, or watching out for attackers. It is the long dark night of her soul; pushed to the very brink of sanity, she's still holding it together by a thread. It seems that she does reach a resolution, that she did love him. Eventually she falls asleep, a bit happier through resolving her conflicting emotions. Some time later, we watch as Gilligan, the blood having washed the blood from his shirt, bursts up from the water, gasping his first new breaths. He looks around, a bit puzzled, as he tries to reorientate himself. Savita begins to stir. Gilligan looks a bit uncomfortable, then reaches inside his shirt and pulls out Godzilla.

Gilligan says, "I'm back, Godzilla, and, it seems, not a moment too soon!"

He throws the monster at Savita; it hits her and wakes her up. Gilligan gets up out of the water, and starts to wring out his clothes.

Savita says (overjoyed), "Cornelius Gilligan! You're alive!"

Gilligan says (gingerly allowing her to hug him), "Technically you'd have to say I'm undead, but I feel pretty good... thanks to you."

Savita says, "Gilligan, there are so many things I need to tell you... my feelings -"

Gilligan says (interrupting her: he seems flippant, but he's trying to protect her from getting hurt later on), "Will have to wait, I'm afraid. We have work to do. Come along: the game is afoot!"

He rushes off, and she stumbles after him.

The scene changes.

Savita's living room. Cornelius Gilligan and Savita. Gilligan is flicking through the channels, most are normal, but on one there's Captain Mutant ranting, on another Detective Grimm answering questions...

Gilligan says, "I see things have got worse while I've been away..."

Savita says, "Things are falling apart everywhere; politicians are talking about breaking away from Europe, breaking ties with the US, becoming a

Fortress England... I even heard one saying we should try and get the Suez canal back! The whole country is going mad... Can you stop it?"

Gilligan says, "Well, you know what, Savita? Just for you, I think I can. I've got a little more under the bonnet these days, if you know what I mean..."

Savita says (missing the double entendre), "So how come dying made you more powerful?"

Gilligan says, "Till I put it to the test, it's hard for me to be sure it has worked, but in simple terms the theory is that the other side is a pretty spooky place, and if you know what you're about, you can bring a good chunk of that spookiness back with you. I can feel it within me; there's a link with that place that is feeding me..." (pause) "Anyway, now I know who we're up against. I spoke to the spirits of those he had killed."

Savita says, "Who is it?"

Gilligan says, "An ancient Indian sorcerer, going by the name of Mohander the Terrible. He terrorised the sub-continent for the best part of 13 centuries. Seems he came here in the sixties, following some big setback, and he's been biding his time ever since. Growing stronger, more dangerous..."

Savita says, "Sounds like trouble, Cornelius..."

Gilligan says, "That's right, my kind of trouble!"

Savita says (looking dubious), "Say it often enough you might start to believe it. So what was being dead like?"

Gilligan says, "It was actually kind of uncool... You wouldn't like it and it definitely does not come recommended. Then again, I doubt it would be quite the same for you, not having signed away your soul..."

Savita says, "Signed away..?"

Gilligan says (grabbing Savita by the shoulders), "You didn't sign your name in the Book of Damned Souls, did you?" (Savita nods in a very frightened manner) "My god, that means you'll go straight to the 63rd circle of hell – reserved for those who deface books! You'll have to spend eternity cleaning baby poo off children's books..."

Savita says, "You tit."

Gilligan says, "Ha ha! Have you got the finger?"

Savita says (digging it out of her pockets and holding it up; sarcastically), "Where would you like me to put it?"

Gilligan says, "You know, that's the nicest offer I've had since undying... but there's no time for that right now."

The scene changes.

Savita is outside a sports shop; Cornelius Gilligan is inside. She looks at her watch; he finally comes

out. He shows her a pack of three darts.

Gilligan says, "Made in Birmingham from dead men's fingers!"

Savita just looks puzzled, not quite sure what he is up to.

The scene changes.

Savita outside a newsagents. Cornelius Gilligan runs out brandishing a map of Birmingham.

The scene changes.

Inside Savita's house. Cornelius Gilligan is drawing occult symbols onto the wings of the darts.

The scene changes.

Savita's back garden. They've pinned the map to the fence. Savita is just fixing a blindfold around Gilligan's head.

Savita says, "Will this work?"

Gilligan says, "Should do. You need to understand what's going on. The occult forces at work are actually distorting space and time around the city in the same way gravity does around a black hole. That's the source of the chaos." (he pulls the blindfold back off) "The Terrible Mohander has grasped the heart of the country in his hand and he's twisting for all he's worth. But that will lead us to him... Sympathetic magic is all about using the representation of a thing to affect the thing itself. In this case, we're going to let the thing – the city – affect the representation – the map. We've made darts out of the golem's finger. I'll throw them at the map. The plan is that they will follow the lines of distortion to their epicentre... Do you follow?"

Savita says, "I understand what you're trying to say, but it still sounds like hogwash."

Gilligan says, "Hey, you're talking to a dead man; you have to allow me the benefit of the doubt in these kind of things!"

Savita smiles.

Gilligan says, "The other way this could be explained is that I already know the answer, subconsciously, and that this is the way of digging it up from the murky depths of my soul."

Savita says, "Sounds familiar..."

Gilligan says, "It might do. This is a refinement of a technique I first learnt from Twin Peaks."

Savita says, "Twin Peaks..? You mean when Agent Cooper was throwing stuff at stuff?"

Gilligan says, "It's a good technique; Cooper was a good cop; shame he got stuck down there in the Black Lodge..."

Savita says (trying to put the blindfold back on), "It was tragic. But back to the matter in hand?"

She puts the blindfold on him, and he throws the three darts. He takes the blindfold off and they go up

to look at the map. One dart is stuck in a stream in Sutton Coldfield park; a second is stuck in Handsworth; the third is nowhere to be seen.

Gilligan says (pointing to the first), "Hey look, you did that!"

Savita says, "What's the other?"

Gilligan says, "Must be where the Terrible Mohander is based."

Savita says (looking around on the ground), "Where's the other dart?"

Gilligan says (shrugging), "Dunno... I think it's time to call Detective Grimmitt. It's time to make our move..."

The scene changes.

Savita on the phone to Detective Grimmitt.

Savita says, "We'll meet you there, then, at 4.00 pm. ... Okay, bye."

She puts the phone down, then notices a photo nearby, of her and her university friends, back when they were all still alive. The third arrow has pierced the image of Cornelius Gilligan. She looks around, but there is no way the dart could have got into the room.

The scene changes.

Outside on the corner of the street. Savita, Cornelius Gilligan and Detective Grimmitt together; having just met up. One possibility for this scene might be to use a combination of special video and shaky camera effects to give the impression of reality shuddering...

Gilligan says (to Detective Grimmitt), "You don't seem surprised to see me."

Detective Grimmitt says, "I've seen weird before. I've seen weirder. It's what I specialise in."

Savita says, "You're kidding, right?"

Detective Grimmitt says, "I'll tell you about it sometime. Did you know that until three years ago Halifax was a suburb of London?"

Savita says, "What?"

Gilligan says, "Come on, don't freak her out. We need her steady for this."

Savita says, "I'm steady, don't worry. I want to get the bastard that killed all my friends."

Gilligan says, "Oh, yeah, all your friends. There is something I forgot to mention..."

Savita says, "Yeah?"

Gilligan says, "I never told you who stabbed me; I guess you just assumed it was the golem... it was Veronica."

Savita says, "Veronica is alive?!"

Gilligan says, "Yeah, but she's... gone over to the dark side. She belonged to them completely."

Savita says, "Can we save her?"

Gilligan says, "Only by killing the Terrible Mohander."

Savita says, "Then let's do it."

Detective Grimmitt says, "Right, but don't get carried away. I have some latitude in these cases, but we can't just run in there blasting away."

Savita says, "It looks pretty normal from here, but won't there be armed guards and stuff?"

Gilligan says, "Probably not. He doesn't need them. Or at least, he didn't yesterday; hopefully he hasn't realised that today I'm back in town, bigger, badder and tougher than ever!"

Savita says, "You look just as skinny-assed as ever to me..."

The scene changes.

Detective Grimmitt knocks on the door, Cornelius Gilligan and Savita hanging back.

Detective Grimmitt says, "Remember, play it cool..."

Amardevita answers the door and smiles at them. Amardevita says, "Hello. Mohander was expecting you. Please come in!"

The three adventurers look at each other. This isn't what they expected. Cornelius Gilligan shrugs and indicates they should go in, and the others don't have any better suggestions.

Detective Grimmitt says, "Thanks."

Amardevita turns and leads them into the front room, where Ravitraj was held at the beginning.

Amardevita says, "Sit down, please; I'll call Mohander. He'll be glad to see you."

She goes to the bottom of the stairs and calls Mohander; the three adventurers look at each other, and, rather than sitting down, arrange themselves spread out against the far wall. Amardevita returns, seemingly unfazed by their aggressive postures. She stands there smiling at them, saying nothing, creeping them out.

The scene changes.

Same set-up as previous scene. Mohander enters, followed by the Snake and Veronica. Mohander sits in his armchair, his two henchpeople take up positions on either side. Cornelius Gilligan begins to light a cigarette, but Amardevita tells him off (bad tempered), "No smoking, please. What a dirty habit!" (sweet again) "I'll go and make everyone tea, yes?"

Mohander nods and waves for her to go. Mohander and Cornelius Gilligan stare each other out. The Snake starts to make a move forward, but Mohander waves him back.

Mohander says (to Cornelius Gilligan), "I'm surprised to see you are still alive... sometimes I feel

my colleagues do not care about their work enough..." (Snake and Veronica look sheepish) "You were very foolish to come here, though. I am far too powerful for you!"

Mohander waves Snake forward. The assassin moves toward Cornelius Gilligan, but Detective Grimmett leaps to meet him, throwing a punch. The punch connects, but it feels as if he has just punched a block of wood. Nevertheless, Snake turns to deal with Detective Grimmett, and wrestles him to his knees. In the confusion, Veronica gets hold of Savita, getting her arm around Savita's neck. This leaves Cornelius Gilligan and Mohander to face each other.

Mohander gets out of his armchair and steps forward.

Mohander says, "I have lived 1500 years. Your reality is dying at my hands! Soon the way will be opening! The Elder Gods will come! And you will all die! Ha ha ha ha ha! You will die! Ha ha ha!"

Gilligan says, "Been there, done that. Shall we do this the traditional way?"

Mohander says, "Agreed."

Gilligan says, "It's good to know that even megalomaniacal demon wizards still have a sense of honour..."

The two of them clasp hands. They strain, the effort showing in their faces. Occult symbols flare up on their faces (Mohander's matching the ones we saw in the opening scene of the film). Close up on the eyes!

Mohander says (through gritted teeth), "You have too much power!" (shakes head and grins) "But I still have more!"

Gilligan says (also through gritted teeth, but he's weakening), "I died... but I came back... I brought power... and I brought some friends back with me... perhaps you know them..?"

Suddenly, possibly in black or white, the souls of the dead appear: Jason, Samantha, Ravitraj, Katherine... They each lay a hand on Mohander, who is visibly drained by it. The ghosts disappear.

Mohander steps back. Cornelius Gilligan drops to one knee, exhausted by the effort. There is a clatter of wood; deprived of the power that animated him, Snake has returned to his natural state. Amardevita falls to the ground, unconscious. Veronica falls to the ground, unconscious. Savita and Detective Grimmett take a moment to steady themselves.

Mohander says, "You think I'm so easily

defeated?"

Mohander swats Gilligan with the back of one hand, sending Gilligan crashing to the ground. Mohander picks up his favourite axe from beside his armchair and makes to attack Gilligan with it. Detective Grimmett rushes forward, but is pushed back like a feather. Savita is frantically searching Veronica for the knife she killed Gilligan with. We see Mohander raise the axe above his head. We see Gilligan resign himself to his fate. Then Mohander falls back into his armchair, and slumps, rolling forward to reveal the knife in his back, placed there by Savita.

Savita rushes to Gilligan.

Savita says, "Are you all right?"

Gilligan says, "Thanks for saving me... but I'm afraid it's all over now; the reanimation spell you did doesn't last long anyway, and I'm afraid all this excitement has... rather worn it out..."

Savita says, "I can cast it again!"

Gilligan says (slipping away), "I'm afraid it only works the one time... I saw this coming... don't blame yourself..."

Savita says, "Cornelius, I think I might have loved you..."

Gilligan might turn to dust at this point, or something along those lines.

Detective Grimmett says (coming over to her), "I think he's gone now, Savita."

Savita begins to weep. He tries to comfort her.

Veronica says (behind them, just waking up), "Where am I? Savita? Is that Cornelius Gilligan?"

Savita says (rushing to her), "You made it! Are you back to your old self?"

Veronica says, "I think so; was I ever someone else?"

Detective Grimmett says, "You don't want to know. We'd better get her out of here before explaining things..."

Savita says, "You're right. There's nothing left for us to do here. I mean, I've saved the universe... what else is there?"

They help Veronica to her feet and leave the room. We follow them out, and watch them struggle heroically down the street; then we come back inside the house, and watch as Amardevita wakes up, for the first time in decades, really, only to see her husband slumped, dead, in his armchair; the shock shows on her face; she goes over to him, and begins to sob...

The Terrible Trio Dig to the Earth's Core!

Stephen William Theaker
Silver Scribe Emperor

Young Roli got out of bed that morning with a spring in his step and a song in his heart. "Oh la," he sang, "oh la, la la, la la!"

He loved staying at his grandmother's house in Uttar Pradesh each summer. He loved his home in Leningrad, of course, but the times he spent in India were always so magical. It was fortunate that his father's airship made regular trips along the border, making it convenient to drop him off and pick him up, at the beginning and end of summer. When he got back to Russia, his mother would be full of questions as ever; it was so upsetting for her that for security reasons the authorities would not let her return to her home, but that was the price she had chosen to pay when she fell in love with a son of communist Russia.

But none of that was in Roli's mind as he bounded down the stairs for breakfast. His best friends Rano and Amit were already there. He had friends back in Russia, of course, but they never seemed to have quite as much fun together.

After the usual squabble over breakfast, they went outside.

Roli's grandma had been quite well off, her late husband having been reasonably well-to-do, there being even a suggestion that he might have descended from ancient nobility. Upon his death, most of the money had gone to improve the lot of the local villagers. Grandpa, Roli understood, had been a kind man, but one prone to indulgence rather than action, and in contrast grandma had taken practical steps to make things better, paying for running water to be extended to every home, sending a local man to be trained as a doctor, and performing a multitude of such goodnesses that ultimately made it one of the happiest and most comfortable villages in the country.

"What shall we do, Roli?" asked Rano.

Amit punched her in the arm. "Why don't you ask me? I get good ideas too."

"Shut up," she told him. "And don't hit me." She ran off to the nearest field, leaping over the fence like a gazelle. They guessed that she might be crying.

"Amit," said Roli, after getting his friend in a headlock, "do you have to be like that?"

"Yes I do."

Roli twisted his ear, and the younger boy screamed. Roli let him go abruptly, in case the noise had brought his grandmother running.

No one came, and they ambled in the direction Rano had taken.

"She was my friend first," said Amit, kicking up little whirls of dust.

"So?" Roli didn't really know what he was getting at.

"So she's my friend, not yours. Why does she always want to hear your ideas?"

Roli thought carefully about it, since his friend seemed to be upset. He came to a conclusion. "I think it's because I am the best. And you stink, rather like poo."

Amit slapped him on the back of the head and ran off laughing before Roli could react. Despite the aching head, Roli was pleased to see his friend happy again.

When he caught up with the other two, they seemed to be reconciled, and plotting some kind of adventure.

"My idea," said Amit, "is that we should dig a hole in the ground, and see how deep we can get. I have read a book where it said there are dinosaurs underground."

"Fossils?" asked Rano. "I don't want to dig all day to find some boring rocks."

"No, it's not just that," he explained. "It was a book by Edgar Rice Burroughs, and there was a

whole world down there of dinosaurs and fighting.”

Roli made a doubting face. “It doesn’t seem likely.”

Amit shrugged. “It is scientific fact that there are living creatures beneath our feet, such as worms and things. It is only logical that there are larger creatures too. For example, on the surface of a lake, we can see small creatures like flies and snakes, but deeper down there are huge creatures like whales, sharks and giant squid.”

“Wowser,” said Rano. “That would be fabulous. If we found a giant spider or something we could take it to Bombay or London and put it on show. We would be the world-famous Rano Brothers!”

Roli thought that there might be something wrong with Amit’s logic, but he had a great fondness for digging, and so he wasn’t going to dissuade his friends from their project.

And so they started digging, but what they ultimately found was not what any of them expected.

Each of them had a small shovel, and they had to take frequent rests. Roli’s grandmother brought them several glasses of lemonade to keep their strength up in the hot sun. Before long, they had dug a hole the size of a small hut, and they had to consider the issue of what to do with the excavated earth. Roli suggested using it to build a castle, and so soon they had two projects on the go.

After a few days of this, the three children were sitting in their castle, sipping lemonade, and considering what to do next. The hole was now the size of a medium-sized house, and people were beginning to ask questions.

“What do you suggest?” asked Amit.

Roli ruminated a little. He had learnt this important skill from his father, who would always say to him, “Never be afraid to take time to think before speaking, son!” To which his mother would counter, “Remember also that there are times when you need to speak before thinking, Roli, or else important words may never be said.” He tended more towards his father’s point of view, even at that age, though it had yet to develop into the cast-iron trap it was in his later years.

“I think,” interjected Rano, since Roli had left them plenty of time to think for themselves, “that we should continue to dig, but make a tunnel instead of just a hole.”

“Yes,” said Amit. “I believe we should.”

“Yes,” said Rolnikov. “That is exactly what we should do.”

They spent the next few days building a tunnelling device. It proved necessary to engage some of the

other village children in the enterprise, but they were happy to be involved, upon the promise that they would be allowed to play in the mud castle from time to time. The three friends were happy to make that concession.

The first necessity was to abduct an elephant from a nearby timber yard. They left a note explaining their plans, and promised to bring back treasure together with the elephant, one week from that date. The village constable would probably have been engaged nevertheless, were he not Amit’s father.

The next step was to place the elephant, who they decided to call Mr Molephant, upon a gigantic treadmill, made from strong river reeds bound together by the other children, placed upon a framework made from strong but flexible young saplings. Amit and Rano watched the children carefully to make sure that their work was up to scratch, and when they were satisfied, they let them go home to their worried parents.

This apparatus then had to be connected to a large drill head, which the three friends made by bashing away at a large rock with smaller rocks. They considered surreptitiously borrowing hammers from the blacksmith but knew that it was very dangerous to play with real tools. Thus they worked through the night, keeping the whole village awake (though the banging and crashing sounds they made were so alarming that no one ventured outdoors to investigate), until as dawn approached they had virtually completed their digging apparatus.

They quickly ran to their respective homes to have breakfast and tell their families of their plans, because they knew it was very dangerous to leave the house without an adult knowing where they were going.

Roli’s grandma looked at him through her funny little spectacles. “You’re going to the earth’s core, you say?”

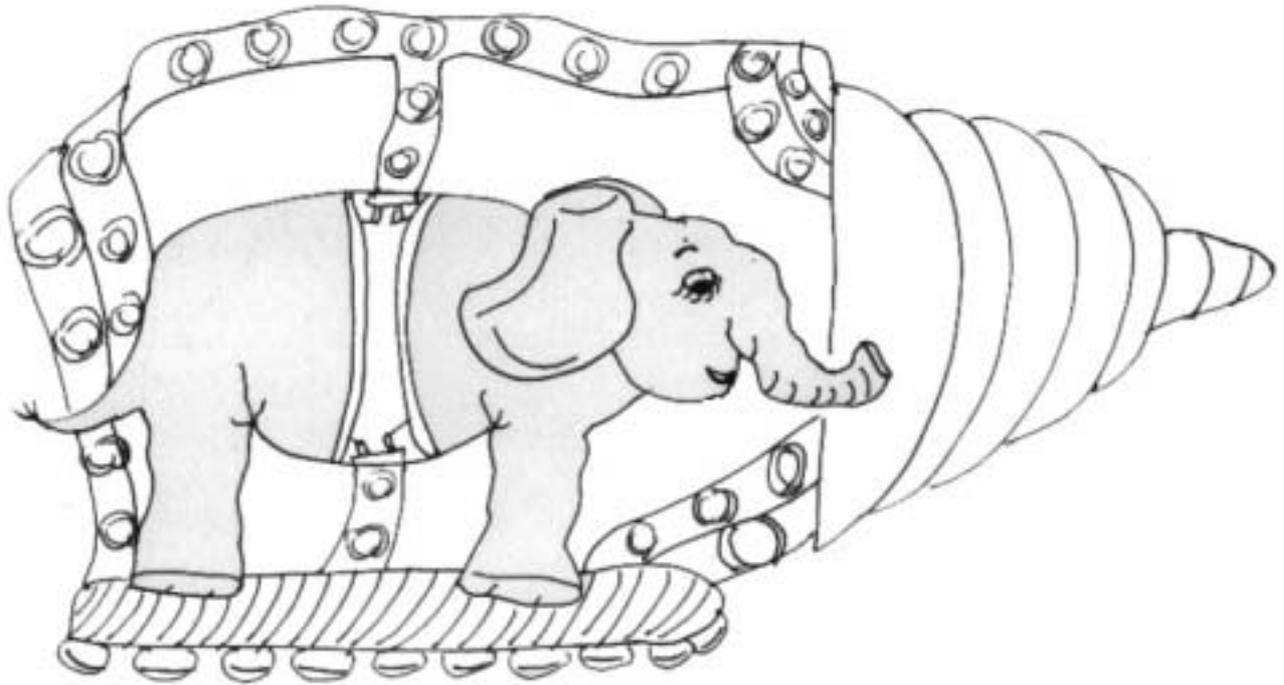
“Yes, grandma. We’ve created a Molephantular digging apparatus.”

“Well, so long as I know where you are. Don’t get your clothes too dirty. You look like a proper little gentleman in your lovely Russian suit, just like your father did when he spirited away my little girl. You’re not going to break any hearts are you?”

“No, grandma. I’m not even sure that there are people in the earth’s core, so breaking hearts will be very difficult.”

His grandma laughed. “Well, what about dear little Rano? She follows you around like a little puppy.”

Roli screwed up his face. “No way, grandma, don’t be so disgusting.”



She laughed. "Have fun at the earth's core, then, and look after your friends."

The conversations which Rano and Amit had with their parents ran along similar lines, and all three met up at the Molephant at 10.00 am. Of course, all three were a bit tired, after staying up all night working on the drill bit, but they had thought of that. Each had pilfered from their homes a padded footstool, and they tied all three to Mr Molephant's back. They were not exactly armchairs, but it would be comfortable enough for them to have a little nap on as they descended through the crust of the Earth.

And that was what they did. They took it in turns to sleep, two at a time, while the third guided the Molephant on its way through the ground. Progress was swift. During Roli's turn at the reins, he wondered where they might end up. Perhaps in an underground mole man's kingdom, or in a land of dinosaurs, in the Christian hell, or by the Greek river Styx, or perhaps, as he had once read in a newspaper, they would find a great fireball of molten lava, which would shrivel their skin and utterly destroy the Molephant the instant they encountered it. This was not a cheerful thought, so Roli tried to think of something else. In those days he loved to sing, something he soon grew out, and so he made up a song. Since Rano and Amit were sleeping through the racket made by the Molephant, he did not think there was any danger of waking them.

*"Off, off, off to the core
Of, of, of the earth,
Here, here, here we go,
To, to, a fiery death!"*

He sang it quite a few times before reflecting on the lyrics. It was a jolly tune, but it seemed his subconscious worries were making themselves felt despite his efforts.

Young Rolnikov reined in the Molephant and tugged on one of his ears to get him to trumpet a bit. He listened carefully to the echoes, and then woke the others up. They stared at him by the light of the four jars of fireflies hung at the corners of the Molephant's cage.

"What is it, Roli?" asked Rano blearily. "Are we there yet?"

Amit looked around. "I don't think so. We're quite a few miles down though. No sign of any subterranean civilisations yet, Roli?"

"I was using the Molephant sounding device—" he began, only for Amit to interrupt.

"What in the name of Uttar Pradesh is that?" He had obviously woken up in a funny mood. He stood up on his footstool and pounded his fists against the tunnel roof. "I demand to know!"

Rano pulled at his sleeve. "He just means the elephant's trunk, jitterbrain."

"Thou thunder gods smite me!" yelled Amit. "I call on thee, mighty Thor, to smash my brains with a

hammer!"

"Are you finished?" asked Roli. "I was just getting to the interesting bit."

"Sorry," said Amit. He sat back down and crossed his arms and legs. "I shall prevail, you know."

Roli gave him a gentle punch on the shoulder. "Of course you will, Amit, there's no doubt of that. But for now please listen. My soundings have shown that not much further into the earth we will find a cavern of some kind."

Rano punched the air. "Wowser!"

Amit kept his arms and legs crossed, but yelled "Yahoo!" with a smile.

"We don't know what will be in there," said Roli, "but I am fully confident of finding dinosaurs, at least, or giant worms. It only stands to reason. Do either of you have any objections, and can you confirm that your parents know where you are?"

"Yes they do," said Amit, "and I understand that there may be dinosaurs. In fact, if there are not at least giant worms, you will be held to account for instigating this boring adventure."

"Oh," said Roli, "it's hardly been boring!"

"Ha ha," laughed Amit, "I was making a joke. Boring, you see!"

They all laughed, but then they had to drink some water because of the dust that got into their throats.

"What about you, Rano?" said Roli once they had pulled themselves back together.

"My parents do know where I am," she confirmed. "They asked that if I were to be eaten by a monster, a telegram should be sent at the earliest opportunity."

"I think we can arrange that, so long as we too are not eaten."

"Right," shouted Amit, "let's go! I am six years old and not getting any younger! Let's do it before we're too old to enjoy it properly!"

"Molephant on!" shouted Roli.

"Forward ho!" shouted Rano.

Within minutes they had broken into the expected cavern – but it was not the cavern they expected. The Molephant rolled into it and came to a stop in front of a shining door. It was at least four metres high, and three wide – easily large enough for the whole Molephant to fit through, and being children, that was the first thought on their minds. It was wooden, at least apparently, and in the style of a English front door. It was white, but its edges glittered with a blue sparkling light that frittered itself into the surrounding darkness. There was no frame, and the door was free-standing in the middle of the cavern, which made it all the more mysterious.

"It's *not* a dinosaur," said Amit grumpily.

"What is up with you today?" asked Rano. "You've been funny ever since you woke up. I think this is very intriguing."

"I think he misses his mummy," laughed Roli. "She's normally there when he wakes up with a cuddle for him."

"I do *not* cuddle my mother!" He set his jaw.

"Well I suppose that explains why you are so grumpy," said Roli. "Whenever you wake up, you are reminded of how your mother does *not* cuddle you in the morning!"

"Shut up," said Amit. "My mother does cuddle me! But I am very grown-up and I just let her cuddle me so that she is happy. At least my mother can stand being in the same country as me."

"Now you just watch it!" said Roli angrily. "We were just having a joke and that is pushing it too far!"

"Well, don't say things about my mother and there won't be a problem, will there?"

Unnoticed by the quarrelling boys, Rano had got off the Molephant and gone to investigate the door. Walking all the way around it, she confirmed her initial suspicions that there was something magical, or at least, she corrected herself, something so scientifically amazing that it took on the appearance of magic to her eyes, about the door. She got as close to it as she dared, and was frightened by the way a few strands of unbound hair began to float up towards it. She quickly retied her topknot.

The boys were still arguing, over something and nothing, but she was able to phase them out, ignoring them to listen intently to the door. It made no overt noise, nothing that she could point to or say, "that, right there, is a noise!", but she felt a tingle in her ears, and a rumble in her feet. It intrigued her, and as a powerful sense of intrigue was one of her guiding motivations in life, she reached out a hand, gingerly, and then poked a finger toward the door. There was no electric shock, no violent alteration in her being, and if she were to be pressed on the matter, she would have confessed to a tiny bit of disappointment in that. She took her finger away and walked back to the boys.

They were staring at her in amazed horror.

"Where did you go?" demanded Amit.

"Oh," she replied, "you finally realised I walked away from your silly argument?"

"That's not what Amit means," said Roli with awe and sincerity in his voice. "You actually disappeared."

"What?"

"For about ten minutes, you were gone," said Amit, rushing to grab her hand. "We saw you

walking over to investigate the door, and then I think you must have touched it. We thought you were dead! Disintegrated!”

“Well I wasn’t,” she said sternly. “And if I were, it would have served you both right for neglecting the spirit of scientific inquiry in favour of petty squabbling. By rights, one of you should have touched it before me. It would only have been polite.”

“I think it is a portal of some kind,” said Amit, quickly recovering and releasing Rano’s hand with a shake. “I think it might take us somewhere.”

“How do we know it is safe?” asked Roli. “It must have been buried for a reason.”

Rano was thoughtful. “When I approached, I felt a kind of rumble. Is it possible that that is what brought us here, that at some level it was guiding the Molephant here, perhaps even guiding our actions on

the planet’s surface? I think we might have been brought here for a reason. I think I didn’t go through the portal, because I only touched it, I didn’t walk through. But touching it was enough to change me somehow, perhaps to an electrical form – if I had then passed through the door, I might have found myself somewhere else, reconverted to human form, as I was when I removed my hand from it.”

Amit clapped his hands. “Those are my thoughts exactly!”

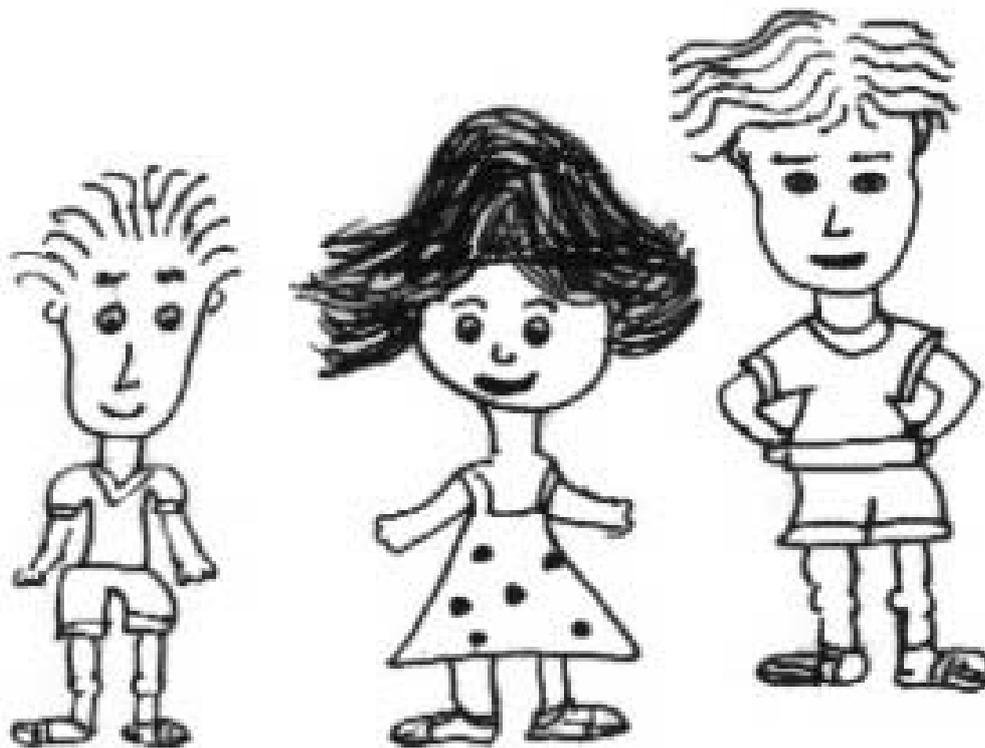
“Well then,” said Roli, climbing back onto the Molephant, “it seems our minds are made up.”

Rano and Amit were back upon their perches in seconds.

“Let’s drive the Molephant through,” said Rano.

Roli started the Molephant moving.

“Forward!” cried Amit. “To adventure!”



The Terrible Trio Meet The Flipstanley Who Moved Too Fast

Stephen William Theaker

Just a man, with man's courage

Having successfully escaped from the authorities, Flipstanley VII was in a quandary as to what to do next. Bobop was only a small town, and returning to it might prove unwise, since there would be so few opportunities to hide himself, not to mention the difficulties of procuring oil and other necessary food-stuffs. But on the other hand, there was nowhere else within easy reach, unless he acquired some means of transportation. Hopton Village was roughly a hundred kilometres away, and though he could make it overnight, with no certainty of finding shelter or supplies there, it was a risk. The villagers might wake in the morning to find him rusted to immobility on the village common.

"You'll never take me alive!" he shouted at Bobop, a speck on the horizon, waving a fist. Then, suddenly feeling foolish, he lifted an hand to shade his eyes, and engaged his mode of optimum opticality, which meant temporarily disengaging his hearing.

There were no signs of pursuit, but he felt sure that it would only be a matter of time. He was a wanted fugitive, after all, a dangerous criminal of the lowest order! If they caught him he would get his gizmos blown, no doubt, and that was something he was keen to avoid.

Suddenly he felt a great rumbling in his feet. He could not hear anything, but then remembered to re-engage his hearing. He couldn't believe his ears! It sounded as if the very earth beneath him was tearing itself apart. Flipstanley staggered back, anxious not to be caught in any imminent cataclysm. Before his very eyes, a huge block of stone rotated up through the surface.

"Astonishing!" he exclaimed. "Do I stand at the birth of a new mountain?"

But his astonishment did not end there.

The stone pushed through the gap it had opened to be followed by the most incredible combination of contraption and monstrosity, beyond anything he might ever have imagined. A flimsy looking framework of, he thought incredulously, grass, harboured a huge grey animal with an arm in the middle of its face and two white horns poking out of its cheeks. It considered Flipstanley with serene black eyes.

And yet, there was more!

Now that the creature was fully emerged, Flipstanley saw three small brown children sitting upon its back.

"Hello," waved a boy, who seemed to be the oldest of them.

"Ho there!" said a younger boy, leaping down from the creature's back to shake his hand.

"Hiya," said a girl, drawing in the reins of the creature and bringing it to rest. She hopped down to meet Flipstanley too.

"Hello," said the android, rather taken aback. "My name is Flipstanley VII."

Roli, Amit and Rano were no less amazed than Flipstanley. They had passed through the door, only to find themselves emerging into the light of this strange new sun, with no intervening digging. If they had been concerned enough, they could have looked behind themselves into a shallow hole to see a second door that was the twin of the one beneath Uttar Pradesh. But they were too excited about the new world they had discovered, and so they did not see the door shimmer one final time and disappear, leaving behind nothing but a muddy patch in a grassy hill.

Flipstanley shook hands with Rano and Roli, and all three children gave their names. "Are you from

Alpha.One?" he asked. "You don't look like the people here."

"No," said Amit, "we are humans from a planet called Earth."

"In that case I should explain, my little human chums, that I am an artificial life form, an android."

The children had thought that he looked odd, but not outrageously so. He had light brown skin, medium length black hair, and brown eyes. The shape of his face was a bit odd, but they had just put that down to him being an alien of some kind, or at least being some kind of future human colonist. Rano said as much to him.

"It is funny you should say that, and you are intuitively very close to the truth," he replied. "Because it is actually due to my android nature that I look as human as I do. Alpha.One is a human colony, though I do not know whether it is in your future, past or present!" He said this very dramatically, and the children looked at each other while he pointed one long spindly finger into the air. He waved it about a bit, and then continued. "The humans of this world, exposed to the odd radiations of our sun, would look strange to your eyes, with their green skins and hair of various colours – orange, purple and joso – a colour created by the light of this sun that would astonish your eyes!"

"How fascinating," said Roli. "That we should find ourselves on a far-off world, yet meet not its denizens, but instead their metallic servant."

The smile fell suddenly from Flipstanley's face and he drew himself up to his full height. "I will have you know that I am a denizen. I may be an artificial man, but there is nothing artificial about my denizenship."

Amit stood on his tiptoes to examine the android's face more carefully. He declared, "I think he is telling the truth."

"There you go!" said Flipstanley. "I am no mere servant! I am self-determining!"

Rano grabbed on of the android's hands and ran around him as if he was an English maypole. She began to sing:

*"Dance, dance, whichever world you're on,
I like to dance, sing, and I like to run!
Ha ha ha, hee hee hee, I love fun!"*

"Stop that!" said Flipstanley, alarmed. He grabbed Rano, gently but firmly, and made her stop dancing. He fearfully scanned the horizon.

Amit narrowed his eyes.

"What is it?" asked Roli. "What made you think he isn't just a servant?"

Amit pulled Rano away from the android and stood in front of her, crossing his arms in a very fierce way for a boy of six. "I believe he is telling the truth when he says he is self-determining because he is something that no menial brainless robot could ever be!"

"What is it?" asked Rano with a shiver, putting a hand on his shoulder to steady her nerves.

"I think I know now," said Roli, his usually trusting eyes developing a steely glint – it was many years before his eyes hardened permanently. He moved to stand by Amit, facing the android with a tough glare.

"He is a criminal!" shouted Amit, pointing an accusing finger. "Look at his shifty eyes, the way he checks the skies every few moments; his scuffed clothes; his being out here without any honest purpose; then his pride, then his boldness in addressing aliens like us so casually!"

"You mean he has nothing to fear!" said Rano. "The most dangerous kind of criminal of all."

"Well," said Roli, summoning all his courage, "what have you to say for yourself, Flipstanley?"

Flipstanley sighed, checked the horizon another time, and then sat on the grass. "It is hard to explain," he said, "but you are clearly very intelligent, despite your tiny size. I am sure you will understand."

The three children sat down too, although Rano jumped up again after a moment and ran to free Mr Molephant from his harness. "Don't eat too much grass at once," she warned him, calling towards one big ear, "we don't know if it will be compatible with our biology. So if you feel sick, just spit it out and wait till we get home!"

Once she was sitting back down, Flipstanley began. "It is true that I am on the run, having escaped from the authorities. But the law I was arrested for breaking was a stupid one."

Roli frowned. Like any good child, he knew that although the rules made by adults often appeared ridiculous or pointless to him, they were made for a reason; usually to protect him. It was for this reason that he was always so careful to let his grandmother know where he was going when he went out to play. (Thinking of his grandmother like that made him remember that they should really try to be back in time for evening tea.)

"What was your crime?" asked Roli, sounding for all the world like a powder-wigged high court judge.

"That is the funny thing," said Flipstanley. "You will really laugh to hear it. My crime was dancing. No one here is allowed to dance."

"So that's why you stopped me?" said Rano. "Because I was breaking the law?"

“That’s right,” he said.

“Why thank you then,” she said. “They say that ignorance of the law is no defence and so you have saved me from a life of crime. Oh, I would have been terrible, robbing banks, forging papers, maybe even assassinating people, who knows.” She drifted into a kind of reverie. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be thanking you, after all!”

Flipstanley laughed.

Suddenly they heard the wailing of a far-off siren, and Flipstanley leapt to his feet.

“Oh no!” he shouted, this is what I was worried about, they have found me! They will blast all my gizmos from Alpha to Omega! Please, you must help me, I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Rano and Amit looked at Roli. He looked at the horizon, noticing for the first time the speck of Bobop. There were now two other specks hovering above it; after a few seconds watching, he was sure that they were the source of the siren noise, but he wondered why they did not appear to be approaching.

“It seems like we have plenty of time to decide,” he said to the others.

“Well, that’s it,” replied Flipstanley, who was still panicky, “the dancing thing is only one manifestation of the main element of the law here – you cannot move quickly at all. If I had danced very, very slowly there probably would not have been any problem.”

“But where would be the fun in that?” asked Rano. She was taking quite a shine to their android acquaintance.

“Exactly,” said Flipstanley, with a nod. “If you are going to dance, you really do have to put some energy into it. Anyway, that’s why the police skycars are moving so slowly, it’s all part of the law, no exceptions. I was going a bit doo-lally in Bobop, always having to crawl, slouch and shuffle when I am designed to race, leap and boogie.”

“At least we don’t have to worry about getting arrested ourselves, given our mode of transport. Old Mr Molephant loves to take his time.” asked Roli. “Have you not always lived on this planet?”

“Oh, no, I was built somewhere else, but I had a terrible time of it. Perhaps once we are in safety I could tell you the tale, but suffice to say that society came crashing down about my ears, through no fault of my own, and I was packed up and shipped out to this place. It was fine at first, a nice change of pace after the chaos of my formative years, but lately it just got too much and I felt myself compelled to open a dance school. Little did I know that once again, society would come crashing down!”

Rano was laughing, and so was Amit, despite

himself. “Let’s help him,” they both said together. “He hasn’t done anything wrong, really,” said the little girl.

“I suppose there’s room at the back of the Molephant,” said Roli, “if you can hang on.”

“Oh, I will!” said Flipstanley with joy.

So they reharnessed the Molephant, who seemed to be suffering no ill health from eating the grass, and began to dig into the ground again. Their initial plan was to go back through the portal, and return to India, where they were sure that Flipstanley would be able to make himself useful, with all that energy which had been going to waste on this sleepy planet. But as they started to dig, they began to be puzzled. The portal was gone, and what’s more, there seemed to be no rock layer under the ground here, just a thin gravel which the Molephant made very short work of.

“This is bizarre,” said Roli. “Where is all the crust? It’s not like a normal planet at all.”

The others shrugged.

“Maybe the portal sank down to a rocky level,” suggested Rano.

“Possibly,” said Roli, “but it seems very strange. Still, since we don’t have any better ideas I suppose we shall have to continue.”

Unknown to the three small adventurers and their new friend, the skycars of the police had, by this point, finally reached the place where all the digging had begun. Two officers emerged from them, taking their time, of course. One strolled over to the upset earth left in the wake of the Molephant.

“This could be serious,” she said to the other officer. “We shall have to call the relevant authorities and set up a safe perimeter.”

“By all that is Alpha, what drove that android to such madness? He’s putting every one of us in danger, with this unimaginable behaviour! And although we were a long way off, it looked to me like those were children with him!”

The first officer stretched to her feet and adjusted her visor. “Remember, most people don’t know what we know, for their own good, for their own peace of mind.”

“I know, but still, moving so quickly, dancing, and now burrowing! It’s beyond all thinking!”

“Most people here on Alpha. One simply don’t have the energy to do something like this, and our homegrown androids are designed to match. Flipstanley is from another world. He probably has no idea what he’s about to discover down there... He’s not bad at heart, and I don’t think he would take those children into such terrible danger if he knew. If he had even the slightest inkling...”

At that very moment the Molephant slammed into the inner hull of the Alpha.One, and smashed an opening in seconds, before anyone had a chance to react. As the Molephant pushed on through the hole, the jagged metal ripped at the bindings of the framework, and even as they emerged into the gravity-free space between the two hulls the contraption fell apart.

The three children held onto their footstools, through fear rather than because it made any difference, as they started to float free.

"What the heck!" yelled Amit. "This is crazy! Where are we!"

Flipstanley VII was still holding onto the denuded Mr Molephant. "I don't believe it!" he yelled. "Who could ever have guessed?"

Roli looked at the curvature of the two walls of the metal cavern in which they found themselves – he speculated that it was as if they were in the gap between a bowling ball and the snug bag holding it. Their momentum had already carried them five metres or so away from the hole they had created in the wall of the bowling ball, but it would take another few minutes for them to hit the other side.

He turned to look at Flipstanley. "I think I've got it – is Alpha.One a space station, not a planet?"

"Until now," said the android, "I had no idea. Why would they lie about something like that? I never saw any clue."

"How strange that is," said Rano, trying to keep her mind off what was to her quite clearly a predicament, even if none of the others seemed prepared to acknowledge it as such. "I would have expected something like that to be a permeating element in their culture, both their art and literature, and as part of their intellectual make-up."

"Perhaps it is," said Flipstanley, "and I just never noticed. I never knew to look."

"Or perhaps it's a secret!" cried Amit. "Perhaps it's a conspiracy!" He yelled at the top of his voice, "It isn't a planet!"

They all went quiet for a moment to listen to the echoes as they rang around the cavern. Thirty seconds later the echoes had started to die down, but then picked up again from the other side.

"Wowser," said Rano. "This is a big place!" Then she began to apply herself to their problem. She lifted the footstool out from under her bottom and picked away at the weave – soon she had a length of twine a couple of metres long. She showed the others what she had done and then explained her thinking. "We are in danger here, but the most immediate danger is of getting separated – if we are, there won't be any way for us to get back together – we don't have any

kind of propulsion."

"What a shame that Roli hasn't had any beans today," laughed Amit.

Roli scowled while Rano laughed.

"So I thought we might be able to use this twine to keep us all connected," she said.

Everyone agreed that it was a good idea, so Roli and Amit followed her example and disassembled their footstools. Rano carefully tied one end of her twine around her wrist in a safety loop – she knew how terrible it might be if the cord got so tight that it cut off her circulation, or even tighter, so that it cut her hand right off! The safety loop was tied close enough that it wouldn't come over her hand, unless she wanted to, but it couldn't slip any tighter. She threw the other end of the twine in Flipstanley's direction – of course, being an android he did not need to take any precautions, but she talked Amit and Roli through the appropriate knots once they were ready. Then Roli threw the other end of his twine to Amit, and Roli threw the other end of his twine to Rano, and they were all soon linked in a chain.

Amit was looking at Mr Molephant with some concern.

"What's up?" asked Flipstanley. "I'm not hurting him, am I? Do I need to get off the poor grey guy?"

"It's not that," said Amit. "I've just realised that if we arrive at the far wall in this current configuration, we're all going to be crushed when the Molephant lands upon us."

"I was thinking that too," said Roli. "We're going to have to kick away from him."

Rano was horrified. "But that means he'll be sent off on his own. He'll probably die alone, left to starve, remembering forty years of friends, and wondering who brought him here to die. Even if he survives, he will never forgive us!"

"I'm not so sure," said Flipstanley. "From my brief acquaintance with him, I think that Mr Molephant is as possessed of the spirit of adventure as any of you, and he understands what needs to be done."

"Perhaps it's true," said Rano, "look into his eyes. A thousand elephants live and die in timber yards every day, but here is Mr Molephant, the first elephant to die in space! A true adventurer!"

Amit agreed. "We wouldn't have been able to get here if he had simply refused to drill us into the ground."

"If you have convinced yourselves that it is alright to let him die alone," said Roli, "let's do it now before it comes more urgent."

Flipstanley gently reeled in the twine until all four were together, then each at the same time leapt a little

forward, a little to the side, and Mr Molephant began to sail sadly away.

Propelled by their momentum, they continued to float across the void until they crashed against the other wall, which they had long since realised was the outer hull of the Alpha. One space station. No one took the risk of trying to stand – without gravity, the slightest push away from the wall and they might be stranded in mid-air, possibly without the momentum to ever reach the other side.

They were all trying not to look at Mr Molephant, who did not look as if he would be out of sight before he hit the outer wall.

“Look at the hole we made,” said Roli, pointing to it. “It’s moving away from us.”

“Is that just because of the way we jumped away from Mr Molephant?” wondered Amit.

“No, I’ve been watching it. It looks like the inner hull rotates, perhaps to create the earth-like gravity we felt inside the station.”

“That means it’ll be very hard to get back,” said Rano. “We’re going to be stuck out here till someone comes to rescue us.”

“Do you think anyone will?” said Roli, somewhat bitterly. “Flipstanley?”

“I don’t see any bones,” said the android. “So if anyone else has ever got out here, they got rescued.”

“Or cleaned up,” said Roli.

At this point Flipstanley is prepared to make a proposal which may offend the ears of any sensitive or indeed any human readers, so they might wish to skip a page or two, which they can do in all surety of missing no important plot details. (In fact this applies to most pages – you could quite happily skip to the end of the book and miss very little.) “There is no food here,” he said, “and I can see that you have no food with you.”

“That’s true,” said Amit sadly. “We might not even be able to survive long enough to be rescued.”

“I have a proposal to make,” said Flipstanley, “if you have strong stomachs.”

“We are *not* eating Mr Molephant!” shouted Rano. None of them could resist looking his way, and they saw something quite amazing – Mr Molephant was about to hit the outer hull but he twisted around so that he was facing the hull, coiled up his trunk, and once it touched the metal, he let it uncoil and push him back into the air like a grasshopper – or at least like a grasshopper that weighed a tonne and leapt using its nose.

“He’s off the menu anyway,” said Amit. “He must have heard you.”

“Oh, how could you!” she said through stern lips.

“And you, Flipstanley, how could you suggest such a thing? You truly are inhuman.”

“No, dear lady, no! That was not my suggestion at all – Mr Molephant would not have liked that, and one has to respect his wishes.”

“Thank goodness,” said Rano.

“As you must respect mine.”

Amit peered at him. “What do you mean?”

“You are all going to starve out here, with no food to eat. What you may not have realised is that although on the inside I am composed of nuts and bolts, my skin is perfectly organic, and what’s more, you could eat me till there was none left and I wouldn’t feel a thing, so long as I turned off my damage sensors.”

The three children were so disgusted that they had to hold their stomachs and grit their teeth to prevent themselves throwing up.

“Why have you gone so green?” asked Flipstanley. “Aren’t you hungry? Look, it’s really tasty! Damage sensors off!” He pulled a chunk of skin away from his arm and held it up in front of Roli. “Dinnertime!”

Roli vomited, but at least he had the presence of mind to point his mouth in the right direction, and the yellow gunk flew out into the void, away from them. Of course, this triggered Rano and Amit and they both threw up too. Luckily no one was hit.

“I see that my actions have had the opposite effect from that desired. I wanted to put food into your mouths but in fact I have brought it out! I shall not speak on this topic again.” He slapped the skin back onto his arm, and turned his damage sensors back on. It hurt for a moment – or at least his android brain simulated a feeling of pain – and then his automatic repair systems worked to knit the skin back into place. “At least not until your starvation has made you less squeamish.”

The children were fortunate, and Flipstanley’s skin was saved. The authorities arrived shortly in little skycars and took them back to the space station. When they landed back on the obviously less firm than it seemed ground of Alpha. One, they were glad to see that Mr Molephant had got there before them.

“Oh Mr Molephant!” cried Rano. “I’m so glad to see you safe and sound.”

“Whatever he is, you have him to thank for your speedy rescue.” said a visored police officer. She explained, “He managed to grab an outspur of the inner hull with his trunk, and began to batter on the metal with all four feet. The people of Hopton Village thought there was an earthquake going on, and since I had already alerted the authorities as to your actions, following our pursuit of Flopstanley VII from

Bobop Town, they had a good idea as to what the sound might mean. They opened up a service entrance and let us come and get you.”

Roli looked at her warily, with little trust in his eyes. “But why did you need Mr Molephant to get your attention if you already knew we were down here?”

“You were going to let us die!” shouted Amit.

“Not me,” she said. “It was the station authorities. They keep a tight rein on everything here, and they were worried that brought back to the surface, you might blow the whole thing wide open.”

“And why would that be a bad thing?” asked Rano. “Isn’t it better for people to know the truth?”

“Not always,” said the police officer. “Imagine the panic, everyone running around, it would be a disaster!”

“Is there a connection in some way, is that it?” asked Amit. “Is the fact that Alpha.One is a space station somehow related to the prohibition on rapid movement?”

The police officer patted him on the head, to his great discomfort. “That’s right, little boy. The rotation of the inner hull is balanced on a knife edge, and were it to stop in its tracks, we simply don’t have the ability any more to restart it. The authorities are concerned that rapid movement in any direction could act to slow or even halt that rotation.”

Rano was quite happy to find her ideas confirmed. “So living in a space station really does permeate your culture, but in a way so subtle that it was not immediately noticeable.”

Now that Flipstanley VII understood the reasons for not dancing he agreed to take things a bit easier, and the police officer agreed not to arrest him. He had learnt that same lesson that all good children know – that the rules of adults exist for a reason, even if those reasons are somewhat obscure. Flipstanley may have been the size of an adult, but he had been built that way, and by his own estimation he had only been functioning for six years or so, and so one might say that he had just as much left to learn as Roli and his friends. He said as much to them.

“Everyone has to learn,” said Roli, summoning all his years of wisdom. “And it is difficult to do so when for their own reasons adults choose to obfuscate and mislead. None of this would have happened if Flipstanley had known the truth. Perhaps the people of Alpha.One should be treated with a little more respect.”

“At one level I agree,” replied the police officer, “and I feel bad every time I have to cover something like this up. But you have to remember that people

are essentially stupid. Humans have evolved socially, at least here, to the point where self-preservation is no longer their main motivation. They assume that someone else, the authorities, will take care of that for them. And so, that responsibility removed, they would willingly throw themselves into all kinds of danger, and even, in my opinion, put the safety of the entire station at risk, just for the sake of entertaining themselves. Look at the three of you. Did you ever consider the dangers inherent in burrowing to the core of your planet? What if lava had found its way up through your tunnel and a volcano had been born in your back yard?”

The three children looked sheepish.

The authorities then helped the children (from a distance – they instructed the police officer via a communicator in her visor) to find the portal – it was still nearby, but had become temporarily invisible due to a solar flare – and after saying farewell to their new friends they climbed aboard Mr Molephant.

“The authorities have remotely probed the portal,” said the police officer, “and using radio commands they have been able to reset your destination so that you will emerge upon the surface of your world, now that your drilling apparatus has been destroyed.”

“Thank you,” said Roli.

“It still seems very sad to me,” said Rano, “even though we know the reason, to have a whole world of people who cannot dance...”

“Maybe one day,” said Amit, “once we have developed our mechanical skills, we will return here, meet these mysterious authorities, and fix the rotation of the hull.”

“And then everyone will be able to dance!” said Flipstanley.

“So don’t forget how!” ordered Rano.

When they got home they found that the summer was almost over and everyone had assumed they were dead, except for Roli’s grandma. She assumed they would be back eventually and carried on making *olu praunti* for them every Sunday. Happily they arrived back home at 10.45 am Earth time on a Sunday.

After they had all eaten their fill, they returned Mr Molephant to the timber yard.

“Oh, I’m so glad no one ate you,” said Rano, giving one of his legs a hug as they said goodbye. “Thank you for forcing the authorities to save our lives. I’ll never forget you.”

But of course by the time Roli returned from Russia the following summer she had forgotten all about the elephant, in the way children sometimes do.