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Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #9



THE MANTOR STRIKES!

Gertrude Saves Mittleville From the Thringrar!

*Newton Braddell Researches the Bird-People
of Kadaloor!*

And Excelsior! Here Comes a Rescuer!

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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No room for a real editorial this issue – we have far too much material to fit in! but in the little space we have here I would like to welcome John Greenwood, one of our consistent contributors, as co-editor, and congratulate Howard Phillips on actually completing a novel. More of His Nerves Extruded will appear next issue. Thanks to all readers and contributors!

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Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into the Unknown



The Bird- People of Kadaloor

John Greenwood
Master Raconteur

The Kadaloorians were a species of highly intelligent, social creatures whom, for want of any better phrase, I must refer to as “bird-people”, in that they resembled nothing more than the large, flightless birds found on Earth. Standing rather taller than a man, they carried their small skulls atop long sinuous necks. The Kadaloorian beak – for there really is no other word to describe that graceful curve – was a highly evolved appendage, which the bird-people had learned to employ with a virtuosity that was breathtaking. Where the beak was a versatile and delicate tool, indispensable for communication, feeding and the manipulation (if one may use such a word) of small objects, the Kadaloorian’s claws, affixed to the giant muscles of the upper leg, were awesome and formidable weapons, but ones rarely used, as the bird-people were a generally peaceable race, resorting to violence only when threatened.

Feathers they shared with the avian species of Earth also, and of course the rudimentary, but quite useless wings which I assumed to be a remnant of their ancestors’ mastery of the skies. No predators lurked in the Kadaloorian forests hungering for the flesh of the bird-people, and one obvious consequence of this was that the species had lost their power of flight. What was more surprising to me was the Kadaloorians’ refusal to accept that their race had ever taken to the air.

This queer notion was communicated to me

through an invaluable device, which I had taken the precaution to carry with me while I stayed as a guest of the bird-people. This was a small metal instrument, resembling a featureless steel box, which is known amongst inveterate space-travellers as a “Dover and Somerset” (or “D & S” for short) named of course after the original manufacturers of the device, although it should be more properly called “Dover and Somerset’s Predictive Conversation Simulator”. The purpose of this ingenious invention is to render one’s own words into the language of one’s interlocutor, and *vice versa*. The two languages of the respective parties are of little relevance, for the “D & S” is not programmed with the vocabulary or the grammar of any language other than English. To the non-technical reader this might appear baffling, but such an attitude rests on a misconception. The device does not in fact translate the words of the opposite party. Instead, using an elegant algorithm, it calculates the most probable utterance under the circumstances, and renders the foreign phrase into its most likely English equivalent. In short, the translation is based on guesswork, but guesswork of a highly sophisticated level. It is more often than not entirely accurate, and there have been very few occasions on which the inherent uncertainty of the mechanism has failed its user to any serious extent. With each prediction, accurate or otherwise, the “D & S” learns from its successes and failures, and rapidly improves its ability to predict what the speaker wishes to communicate. Conversely, the device also learns the language of the foreign party by an identical method of trial and error.

As I said earlier, the Kadaloorians could not accept that any of their ancestors had ever taken to the air, despite what appeared to me to be incontrovertible evidence of feathers, wings and that inimitable avian form which was so suggestive to me of the birds of Earth. At first I confess that I suspected the problem lay in the operation of my “D & S” box, and spent several fruitless hours investigating its circuitry in search of a fault. Eventually however, I

was forced to admit that the translation of the Kadaloorians' language was accurate: they really did not understand the concept of flight, at least with regard to large, heavy animals such as themselves, or myself for that matter.

I attempted to explain to them about my flight to the surface of their planet, the malfunction of my computer, and my subsequent crash-landing (I omitted some unimportant details about the reasons for the computer's malfunction). This description was accompanied by diagrams, which I drew onto the ground with a stick. It was a wasted effort: the Kadaloorians were entirely nonplussed. Insects, they admitted, were capable of flight, but this was only because of their diminutive size and weight. They could not conceive of anything larger than a dragonfly capable of resisting the force of gravity for longer than a few fractions of a second.

It was a pity that my entry into the atmosphere of Kadaloor had taken place unobserved, for had the bird-people been present at my crash-landing, they would have been forced to re-evaluate their irrational prejudices. As the case stood, they simply refused to believe me. Naturally there was a large amount of speculation as to how I had arrived on the surface of their home world and, given that space travel was out of the question, it was suggested by one of them that I might have burrowed through the earth from some kind of subterranean realm. The fact that my craft was clearly incapable of any type of burrowing activity (there was nothing more powerful than a hand-drill on board the *Tanjong Pagar*) was by the by. The crater which my spaceship had flung up on its impact with the planet gave them further evidence for their wrong-headed conclusions. They regarded it in the same manner as a gardener might look at a molehill: the inconvenient by-product of an obscure process of underground tunnelling. Nothing I could say by way of explanation could persuade them otherwise, once this muddled notion had found favour among the bird-people. Quite why I would have chosen to burrow up through the bedrock of the planet of Kadaloor, and from where, was not a question which caused my hosts any great concern, and I must admit that I began to doubt their intellectual capacity.

Subsequently I had reason to dispel some of these doubts, but that is a story for another occasion. During the many weeks I spent as a guest of the bird-people, I had the opportunity to form an adequate picture of their habits and culture. My investigations were eased to no small extent by my earlier decision to don the beak-like air filter, and while my outlandish appearance still caused consternation

amongst some of the more timid inhabitants, I was not the object of outright horror that I might have been had I presented a more human form.

Despite the absence of predators, the Kadaloorians chose to live in a rambling network of underground tunnels and caverns, excavated by the creatures' own spade-like claws. Their dwellings were damp, close and dark, and their standards of habitation were quite opposite to those cherished by mankind. They valued their cramped quarters as though these clammy bolt-holes were palaces of the most extravagant opulence and comfort. The more inaccessible and claustrophobic residences were the most desirable, and while the lower class of Kadaloorians lived in cathedral-like natural caverns near the surface, the Queen of the bird-people and her extended family occupied a squalid hole at the end of a long, twisting passageway over a mile underground. I surmised that to be crammed together in such an obscure hovel gave them a feeling of security, although as I have already stated, they had no reason to fear molestation.

The diet of the bird-people consisted largely of nuts and fruit from the great trees that covered the surface of the planet. Many of the species of nut were large, heavy and hard-shelled, particularly the species known locally as the "bedok", which formed the staple of the Kadaloorian diet. At harvest time, when the winds were strong and windfalls commonplace, only the most foolhardy of Kadaloorians would dare venture into the bedok groves without protective headgear. I accompanied my hosts on several food-gathering expeditions, and witnessed for myself the lethal force of gravity: no less than three of my party lost their lives to abnormally heavy bedok nuts.

The paucity of ingredients had not prevented the Kadaloorians from creating a various and, on the whole, pleasant cuisine. My only difficulty lay in mealtime etiquette, for the Kadaloorians did not employ plates and forks (I should have been greatly astonished if this were the case). Instead they employed a ceramic vessel of roughly spherical shape, hollow and pierced with half a dozen neat round holes on the uppermost surface. The inside of the vessel was separated into discrete chambers, and into each of these sections a different dish would be poured. The Kadaloorians used their graceful beaks to draw out each dish one at a time, but I was unwilling to copy them for fear that the tube of my air-filter might become blocked and inoperable. The Kadaloorians, who never questioned their first assumption that my filter tube was a rudimentary beak, were perplexed by my difficulties. It caused



great amusement when I attempted to feed myself by raising the vessel to my lips, successfully tasting one dish, but spilling all the others down my chin.

The origins of this item of alien crockery are interesting in themselves. It appears that the Kadaloorians of ancient times were in the habit of drilling holes in the nuts with their beaks and directly drinking the juice within. As the civilisation developed and tastes became more refined, this simple method was replaced by the elaborate vessel I have just described. So ubiquitous was this means of nourishment, that my hosts could not contemplate the sight of their own food laid in front of them without revulsion, as was made clear to me when I attempted to decant my meal into a more familiar bowl scavenged from the *Tanjong Pagar*.

As I have already stated, my craft had been rendered inoperable by the force of my landing, and for several weeks I put the question of its repair out of my mind. It proved far pleasanter to engage myself in a study of the society of the bird-people than to uselessly scratch my head over the wreckage of my vehicle. The disabled *Tanjong Pagar* proved an object of curiosity, particularly among the young Kadaloorians. I felt no anxiety for the safety of my ship, for its security systems remained intact, and the bird-people were a trenchantly honest race. Nevertheless, some well-meaning officials removed

the craft to a location underground, and it is an indication of my state of mind during this period that I did not trouble to enquire of its whereabouts.

In short, despite their irrational fears and prejudices, the Kadaloorians had both charmed and intrigued me, and all thoughts of my elusive mission fled in the face of such hospitable and endlessly fascinating hosts.

For most of my stay among the Kadaloorians, I was the guest of a family called Aljunied. This is an inadequate transliteration of their name, but my study of the Kadaloorian language, while fascinating in itself, was interrupted by events that could not have been foreseen, as will be explained below. In brief, the Kadaloorians employ distinct syllabaries, one for each class of words. Thus nouns are written with one set of letters, verbs with another, and there are yet seven more categories having no exact corollary in our own tongue.

I digress. The Aljunied family, in common with all Kadaloorian families, had no need for any personal names. What saved the bird-people from abject confusion was a strict series of identifiers, rigidly applied to all individuals in this matrilinear society. At the core of the Aljunied family was the Aljunied Elder Mother, followed by the Elder Mother's Sons, Daughters and Husbands (they were not a monogamous race, but their polygamy was strictly codified: to wed two or three partners was considered laudable, a fourth was frowned upon, a sixth merely eccentric, but a female with five husbands was an unthinkable taboo carrying the harshest penalty of Kadaloorian law: ostracism). My closest friend during my time among the bird people was a young female of the species, known to me as the Aljunied Secondary Mother's Eighth Daughter. This title, which to our ears sounds convoluted, was sufficient to distinguish her from every other individual on the planet. The inevitable drawback was that every time somebody died, whole titular structure of their family was upturned, and a Kadaloorian could be expected to change her name up to a dozen times during her lifetime. Another peculiar consequence of this system was that the bird-people gave up their names at the same time that they gave up their lives. This caused less confusion than might be imagined, for the Kadaloorians observed the strictest taboo against speaking of the dead.

It was while in the company of the Aljunied Second Mother's Eighth Daughter (who for the sake of convenience I shall henceforth refer to by her acronym, Smed) that I witnessed a singular and puzzling phenomenon. While in the family's communal chambers I happened upon a stray shard

of bedok shell. The outer casing of the bedok is tough and fine-grained – a good material for carving – and the piece I held in my hands that day was an elegant crescent with an irregular curved section missing from one side. It had been deliberately and carefully fashioned, but to what purpose? The shape was uncannily familiar, but for several moments I could not recall from where. Smed's first words were enough to trigger recognition: "What have you there?" she asked. "Oh – it is a piece from the children's game. Perhaps the Seventh Mother's First Grandson has dropped it."

For many months now, ever since the *Tanjong Pagar* had crash-landed on this wooded planet, I had not given a single thought to the wretched game, the game that had once ruled my every waking hour. Yet here was a piece of that same puzzle, on an alien world, in the burrow of an alien race. My mind refused to contemplate such an absurd coincidence. Was this the same game that I had played so many thousands of times against the ship's computer? I twirled the simple sliver of nutshell in my fingers. There was something not quite right about it, but it was not until the Seventh Mother's First Grandson was ordered, at my urgent request, to produce the rest of the puzzle that I understood how the Kadaloorians' game differed from my own. The game I had failed at so miserably and so frequently aboard the *Tanjong Pagar* took place on a flat screen and dealt with a two dimensional circle, but the pieces of the nutshell were curved in three dimensions, and when completed formed a sphere.

These differences notwithstanding, the rules of the game, known to all Kadaloorians as Bedoki, were essentially the same as those of the nameless puzzle found lurking amongst the subdirectories of my ship's computer. The Seventh Mother's First Grandson challenged me to a game, and it was with some trepidation that I agreed, as the reformed alcoholic accepts the offer of a drink after many years of determined abstinence. I could pretend that I had been unprepared for the exponential increase in complexity caused by the addition of a third dimension, but this would be disingenuous. In the event, my hatchling opponent beat me soundly and swiftly, but Smed assured me that this was entirely normal. "The young always win at Bedoki," she told me. "But the older they get, the more often they lose."

"But how is this possible?" I asked, for her explanation seemed to defy logic. "Surely with any game of skill, one's aptitude increases with experience."

"I do not know exactly," replied Smed. "I suppose it must be that the hatchlings don't give too much thought to their strategy. They don't try to figure out

their moves in advance, but simply play the game according to their intuition. When we adults play, we think about it too much, and always end up wrong-footing ourselves. In many ways it is a curious game."

I found that my pulse was racing: if what Smed told me was true, then was this the solution to the mysterious game I had discovered on the *Tanjong Pagar*? Had I merely overthought myself? I demanded a rematch from my infant opponent, and decided this time to give as little thought as possible to each of my moves, playing each piece indiscriminately. Still, the Seventh Mother's First Grandson gained an easy victory, and I explained to Smed that her explanation must be flawed.

"You have missed the point," she told me. "It is not that the children play the game at random. You lost because you were deliberately trying to avoid thinking about Bedoki as you were playing it. You cannot win this way. It is only by existing entirely in the present moment, concentrating wholly on the current state of play without a thought for your past mistakes or your future strategy, that you can succeed at Bedoki."

"How can I do that?" I asked desperately.

"You must forget that you have ever played the game before," was my host's answer. "Play each game as if it were your first, and you had only just



learned how to play. That is how the very young play it. And occasionally the very old.”

For the first time in many weeks my mind turned to the *Tanjong Pagar*, and I confess that I was thinking once more of the game, and whether the ship's computer might be defeated by intuition where logic and forethought had failed. Anxious to test out this new approach, I made some enquiries, and was taken to a spacious natural cavern where the *Tanjong Pagar* had been housed. To my great surprise and embarrassment, I learned that while I had dwelt in idleness, the Kadaloorians had been working day and night to repair my vessel. They had hoped to keep this knowledge from me, so as to surprise me when the repairs were finally completed. As it was, I interrupted this scheme when work on the spaceship was very nearly complete. When I was first told that the *Tanjong Pagar* would be operational in a matter of days, my joy was unbounded, but doubts soon crept in. Had not the Kadaloorians firmly refused to believe in the possibility of space flight? How then could they have acquired the technical skill necessary to repair a spaceship?

When I finally caught sight of my craft, all my suspicions were confirmed. The *Tanjong Pagar* was barely recognisable. The Kadaloorian engineers had made radical alterations to the craft's design and it was clear at once that the enormous hunk of metal before me would never again take to the skies. Initially I hid my disappointment from my hosts. They had worked so hard to please me, and I thought it churlish to reproach their efforts. I tried to smile and express my gratitude, but as I inspected the modified spacecraft, my bemusement grew. For what purpose was the *Tanjong Pagar* now fit, if not for scrap metal?

The answer came to me as I inspected the nose cone. I could not disguise a sharp intake of breath when I first beheld the immense metal drill which had been fitted to the front of the vehicle. The *Tanjong Pagar* had been transformed from a graceful bird of the air into a scarred and brutish burrower. A giant metal mole was now my mode of transport. I was utterly mortified. The unpleasant surprises continued when I was invited to examine the interior of the cockpit: the entire dashboard had been ripped out and replaced with a single mechanism. A series of long, narrow shafts penetrated the control panel and into these, so I was informed by the Kadaloorian engineers, I should insert my beak, by which they referred to the long tube of my air filtration mask. In hindsight it seems only natural that the bird-people would design their machines to be managed by that most nimble aspect of their anatomy. At the time I

could not have been more astonished by this innovation. Only by the subtlest movements of a beak or similar long, tapering stick, slotted into one of the unlabelled shafts on the dashboard, could the *Tanjong Pagar* now be managed. It seemed an impossibly finicky skill to master, but the Kadaloorians assured me that it would soon be second nature to me. “As simple,” they said, “as sucking the juice from a bedok nut.” I suspect the bird-people never really grasped the physical differences between us. They invited me to test out the newly refurbished craft and, despite my complete ignorance of its operation, perhaps in desperation, I agreed. Alone once more in the cockpit and full of the gravest misgivings, I leant awkwardly over the control panel and attempted to insert my “beak” into one of the pipes.

It is doubtful that I will ever be able to return to the land of the bird-people, and if by some freak chance I were to find myself amongst them again, I have many reasons to believe that my appearance would not be wholly welcome. It has always been my fervent hope that none of the Kadaloorians perished during those few chaotic seconds, as the *Tanjong Pagar* rumbled immediately into life and began to churn up tons of rubble and earth as it ground its way through the walls of the chamber, destroying all in its path as it wound a muddled path through the underground city of the Kadaloorians. As a result of the meddling of the Kadaloorian engineers, the cockpit was now windowless, and I was driving blind, but perhaps this was a happy mischance, for I was spared the sight of the devastation of which I was the hapless cause.

Almost immediately I realised that my prosthetic beak was stuck fast in the control mechanism. In a panic I began to adjust the controls of the *Tanjong Pagar* at random, but to no avail. My ears were full of that terrible grinding sound, as the sharp bit of the drill tore through one chamber after another. At last I managed to disengage myself from the dashboard and tore off my helmet, careless now of the danger of infection, and seized by despair at the havoc I had wrought. In what direction was I travelling? Apparently the Kadaloorians had not thought it necessary to install any instruments by which I could monitor my progress. For all I knew I was being dragged down into the molten core of the planet. The burrowing monster continued regardless on its haphazard path, and I could only sit helplessly and wonder when the beast might run out of fuel. Even that thought brought me little comfort, for what chance did I have of escaping this self-created subterranean labyrinth?

The Saturation Point Saga

His Nerves Extruded

Howard Phillips
Novelist, at last

The Beautiful Beautiful Palanquinettes

After my previous adventure, I was in the mood for a break. I decided to take myself off to a different country, where I might recuperate from the trials I had endured during my procurement of the mountain drummer for the band. Money was no object, nor was time, and so I resolved to travel in the most luxurious way I could imagine. After a few days' thought, I decided upon a palanquin carried by beautiful women. None of them were very strong, which did not concern me in the slightest, as it excused my hiring slightly more of them than was perhaps necessary. I had had a particular yearning for brown women with jet black hair, large chests, and wide hips, and although there was a shortage of such palanquin carriers in Britain at the time, I placed a call to a casting agency and explained that the journey would be filmed, thus guaranteeing myself a steady stream of willing young actresses.

And by Jove, they were willing!

I'm sorry about that.

I had hoped to avoid that kind of talk in this part of my tale, but it appears I cannot help myself. I am a lusty man, and when my mind ranges across the luscious curves of those adorable actresses, my

fingers are forced to follow, the typewriter at my hands serving as paltry replacement for the sweet tender flesh they were able to caress, from time to time, during the opening portion of that wonderful journey.

I met my first set of palanquinettes in London – others would jet out to meet us at waypoints across Europe – and as they lifted my palanquin up onto their shoulders I was taken with the kind of feeling usually experienced only in dreams, and lost upon waking, to leave only ineffable sadness. It was as if I were the king of the world, as if I had conquered all, but without violence, simply with love.

And how I did love on that trip! Each day brought new delights. Soft new lips greeted me each day I woke.

Of course, I still had a degree of fame from the release of my album, *The Fear Man*, recorded with *The Sound of Howard Phillips*, and that might have played a part. It was still selling steadily, and the copyists had swooped in on my brave new world of music with an eagerness that had shocked even me. When I thought back to when electroclash and Fischerspooner were first hailed as the next big things, and how it had taken a couple of years for other artists to plunder their ideas, I realised just how influential I had become, in that the knock-offs of my music had begun the year the album came out, and showed no sign of abating these few years later.

The band themselves were very happy. Upon my return from the East I had found their picture in every newspaper, in every magazine. They had had a new album ready for release, *Cold Hand Hank*, and once out, it had outsold everything else in the top ten put together. I had been happy to see it do so, despite what you might think. I bore them no malice – far from it. I felt guilty, if anything, for the year of hell I had put them through recording *The Fear Man*. Add that to the way I had then left the band, before disappearing for years on a quest to only God knew where, and you can see that, if anything, I owed them one. But I had left them a valuable gift – the ideas on which to build – and they had taken that gift like the gang of troopers they were, and run with it all the way to the recording studio. They might not have me writing the songs any more, but they had the memory



of all the sounds I had encouraged them to make in the studio, and they had in their possession all the tracks we had worked on during that year. Some of our alternative approaches to the songs had differed so much from their eventually released versions that all they had had to do was slap a new set of lyrics on the track and they were laughing.

As a result, they had been good enough to pay me a royalty on the new album, which had been very sweet. I had not the heart to tell them, the one brief time we met up before I began to travel again, that the money they offered me was as a gnat to an elephant, when compared to the treasure I had discovered in the Himalayas.

My chat with the guys had gone well. Naturally I had not told them a thing about why I had disappeared. I did not want to hurt their feelings. If you were the drummer in a band, would you want to hear that someone had gone to the mountains near India in an effort to find your replacement? I just told them that I was still searching for my muse, and they simply put it down to the creatively damaging eccentricity that afflicts so many musical geniuses.

As to the mountain drummer himself, I had installed him, prior to my departure from Birmingham, in a suite at the Novotel, where he entertained himself with television, food and drink. It was all new to him, and I don't know what the staff

would make of such a being, but everyone had seemed very happy when I left. Naturally, he had practically unlimited funds at his disposal, and should not have had any problems, but I had not realised just how long my overseas sojourn would last.

So, was it my fame, physical beauty or outrageous wealth that brought those women to my bed every night? Perhaps a combination of all three, but I had achieved a measure of wisdom during my previous adventure, and one of the things I had come to realise was that women, despite all their delectable differences from men, are not so different when it comes to physical pleasure. Most men, at least when single, will gladly undertake the act of congress with any reasonably good-looking woman that chooses to offer, and they do not generally mind if women know this. The fairer sex, on the other hand, though they might be open to the idea of copulation, can imagine no greater horror than offering their bodies, and having the offer declined. Knowing, as she does, that men will make love with any reasonably good-looking woman who offers, the only conclusion a declined woman can come to is that she does not even reach reasonable, on a scale of attractiveness.

What I had come to realise, in the course of my quest for the mountain drummer, was that if I could reassure a woman – for this fear lies in the breast of even the most attractive of them – that I would under no circumstances ever decline her offer, then the offers would come thick and fast, and so it had proved. They fell at my feet wherever I went.

It was not a matter of louche suggestiveness. Far from it, even if my lustiness seems to take that turn from time to time in my writing. It was much more subtle than that – a question of meeting a glance at just the right moment, letting my eyelids dip in excitement when her eyelashes fluttered in interest, and always holding my hands in such a way as to invite contact. In short, it was a matter of ensuring my body language said exactly what I wanted it to say, and what I wanted it to say was: come to me and let us love.

I should return to my journey – an adventure awaits in this narrative, an adventure no less exciting than that of *The Ghastly Mountain*, but if I spend much more time discussing my palanquinettes it may have to be deferred to another novel, and I would not want to put my readers to that trouble. Some of you, I know, would like nothing better than for me to continue to write about my amours with those warm-skinned Aphrodites, but this is not that kind of book, and I don't necessarily want that kind of reader.

From London we set off for Dover, where the plan was that we would take the ferry to France.

The weather was generally good – it was the middle of summer – and the nights were mostly warm. A small truck followed us, carrying camping equipment for the girls (I slept in my palacious palanquin, of course), supplies, and whichever of the palanquinettes were taking their turn to rest their feet. Ahead of us ran a young man on a moped, on the back of which was mounted a digital video camera. I owed it to my bearers, I felt, to make the film I had promised them. The resulting film, I reasoned, might well be dull, but on the other hand there would be no shortage of gentlemen willing to pay money to watch a film of beautiful young women doing nothing but walking, for mile after mile. It is in a man's nature. And compared to some of Andy Warhol's work, it would be absolutely riveting. Little did I know just how riveting the resulting film would actually be!

A Struggle to Breathe

There was but one of the palanquinettes who was impervious to my charms, and naturally as the days went by she increasingly drew my attention. She went by the name of Arelline Bonny. As beautiful as any of the others, she added to that a firmness in her jaw, and steel in her eye. It was not as if I had approached any of the other women – I had merely made myself available to be approached by them – and so I did not make any move upon her, or try to engage her in conversation, but I did try to ensure that when it was her turn to be among those carrying my palanquin, she was at a station in front of me, rather than behind, that I might let an eye look her over from time to time. She had firm lean muscles, and I would not have liked to wrestle her, even in jest. She would have sprained me all over, I supposed. Like all the others, she had jet black hair – to my specifications – and hers was shoulder-length – the perfect length, I have always felt, for a woman's hair. Just long enough to be feminine, and to drape over one's chest during relations, but not long enough to be a pest, or require excessive maintenance.

(Please bear in mind, though, that my preferences are just that – what I prefer might not always be what I desire, or need. No woman should ever feel slighted when I speak of my ideal, because tomorrow my ideal might well be quite the reverse. There are some

women who look better with short hair, and I would never encourage them to change their style. On some people it would look foolish, like long hair did on Clark Kent. But why should women waste time on looking boyish? Is that not what young men are for? Is every man who finds himself attracted to a woman with short hair simply repressing his homosexual desires? We all have them, after all, when we are lonely enough, and for those of us who have a more healthy approach to sexuality, it does not take loneliness – just the right pair of eyes or the right pair of lips.)

She intrigued me. And once intrigued, I tend quickly to passion, and so I soon became as passionate about her as if we had spent every night together. Of course, I continued to dally with the other actresses, but when I ran my hands over the curves of their buttocks, I closed my eyes and imagined it was Arelline's rear I was about to squeeze. I would at first press lightly with the tips of my fingers, then with the flat of my hands, and finally, at the summit of my delight, I would knead, slap and spin them like an Italian chef would a pizza base. But my thoughts remained with Arelline. I dallied with her in my mind, and wondered what she thought about, as she carried me along in my magnificent palanquin. I felt like a prince up there, but, pleasant as they were, my concubines were dulling my senses.

I should mention how we dealt with the occasions when it did rain upon our parade. It being England through which we travelled, this was not an infrequent occurrence. The van carried an enormous canvas, and upon the roof of my palanquin was a small heater, which for most of the journey concerned itself with keeping myself and my companions warm. However, when it rained, we would turn it upside down, attach the canvas to the shoes of the palanquinettes, and let hot air billow it out, creating a wonderful shelter for us all.

Eventually this strange assembly – I do not know what took me over during those days – doubtless an extreme reaction to the occasional privation I had suffered on my quest to the ghastly mountain – arrived at Dover.

The sea!

There is nothing to compare with it.

The smell takes your mind swimming, at one and the same time making you think of pirates, naval battles, blockade runs, on the one hand, and death, drowning, and scurvy on the other. It's a call to adventure, a demand to manhood, and an affront to humanity. In its face we are almost nothing: specks of dust that drift across its surface like dragonflies in a pond. Yet at the same time we damage it, poison it,

and pour our excrement into it, letting our neighbours live in the muck we create. We have no power against it. It has no power against us.

The sea!

Both my grandfathers were sailors – what luck that they made it back! This novel would not have been written – this adventure would not have taken place! Would someone else have made the journey in my stead? Would fate have thrown up another hero (to the extent that I can be so described)? Or would mankind have seen its final day, unknowing of its imminent doom until the first horrors struck?

There was still an hour to go before the ferry was due to depart, but I sent my palanquinettes and the truck ahead, while I went off to have a look at the ocean. I took with me my cameraman. It would be interesting to have a word with him, I thought. His name was Johnny Quondam. I don't know if that was his real name, but it suited it as well as any other.

We walked to the distant end of the Brobdingnagian car park, and looked out at the sea together, the cars filing onto the ferry a distant hum.

He busied himself with his camera and accoutrements while I pondered the ocean. He seemed a fine strong lad, in his early twenties, I would have guessed – I had not gone over the CVs sent my way with a fine toothcomb, given the makeweight nature of the job – and seemed to know his stuff. He had something of the air of an enthusiastic amateur, but had come to us directly from film school, where he had apparently astonished the faculty with a series of films on the natures of reality, horror, poetry and love. In short, his idea of what was important in life was quite similar to mine.

He wore a sturdy green jacket, blue denim jeans, and a red sweater. His clothes had been less practical when we had first left London – I believe a silk shirt had come into play at one point – but a few days on the road riding a moped into the wind had brought out a less fashion-conscious side of his nature.

“How do you feel about all this?” I asked him, one man to another.

He shrugged. “It's your money, I suppose. You should spend it however you think best.”

“Does it seem wise to you?”

“Definitely not,” he said sternly. “My palanquinettes would all have been blonde. It's only sensible.”

I laughed. “Your taste in women is clearly abominable. The dark-haired woman is all woman can be – strong, beautiful, determined!”

He laughed too, though not as freely as he might have with friends. I was his paymaster, after all, and he was reliant on my good will. This saddened me,

and made me wonder if I was on the wrong course after all. Why had I chosen to surround myself with paid flunkies? It had seemed like such a good idea at first, but now my depression began to return. If only my quest could have stopped upon finding the mountain drummer. If only we could have made music alone, the two of us, if drums, keyboards and vocals alone could have been enough to realise my heady dreams. But no – the quest had to go on, and if that was to be the case, I needed to relax – chill, even – or chillax, as I once heard Stephen Fry say on a television talk show.

“They're all the same in the end,” I said sadly. “With the lights off there's no difference between one and the other.”

“Only two kinds of people think that,” he replied. “Men who have slept with too many women, and those who have not slept with enough.”

I turned to look at him. “You are a wise young man, it seems. Perhaps you should ride in the palanquin while I take the moped. Does the wind clear out your head?”

“I don't think wisdom has much to do with where you ride, boss.”

“Maybe not. Probably the reverse. I was wise once, I think. It was not just luck that brought me here. It was luck that gave me money. It was a dream that gave me inspiration. It was a drug that sent me in the right direction. But I worked hard to follow my dream. I need some time to be stupid, and irresponsible, and this came to mind. My first choice was for us all to ride upon Segways, but the power points along the way were too infrequent, and I worried that on the roads we would look too temptingly like ninepins.”

“As it is, people slow down to look at us, rather than speed up.”

“We do make quite a sight. If your footage turns out all right, we might be able to put it to some good use. But every day I question myself. I am unable to rest, yet I need to recuperate before I set off again, in search of my next band member.”

“Band member?” he asked, his freckled forehead wrinkling querulously.

“I've already said too much. Let's go and catch the ferry.”

“No problem,” he said. He hefted his bag and we set off on our way. “Must be odd, having to walk again. Would you like me to carry you?”

“You cheeky fellow,” I retorted. “I have climbed mountains on these legs. They have carried me across continents and into places and situations you could not imagine – even if you had seen them with

your own eyes you would attempt to rationalise them into some paltry notion of everyday reality!”

“Whatever you say, Howard – you’re the boss.”

Thirty-five minutes into our trip across the English Channel (*La Manche* to our Gallic cousins), the summer sky was suddenly riven by lightning, crashing across the sky!

Ferry Worrying

I had spent the time on the ferry in the usual ways – a little walking, a bit of staggering, a short period of time looking in the onboard shop and a longer while taking a drink in the bar. That had accounted for thirty-two of the thirty-five minutes. At that point, during the thirty-third minute, I had been intrigued to see a small puppy run across the floor, apparently on its own. I wondered who the owner might be, and, though as my readers must know I detest the animals, I was concerned that, left to its own devices, it might simply leap over the side.

I put my drink down and followed the fluffy little chap out of the bar. I exited the door just in time to see him scamper down a flight of stairs, and so I followed him.

This part of the ship was quieter than the rest, and it was easy for me to see the way he ran – off along the corridor, and then down a second flight of steps. I followed, but a sign hung on a chain across the stairwell gave me pause – entry to that deck was forbidden during the crossing – presumably, I guessed, because it would not be a good place to be were the boat to begin to sink, but also, I should think, to prevent ruffians from doing their worst with holidaymakers’ luggage.

Still, I had a duty to do, and though it might well get me into trouble were I discovered, did I have any choice?

I am no real kind of hero, as I mentioned in an earlier chapter, but I have a small store of bravery which I can make use of – I almost have to unearth it, it lies so deeply buried! – in the gravest emergencies. This was one of those times! There was a small animal, detestable as it was, that needed my help, and I could but serve.

I am no Buddhist, despite the reverence for life you might read into my words above. Neither am I Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Hindu. In fact, I am a man of no faith. How can one have faith when our fate is but to die? “I’m hoping for the best,” you might say to me. “But you are going to die,” I would

reply. “That much is sure. Only the worst is sure to happen.”

I moved the chain aside, passed across the threshold, replaced the final link upon its hook, and tiptoed down, down, into the lower reaches, the very bowels of the ship.

“Puppy? Puppy? Where are you?”

The place was empty of human life, but full of cars. How I hate the car, with all its pathetic demands upon us. I would rant upon the subject, but I have probably already done enough of that for one chapter.

I looked around, peered under a car or two, and whistled a few times. There was no sign of the creature, and the sound of the waves the ship was breaking through was making it hard for me to be sure, when I heard a noise, if it was my quarry, or just an echo.

Then, for a second, the waves fell silent, and I heard the scurrying of the dog, and I ran to its location. It sat there, between a red car and a blue car (don’t dare expect me to have bothered to learn the names and categories of my bugbears – you might as well expect me to explain the intricacies of water polo – the cars were red and blue, and to the rest you can apply your imaginations).

This was no puppy.

It was, in fact, no dog.

It was fluffy, but, I would hazard, only because it had passed through an air-conditioning system at some point.

Its teeth were narrow and pointed. Its eyes were small and black. It did not have the long, thin tail usual to its kind, which must have encouraged my misidentification – at some point the beast must have met with misfortune, leaving it with just a horribly stiff-looking stub at its rear.

It was a rat. A cold-hearted, scheming, scrabbling, meddlesome, disease-spreading, terrifying rat – and it might well have saved my life.

Suddenly the noise of the waves was back, and there was a flash of lightning across the sky. As I looked away, the rat saw its chance to escape, and dashed away through the cars.

I was annoyed, of course, that I had risked so much to come down to that level for the sake of a mere rodent, but then I heard the screams begin.

Few in number for a few seconds, the screams were at first just those of frightened women, caught by the unexpected, but then I heard the screams too of men, and I realised that something unpleasant was afoot. I reached down to slide the knife from my boot – it was made of wood, and thus undetectable by normal means, but I had found its blade sharp

enough to save my skin more than once during my travels in the East.

"Action is mine!" I shouted with all the conviction I could muster. Much of my bravery had already been wasted upon the pursuit of the fluffy rat, but if I yelled hard enough perhaps more would make itself felt. "I am Howard – my name is war!"

I ran up the stairs, two at a time – on the first floor there was nothing – no sign of trouble – and so I ran back along the corridor I had previously traversed at a more leisurely rate. At the base of the second flight of stairs I paused, to listen. Whatever was happening up there, preparation could not hurt. Delay might be fatal – I realised this – especially if I left it so long that all potential allies, against whatever calamity awaited me at the top of those stairs, had already perished. But it was not a matter of choice, it was one of necessity. I had a musician's ear – what's more, a poet's ear! And if I did not put those resources to good use I might just as well have thrown myself out of a portal on the bottom floor.

I heard: screaming, whimpering, tears, LIGHTNING, shouts, GUNFIRE, laughter, EXPLOSIONS, Arelline...

Arelline?

It was time to step into action. I ran up the steps, eyes darting in one direction and another, ears listening as hard as they could, every one of my senses reaching out to establish the situation, even as I threw myself into it. My sense of balance tried to tell me what was happening to the ferry. My heat sense fed me information on the rising temperature – despite the stormy weather? Even as my legs pounded the stairs I made note of that important fact. My sense of smell told me more – it brought to my attention the acrid burning of air and flesh by heat weapons. And taste? All I could taste was fear.

I stood at the top of the staircase outside the bar, and inside the bar I could see Arelline and many other passengers, including my other surviving palanquinettes and a pair of families with small children, three sailors, and the bar staff. They had nothing to defend themselves with except the contents of the bar, and so they held bottles of wine in their hands, incongruously in so many ways – almost as if the ferry were about to be launched, rather than sunk.

Between them and me were a trio of loutish men. I would have thought them to have come from a costume party, if their costumes had been a little further out there. As it was, they seemed positively mundane – dull silver helmets, featureless, black, tight-fitting overalls, and metal belts from which they had unslung primitive-looking blaster weapons.

It seems funny to call them primitive, when they were so far beyond what anyone on Earth could have produced, but if you had set them down next to an iPod or a tablet Pronto any observer taking a guess would have pegged Earthlings as the star-spanning race. On the other hand, if you had asked who would be most warlike, that observer might have guessed correctly. Humanity is a vile and aggressive species, that much is certain, but in these space brutes, so nearly our cousins in looks, we had met our match and more.

If they had turned to face me, they might have had a chance to demonstrate their worth in combat, but they were indisposed by their glee in picking off, one by one, the occupants of the bar.

I sliced the neck of the first before he had a chance to add to his tally, wrestled the blaster from his hands and turned it on his fellows. When both were dead I stamped on each of their faces, as a symbolic gesture of defiance. I don't know what had gotten into me. I am normally non-violent – a little tetchy at times, cantankerous even, despite my relatively youthful age – but to see the focus of my passion threatened by such brutes as they had awakened something primal in me.

I took the other two blasters and took them into the bar, handing one to a sailor and the other to Arelline.

"How do you use it?" asked the sailor. Arelline was looking carefully at hers, and had already worked it out.

I raised a sarcastic eyebrow. "You just pull your fingers together, and it blows..."

"Why does she get one?" asked one of the other sailors.

"Because I won them in combat, and they are mine to dispose of in the way I think best. I know this woman, and I know that she will not hesitate to use this weapon when fate demands it. You should take the weapon I've given you, and try to secure either the ship or the lifeboats. Make your own decision, but you have to place the safety of these families above all. The palanquinettes are my concern. With luck the actions we take will make your job all the easier."

He looked at me queerly, then went off to consult with the other sailors, the bar staff, and the families.

"Thanks for the gun, Howard," said Arelline. "I'm really glad to see you." The other palanquinettes echoed her feelings. "But what do you want us to do?"

"First, I want you to tell me what has happened. Second, I want you to follow me onto the field of battle. We will take the fight to the enemy!"

We Fight Back. For Love, For Victory, For Honour!

Arelline began to explain to me what had happened, as quickly as she could. There was clearly no time to waste, but whatever few scraps she could give me in the next few minutes might be the difference between life and death.

She and the other palanquinettes had been wandering around the boat in twos and threes, laughing at the double-takes they attracted – both from men stunned by their beauty, and from others who thought they were seeing double, triple and quadruple as they saw these similarly attired dark-haired, brown-skinned beauties wandering the ship.

That had given the crossing something of a theatrical atmosphere, and so when the lightning struck, many of the passengers doubtless thought nothing of it. When they saw a ship, gun-metal grey, appear in the sky above their heads, they probably thought it related to whatever endeavour had brought those beautiful women on board, who they now deduced to be actresses. When an airlock opened, and men who were not men began to leap out to drop ten metres to the deck of the ship, they probably thought they were stuntmen. And when the blasters began to splash blood from their chests, it would have been a horrifying few seconds before they realised that it was not theatre, or television, or film, or a video game, but real life – and real death!

The palanquinettes, perhaps more attuned to reality as a result of their walk to Dover – I but speculate, but they had not seen any television for a number of days, and so perhaps were more firmly struck by the oddness of what was happening – had run as fast as their lovely legs could take them, dragging adults and children along in their wake whenever possible. Holed up inside the bar, they had waited for their inevitable fate, and prepared to sell their lives as dearly as possible, which in fact had turned out to be well under the market rate, the aggressors having just picked them off from outside. At that point I had arrived and delivered them from their doom.

“Okay, girls,” I said once Arelline had finished her explanation. “It is as I surmised upon seeing the men. Either we are faced with an attack by a foreign power or criminal organisation in possession of incredible technology, unknown by anyone else on Earth, even

if a little behind the times in design terms, or our enemies have come here from another world, and are merely the vanguard of some greater invasion force.”

“Do you think they are testing us?” asked one of the girls quietly. Her name was Helena. We had shared a few quiet moments of our own a couple of nights before, but I put that quite out of my mind and considered her question seriously.

“It is hard to tell,” I said to her. “But it would make sense. They might be attacking several targets at once, but if they were, why attack a ferry? It would hardly be a prime target during an invasion. Yes, more likely they are just testing us out – a short incursion to test the mettle of the average Earthman.”

Arelline held up her hands. “Hold on a minute, Howard. We don’t know that they are aliens yet.” She walked over to the doorway, peering out at the bodies of those I had killed. “They look pretty much like us, apart from their skin being a bit grey.”

“Be assured I am not assuming anything. Hence my determination to take the fight to them. We could wait here, try to ambush them, one by one, or threaten to blow up the ferry, and so on, and try to drive them away in some fashion – I doubt they will have the stomach for a real fight, if we show we are willing to get our hands dirty – but if we let them get away we lose our chance to find out more about them. I want to get on board their ship, take control of it if possible, and get to the bottom of this.”

One of the other girls, Jenny, spoke up. “Howard, just because we all signed on to carry you around the country doesn’t make us your own private army! You can’t expect us to fight – we will be massacred!” There were a few hear, hears (figuratively speaking) from the other palanquinettes. “Why don’t you take the sailors? They will be able to use a weapon better than us.”

“No,” said Arelline, before I could respond. “If we get into that ship we don’t know where we will end up. We could be on another planet within hours, or trapped in an evil genius’s lair in a dormant volcano! If the sailors were stuck there instead of us, how would any of the survivors get home on the ferry? Do you know how to pilot one? I know I don’t.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” I said to Arelline, patting her on the shoulder.

“Take your hand off my shoulder,” she said sternly. “Despite what these others might think, we are here as actresses, not your personal playthings. Actress stopped being a synonym for whore a century or two ago – or perhaps you hadn’t heard?”

The other girls responded angrily. I had to hold my arm out to stop them physically reproaching her.

“Money did not come into it,” I told her. “I can

assure you of that. There was no question of these other actresses prostituting themselves to me. I merely have something that women want.”

“Yes,” she replied tartly. “Money.”

“No. It isn’t that.”

“What, then?”

“Perhaps I misspoke. It is something that women want – except those women who prefer the company of other women after dark. But we have to set this useless bickering aside. We have work to do.”

“I don’t understand you, Howard,” Arelline said with a shake of the head. “Are you from the nineteenth century or something? Your attitudes would suggest so. And then at other times I hear your music on the radio and think you were born a hundred years before your time.”

I was about to ask her more about what she thought of my music, but then remembered my own words concerning our situation – there was work to do – and it would be dirty. I got the girls to help me drag the bodies into the bar.

“Let’s get these soldiers out of their uniforms, and see if we can clean them up a bit. There’s only a few minutes to spare, but what you can do in that time might make the difference. Arelline and Helena, you are the tallest of the palanquinettes, and so you will join me in the uniforms. I will make use of my knife, which has yet to let me down, and you can have the second of our guns, Helena.” I gave it to her, and she handled it gingerly, but with interest. “While the other palanquinettes get our uniforms ready, I will give you a few pointers on shooting these weapons. I only used mine the once, but noticed it had quite a kick, and tended to move to the left after a shot.”

I continued to talk them through my plans as our outfits were prepared. Mine did not fit well across the shoulders, and those of the girls were somewhat constricted across the chest, but in general we made out quite well. Under close examination of course we would not pass for members of the attackers’ race, but from the air, or at a distance, we might get by long enough to make our play.

I took a bottle of whiskey from the bar, and passed it around, each of the palanquinettes taking a single swig for bravery. I went last, and then quietly said, “For the people!” Everyone else in the bar echoed my whisper, and then I went to consult with the sailors.

“Are you ready to make your move?” I asked. “I take it you heard some of my plans?”

“You are insane,” said the one to whom I had given the gun. “You are going to get all of those girls killed.”

“That’s as may be,” I said, “but in doing so I might

save your life, and the lives of everyone else in this room.”

“We’re ready,” he said. “As soon as you set off we’ll head for the bottom level and get the people into their cars. If we’re going to sink, we’ll die wherever we are, but at least that will provide us with a bit of cover if need be.”

“Good thinking.” I looked around the room at my band of beautiful brothers. “At least if I die, I will die surrounded by beauty. If with my last motion I could place a kiss upon the lips of any one of those girls I would judge my life well spent.”

I shook it off and went to the doorway.

“Girls! To me! We have a battle to win! You are now prisoners of whoever Helena, Arelline and I are pretending to be. Look dejected, despondent and desperate – but most of all, look for your chance to strike!”

I grabbed a half dozen large bottles from the bar and smashed the ends off them against a table. As the glass shattered around me I refused to blink, even as chips bounced off my spectacles.

“Take a bottle each, girls, and hide it well if you can. If not, bear it low, and wait for the opportunity to press it deep into the heart of an enemy!”

I led the way out of the bar, while Helena and Arelline brought up the rear.

It was do or die time. If we had to die, we would make sure we did for as many of the invaders as possible. They would fall at our hands, at our feet, at our blasters, at our broken bottles. We would scratch, claw and bite our way – but to victory, or to defeat?

I had never felt so alive!

Heist You Later

We turned left, and from the interior of the ferry we moved onto the open deck. The sounds of gunfire and screaming came less frequently than before, and I fervently hoped that was because the survivors were well-hidden, and not because there weren’t any.

I led the march along the deck – we were heading for the steps that would take us to the upper deck, which was as close as I thought we might be able to get to the attacking ship. I could not look up to check, though, since anyone looking down who saw my face could not fail to identify me as an imposter. I could hear shouted orders above, called out in rusty, throaty voices, but I had to keep my head down and pray that none of the orders were for us.

We reached the steps without encountering the

enemy face to face, but as I was halfway up one appeared at the top. There was no time to think about it further – I dashed up the few steps remaining before he had a chance to react, burying my wooden blade in his throat, and tossing him over the guard rail. If luck had really been on my side, he would have gone into the sea, but the fact that he was dead and not me meant I really had no cause to complain, even as a rabble of his co-soldiers gathered around his body, and turned to open fire upon us.

“Onto the upper deck, quickly!” I yelled behind me after looking around to check the area was clear.

Most of the girls got up the stairs unscathed, the railings and iron steps catching the brunt of the attack, but just as Helena reached me, a blast caught her in one leg. It buckled beneath her, and she fell. I tried to grab her, to pull her up to safety, but blaster fire buzzed horribly about my head.

She held out her gun. It was just within my reach. “Take it,” she said. “You can have it, so long as the first thing you do with it is put me out of my misery. I can’t fall into the hands of those creatures, I simply can’t.”

“Pish tosh,” I told her sternly, keeping my head well down, but taking hold of one end of the gun. “Nobody will be staying behind. I might need you wherever we are going. You know how these things work – ow!” A blaster shot had just clipped the top of my head. It stung like heck. “If we are captured, our captor will fall in love with one of you, and we can use that against him. What if you are the one with whom he is destined to fall in love? We will be sunk! Now hang on tight to this gun, and I’ll drag you up here.”

She did as I had said, and I lay flat on the deck. I told the other girls to take hold of my feet, and drag me along. They performed their duty admirably, and in a few seconds we were all safely on deck. It was just in time, as the attackers had given up on shooting at us from a distance and had begun to charge up the steps, calling their fellows to hie from the rest of the ferry as they went, in whatever guttural tongue it was that they used. (Later, of course, I would find out what their language was, but at that point in time it sounded utterly unfamiliar to me, apart from that you could easily discern the characteristic intonations of the aggressive brute, the bully, the ne’er-do-well – though they probably were doing *quite* well, I supposed, to have been sent on this mission. There must have been a lot of responsibility riding on it, which made me take all the more glee in ordering Helena and Arelline to join with me in focusing our fire upon the top of the flight of steps. The metal had been tough enough to resist the ranged attacks of the

men from below, but at this range it blistered and buckled with each shot, until at last I was able to kick at the steps, and watch them swing away, out towards, and then down into, the sea, taking with them at least a dozen of the murderers.

“Let’s hope the sailors can take advantage of this diversion and get any survivors to relative safety,” I said urgently. “The best thing we can do now, having come this far, is take control of the ship they arrived in and leave them stranded, else they will just return with reinforcements to attack other ships. We need to follow this sickness back to its source, and make sure that, even if we can’t stop it ourselves, we are able to give the information to someone who can.”

“That’s fine, Howard,” replied Arelline, “but how do you propose we get up there?”

I turned to look at the attackers’ ship. It was hovering a dozen metres in the air above our heads, with no visible means of reaching it.

Have I described it yet? I suppose this is the first time I got a really good look at the thing, so this is as good a place as any, if you don’t mind a small interruption to the action.

I think I said earlier that it was gun-metal grey, which was how Arelline had described the thing to me, and that was indeed an apt way to put it. It had the manner of a loaded pistol. It was shaped like an angry zeppelin, but much smaller – the troops we battled must have been packed into it like matches in a box. Unlike a zeppelin, I could not imagine this thing being lighter than air, regardless of what gases filled it. Despite that, no rockets belched fire, no engines whirred – it hung there, so quietly it would have been drowned out by a tivo in standby mode.

That was why I had not envisaged any problems with my plan, standing with my back to it, problems that had been immediately apparent to the palanquinettes. I had assumed it would be resting on the upper deck, having disgorged its violent cargo, especially once I had not heard the noise of any engine maintaining it in the air.

“Interesting,” I said. “There must be a way to get up there. If there were men inside they would simply have flown it down and sat the ship upon us, squashing us like insects, but they haven’t. Of course it’s possible that they have had a look at you ladies and have suddenly developed an intense respect for the sanctity of life, but I think it’s more likely that they just parked it up here and poured out to battle.”

“It might even be under remote control,” said Helena, as one of the other girls bandaged her leg with a piece of torn cloth. I did my best not to look at that which the torn clothing revealed, but danger does not change the man – it might bring out aspects

of himself he never suspected to exist, but only rarely will it lead him to forget his basic nature.

"It might well be," I agreed. "We must hope that any control, if there is one, has gone into the sea, or the remainder of our assailants will soon find a way to use it against us. I bet there's some way to get into it from down here."

Arelline spoke up, thoughtfully. "If these brutes can leap ten metres from the ship onto the deck without a bit of trouble, perhaps they could just leap back up again in the same way."

I thought about it a moment, but shook my head. "I don't think so. These men are not so different from us. I was able to kill them with a normal knife. If they had some special physical capabilities I think we would not have made it this far."

She was a little exasperated with me. "So how do you explain the way they jumped down?"

"It is not beyond the realms of reason to imagine some special material that could be included in the men's boots, some material that could absorb almost any shock."

"Like Captain America's shield?" she asked.

"Exactly – though obviously not to such an exaggerated extent. But knowing that doesn't help us get up there, does it?"

One of the palanquinettes – her name was Judy – was keeping watch at the edge of the deck, peering out from time to time to see what our enemies were up to. She was a very sweet girl, full of energy, and easily pleased. Now she called my name one last time.

"Howard!"

She turned to see if she had my attention, and I saw her head explode as blaster fire caught it full on. Blood splashed over all of us. That just left nine palanquinettes and me to save the world.

Action Is Mine!

I screamed, long and hard. For thirty seconds, at least, I gave full voice to the horror that assaulted my senses. After the first twenty seconds the girls joined in, and began to scream too. I took a breath, then screamed harder, and harder and harder. The girls did the same, then, one by one, we ran out of breath, fell to the ground, and began to laugh, a demented, high-pitched giggle that would have made you wonder as to our sanity. You would have not have wondered if we were sane – you would have wondered if we ever had been, if we ever could be – you would wonder if

sanity had ever strayed within sight of our madness, if we had ever done anything reasonable, said anything understandable, or thought anything thinkable.

"Glad we got that out of our system," I said with a snarl. "I loved Judy, as I love all of you, and I'll wear her blood like a badge of honour. When I lack courage, I will look to my chest and find it there, her sacrifice a reminder of why I have to persist, survive, and finally win out."

I clenched a fist, set my spectacles straight, and nodded my head firmly.

The next order of business was to get into that ship. From where I stood I could see no means of ingress, but I would not let that stop us.

After giving the matter some thought, I was left with only one option. There was nothing here on the deck which we could use to make a ramp or ladder – everything was screwed down tight, and our two blasters were already very nearly spent. A hot air balloon would have let one of us get up there, but the materials were not available, even though I had at my disposal more than enough hot air to power a dozen such balloons. Waiting for someone else to access the ship would be suicidal, since, even if they were able to get into it, it would leave us entirely at their mercy, defeating the object of the exercise.

No, there was but one option.

I cast my mind back to certain techniques I had learnt in the East, during my time spent living in the village of Ban, when I had all but given up on my search for the perfect drummer. Had I a dozen trained villagers, there would be no question of it – I would have been inside the ship faster than tea down an Englishman's throat – but would there be time enough to instruct the palanquinettes in those self-same techniques?

I would see. My life was already staked on it.

"Girls, gather round." They did as I asked. "Remain seated on the deck, but watch what I do carefully. After I have done it once, and you have watched it once, I will ask you to do it. It will hurt to try, and you will be unable to do it. Then, I will do it a second time, and you will watch me a second time. Then I will ask you to do it a second time. It will hurt to try, but this time you might be successful. We will repeat the process a third, fourth and fifth time, until all have managed it. At that point we shall proceed to the next stage of the plan. Is that clear?"

They all nodded.

"Okay. Now watch."

I span on the spot three times, punched my left leg out, thrust out my right, swung my right arm left, and swung my left arm right. Finally, I upped my neck

and squinted, hard. This left me unable to move any part of my body, other than my facial features. I was utterly rigid.

“Did you all get that?” I asked, gritting my teeth from the pain, but trying not to let it show.

They nodded, and many of them winced.

“You bring it to an end like this.”

I raised both eyebrows, and brought them down hard. My limbs unlocked, and my movement was unrestricted once more.

“Now you try, ladies.”

They got gingerly to their feet, and gave it a try. Legs were punched out, arms were swung, and necks were upped. It was not a bad effort, but as I walked among them I could see that none were truly rigid. Odd arms and legs here and there were locked, but none had achieved the perfect stiffness. It was a technique that had been developed by the Ban villagers to combat an ancient enemy, an awful tiger, extinct throughout the rest of the world, that could not bear to eat dead flesh, and so had had to adapt when its prey realised that playing dead was a way to survive.

Of course, I say that the tiger had to adapt, and that the prey realised, but you should understand that this is but a poetic way of describing these evolutionary events. If I were to write a literal account, what happened was that animals that had a tendency to play dead thrived despite the tigers, while those that did not tended to die out. In response, the tigers that by luck were able to combat this crafty (again with the non-literal descriptions!) behaviour tended to do better than those that did not.

Thus it was that the tiger of that area developed immensely long whiskers, that drooped right down to the ground on either side of its nose. The beast would use those whiskers to tickle any prey it found, and if the animal responded in any way, it would soon find itself snapped up.

The men and women of Ban had noted the results of this evolutionary argy-bargy with interest, and, one day, when a hunter became lost on the mountains, and had been discovered by a tiger out in the open, he had forced himself into the utmost rigidity, and survived, taking the secret back to the other villagers. Each of them had learnt how to do this, and during my long stay there they had passed the secret on to me. It was rarely of any use to them, but they did not have a huge variety of ways to pass the time there, isolated by the high, high mountains as they were, and learning that skill had effectively been the closest thing they had to martial arts lessons.

“Okay,” I said. “Bring your eyebrows down, hard. You might not have got quite there, but you still need to unlock anything that got locked.” They did as I

said, and all then let out huge groans. I let them have a second or two, then bade them sit down. “Watch again. This time, look especially for anything you did not pay attention to the first time. I will go at the same speed.”

I repeated the procedure, and this time when the palanquinettes tried it about half of them succeeded, which astonished me. Despite what I had said, in my heart I thought this a foolish endeavour. But perhaps the way that the palanquinettes were used to following my orders helped. And remember they were all actresses – their very job was to pick up on, and learn to pass off as their own, ways of behaving, ways of holding themselves. They were the perfect class for this lesson.

After that second attempt I had them all remove their clothes. This was not, as you might think, for my pleasure, though pleasurable it indeed was, but rather so that we could twist and bind those clothes into a thick strong rope.

The third time all were successful, though they shivered in their underwear. I choose the seven best, the firmest, stiffest and tallest, and had them repeat the procedure. The other two helped me stack the seven of them together, threading their arms and legs together to create a human chain. Finally we tied our rope to the end of this ladder of flesh, wound it through the railing to create a pulley, and dragged it up into the air, where the top girl – Arelline, as it happens – banged her head against the ship. We had done it!

I scrambled up the girls, using their brassieres as convenient rungs, and reached the ship. There was a simple button to press to gain entry – probably confirming my view that the ship operated under some kind of remote control, and that that control had gone overboard with the men on the steps – and I pressed it firmly, hefting my blaster in the other hand, letting Arelline bear my weight and support my balance through my knees, which I imagine was not very nice for her.

The door opened, and I leapt inside. I looked from left to right, but though the hold was unlit, I was sure it was empty. I hung out from the door and waved for the two girls that were at liberty to lower my lady ladder.

I ducked back inside to avoid another volley of shots, though the attackers seemed to be finding it hard to get a line on us. If only Judy had not stuck her head out at that moment... But I had not let that death affect my decisions – after all, I had known there was a fair to even chance that one or more of the girls in the ladder would take a shot, and yet I had encouraged them to do it. I regret to say that if being

shot would have made their body lose its rigidity, spoiling the plan, I would not have gone ahead. I had made them do it, knowing that any additional deaths would only be minor annoyances, so far as the plan went. Later, of course, I would have grieved for their loss, and I would have borne the burden of that responsibility forever, but that is the kind of decision a leader must be ready to make. True, no one had appointed me the leader of these women. I had hired them, but that contract had been void, irrelevant and ridiculous from the moment we found ourselves in a life-threatening situation. They had looked to me, and I felt I might be able to help them through, and that made me their leader, in fact if not in title.

Once they were back on the ground and unlocked, I had them ball up an end of the clothes rope and throw it up to me. I tied one end to the firmest thing I could find in the bay, an iron strut, and ordered the girls to climb up. All of them made it safely, and I pulled the rope up after them, and after closing the door enjoyed the view for a few minutes as they unknotted it and clothed themselves again.

What would be the next step? I needed time to think, but for the time being we seemed to be safe, and I felt justified in wasting a few moments in the contemplation of beauty. After all, in the end, women and children are the only important things men fight for, and it would not hurt to remind myself why I was fighting.

Eggshell in the Void

The bay in which we found ourselves was not large, but there was room for twenty or so of the attackers to have stood there. Posters bearing words in a language unknown to me adorned the bulkheads. The posters were vaguely reminiscent of Soviet propaganda in their lines and shapes, but where many of the Russian posters would have been in theory inspirational in nature, if not in effect, the purpose of these was clearly only to deaden, harden and dishearten. At the top of each poster could be seen a vague figure, a man, I imagined, though so highly stylised I could not be sure. I wondered if this was their leader.

More interestingly, there were also weapons racks on each wall. Most of the slots were of course empty, but there was enough for each of my girls to get their own gun.

It was time now to explore the rest of the ship, but I was to be surprised, as there was in fact very little

to explore – a pair of toilet cubicles, a small rations cupboard, and that was it. No flight deck, no windows, no bunks – none of that.

“This is very interesting,” I said to Arelline, as we sat to rest, there being nothing else to do. The other palanquinettes busied themselves with tending their wounds, and tucking into the rations. They might have been actresses, but they had been working hard, and had they not eaten they would have been likely to faint at the next sign of trouble. I had got them into good habits during our palanquinade. Casting directors would probably be impressed enough upon seeing this adventure on a CV to overlook any slight paunchiness brought on by the need for sustenance.

“Why’s that?” she asked. “Do you not just think the whole ship is remote controlled, that whoever sends these creatures to do their dirty work doesn’t actually want to spend any time in close quarters with them, and that the rest of the ship is given over to enormous engines, so that it can get about very quickly?”

I raised an eyebrow. “You are very sharp, Arelline. That is indeed what I think – but I thought it was interesting. Clearly you do not!”

She tipped a hand from side to side to show her ambivalence. “It’s not so much interesting, Howard, as worrying. If we could have gained control of the ship, we would have been golden. We could have flown off for help, then perhaps tried to infiltrate the enemy base, were we still up for it. If any of us had chickened out, you could have just taken a bunch of real soldiers to help you out. Now you’re just stuck with us, and we’re stuck with you, and we’re all stuck in here. We don’t know where it’s going, or when it will leave, or when it will arrive. Whoever built it might just fly us into a volcano, or into the sun.”

“That is a danger,” I agreed.

“Some of these girls would follow you anywhere, Howard, especially since you rescued us from the bar, but even before then. You seem to have a hold on them, and I don’t understand it fully. It isn’t love – it almost seems to transcend such ordinary day-to-day feelings. But whatever it is, you must not take advantage of it.”

“I fear I already have,” I said sheepishly.

“Oh, I don’t mean like that.” She rolled her eyes. “I mean, if you get to a point where there’s a choice of going on to danger, or running away to safety, you have to send them to safety, even if they don’t want to go. So far, you haven’t had much of a choice. I accept that. But when you do have a choice, you have to make the right choice for everyone.”

I said nothing for a moment. When it came down to it, I could not promise to do that.

“I wish I could say I would, Arelline. I love all these women dearly. Each one of them falls firmly within the parameters that define my ideal woman – when I saw each one for the first time I lost my heart and had to search for another to give to the next of them.” I bowed my head a little, embarrassed and almost ashamed of what I would say next. I spoke quietly. “But I am on a quest. I have had a vision, of the greatest band that ever played a note.”

“Are you serious? What has that got to do with this?”

“I don’t know – yet! But I believe that fate led me here. I let chance play its part, and it brought us all down here, just at the right time to encounter these people, this ship. It could all be coincidence, but that doesn’t matter. I can already feel a vibe. Something is in the wind. And if it came down to it, and I had to choose between sacrificing one of the girls to find the next member of my band...” Words failed me for a moment.

“You would let her die?” She was outraged, but spoke in a hard little whisper, for my ears only.

“Of course not,” I replied, my brow furrowed deeply. “How could you think that? I would sacrifice my dream, and save the girl, but then, how could I live? I would in all likelihood fall to the floor at that moment, the universe having stricken me dead if I had not done it myself. The cosmos needs me to bring this music into being, and thus it guides me – imagine its anger if I turn away from it all, for the sake of a beautiful woman.”

“It wouldn’t be for her sake, Howard,” she said gently. “It would be for your own. It would be for your dream. How could you ever play again, having paid such a price for it? If the cosmos wants to hear that music, it will make sure you can play it without destroying all that makes you human.”

I looked up, and gave her a thin smile. “I hope you are right. I hope we never find out.”

Neither of us spoke for a few moments, but I could not let this chance to talk with the object of my passion go by in silence.

“Why is it that you find me so resistable?” I asked. “Why do you not feel the same way about me that the others do?”

She tossed her hair angrily. “I am promised to another.”

I blinked. “Really? Do people still do that? The promising business?”

She slapped me on the shoulder. “I am engaged to be married.”

“Have you met him?”

Arelline was even angrier now, but her frown was just another aspect of her beauty, and so I felt no urge to disengage her from it. “You just assume that, just because my family is Indian? You assume it’s an arranged marriage? That’s so cheap, Howard.”

She was lovely when enflamed!

“You are right. I have no cause to pry. If you do not want to talk about it, I should not press you. I expect it is not an arranged marriage, that it is some smart young chap that you’ve met at university, and that he’s waiting for you right now, wondering why it is taking so long for you to phone him.”

“If you must know, Howard, it is an Indian man, and I chose him myself, and you can just get your nose out of it. A nose which, I think, is just out of joint because one of the harem didn’t fall for your charms!”

“Ah, so you admit I have charms! I am making some progress with you, then. Your gentleman will have to watch himself!”

We were quiet another moment, listening to the other girls chatting away, about jobs they had lined up, auditions they would be going to over the next few weeks, agents honest and otherwise, and so on. Finally I decided to give her another prod.

“The thing with such an arrangement, hypothetically speaking, is that it is only well into living with a woman that you truly know her. It is the details that matter – how often does she shave her legs, or bathe? Does she pick her nose outside the bathroom? Is she careful about where her nail clippings fall? I hope that your gentleman is not in for a series of unpleasant surprises.”

“Shut up, Howard,” she said, in a resigned tone of voice.

At that very moment, the engines of the ship started up, and we were off!

Tears in Transit

“Howard, what’s happening?” It was Helena that I heard asking the question, but I do not think that she was the only one. There was a concerned hubbub from all of the palanquinettes, and I moved quickly to assuage their fears.

“Do not worry, girls,” I said, taking to my feet. “This is just what we expected. It is all part of our cunning plan to unseat the villains who perpetrated this assault upon our ferry and the brave people upon it.”

To my surprise, Arelline stood up beside me.

“Howard is right – this is just what we were waiting for. It’s a shame that this isn’t a ship we could steer to safety ourselves, but this is the next best thing. We will wait here – wait, rest, prepare and train – and when that door opens again, we will take the operators by surprise and make our way to some kind of radio apparatus. From there we will signal the authorities and then hide till they arrive. If we are discovered in the meantime, between the nine of us we have rather a large stock of feminine wiles.”

I was very grateful for her intervention. “Arelline could not have put the plan better. When we arrive, I will still be wearing this outfit I took from the man I killed, and I will herd you out, as if you were booty, in both senses of the word, that I had brought back from Earth. If this is a military establishment without women – and I saw none in the attack – then they will be glad enough to see you that they will not think to wonder what is concealed in the hand behind your back. That is when you will strike!”

There was one flaw with my plan, which many readers will already have noted. If we were not in fact moving to a location on Earth, but were on our way into space, help would be unlikely to respond to radio signals for thousands of years! That would of course be no good to us, unless we were able to commandeer some kind of suspended animation apparatus... I did not exactly put the thought out of my head, though I sequestered it somewhat. It was ridiculous, but then we were in a ridiculous situation, the kind of situation only a total idiot would have got themselves into – I began to berate myself – I had reacted to danger as if I were one of the Three Stooges, rather than as the man of action I had lately fancied myself to be.

I sank back to the ground, my head in my hands. “Foolish, foolish, Howard!” I cried. “All these girls will die for your idiocy! My palanquinade will end in suffering for all! Why did I not just hire an apartment, and fill my living room with fine prime grizzle?”

Tears began to fall from my eyes, and the girls looked at each other in consternation. Even Arelline seemed shaken. You probably wonder, from the safety of your favourite couch, why these women – intelligent, strong and beautiful as they were – looked to me for leadership. What did I have to offer them, aside from the pleasures of the flesh? Reading my account so far, you probably wonder why others have such high opinions of me that they are willing to follow me into trials and dangers. At this moment, you see both my strength and my weakness. My greatest strength as a leader was that *I did not fear to show my weakness*. Almost all great leaders have this

quality – they will show a front of strength to the enemy, but to their friends they are honest, that plans may be made more effectively.

I began to mutter to myself, thoughts of despair breaking over me like waves on a breakwater that nears its end. “What to do... what to do...?”

Looking up to Arelline, I held up a desperate hand. “Lend me your strength, pretty lady. Help me, please, I beg. I am nothing to any of you, who have followed me into this.”

She reached out and took my hand. I pulled hers towards me and examined it closely. The back of it was as brown as the rest of her gorgeous skin. The outline of her bones lightly protuded, but they took nothing away from its smoothness.

I placed a kiss upon it, and she did not take it away.

I turned the hand over. This side was lighter, somewhere between pink and a yellowish brown, depending on which part of it you were looking at. The grooves in the palm and across the top part of the hand were deep, and were a dark, dark brown, contrasting strongly with the rest to create the illusion of another hand behind the one visible to the eye, as if you could peel off the lighter skin to see the true hand beneath. I buried my face in it, and let more of my tears out.

“I am a weak man,” I mumbled, struggling to speak through the sobbing and her hand. “I don’t deserve the respect of any of you.”

“Howard,” said Arelline gently. “Get to your feet. We need you to lead us. Any of us could lead in theory, we have the strength, we have the will, we have the intelligence. What we lack is your recklessness, your view of the big picture, your imagination, and your experience in these matters.”

I lifted my head from her hand, pursed my lips and laughed. I reached inside the attacker’s outfit I wore to my real clothes, and took out a handkerchief with which I wiped first her hand, and then my face.

“Am I being played by a Hollywood star in this film?” I asked. “This is one of those scenes where everyone has to say how great and special he is, and that only he can do it?”

“I guess it is,” she said, laughing so prettily it almost pushed me over.

But I kept my balance, and got back to my feet. I took a short walk around the bay to get my bearings and composure back.

“I am really, truly sorry, ladies,” I said, taking a moment to make eye contact with each and every one of them. “I have my doubts, and I let them get the better of me. What brought on this embarrassing little episode was the thought that this ship might be

taking us off Earth, in which case I would not be able to guarantee your safe return home. I might have condemned you to slavery. You might have been better off jumping into the sea.”

Arelline pumped her fist in the air. “Better to die on an alien planet, fighting for Earth, than to die underwater, fighting for air. Even if we cannot win out, wherever we find ourselves, we can do everything possible to convince these aggressors that our world will not fall easily. That not only every man will fight back, but every woman too!”

The other eight palanquinettes gave a cheer.

“We’re with you, Arelline!”

“Howard and Arelline, for Earth!”

“Okay,” I said, holding up a hand. “This could get a bit soppy if we’re not careful. You don’t want to see me cry twice in one day. But I think it was good to get it out of my system. There might not be time to cry later.”

Suddenly, the engines came to a stop.

“So soon?” asked Helena.

“It seems that there is no time to cry now, either.” I said wryly, all business now that it came to the crunch. “Everyone take your weapons, put your hands behind your back, and arrange yourselves in front of the door. I’ll stand off to the side here, in darkness, so that they can’t see me clearly, but can see that I am here.”

They took their positions, and I took mine.

First Steps on a Far-Off World

Three men waited for us. Their eyes went wide as the girls filed out, but before they could call their thanks to me they had received their just desserts, their bodies disintegrating under a hail of blaster fire.

“Good work, girls,” I said, stepping out after them. They were a sight to behold. A miniature army, but a perfect miniature. If only all armies could be like that, and all wars fought with hard stares and catcalls, but the enemy had brought their guns to the battle and so we had to bring ours too (or rather we had to steal theirs).

We were in a small dark chamber, bereft of windows. The nose of the ship we had arrived in, it seemed, had nuzzled neatly through a gate of some kind, just far enough to allow us to step from the ship straight onto the platform, just as we would have done from an Underground train in London. When I

say the chamber was small, I suppose I mean the part of the chamber unoccupied by the ship. Take out the ship and it would have been quite huge! But the platform was narrow, just large enough for the ten of us to stand single file (though a control panel crowded us a bit), which meant the soldiers must have filed in from somewhere else – there it was, a sliding door off at the end of the chamber opposite to the gate through which our ship had entered.

I had not seen it at first – the lighting was murky, everything indistinct and moody. It was not that the lights were dim, more that the colour they shone was not the bright yellow or white I was used to – it had a slight purplish tinge that created shadows even where none were cast. The lines of the door were not such as to stand out from the wall – it faded at the edges, let you forget it was there. This was a subtle nation we had found, but not, I deduced, a happy one.

“Where are we, Howard?” asked one of the girls. Perhaps it was the stress of the moment, but I could not remember her name. I quickly came up with a way to get around that.

“We will soon find out. But first, let us all introduce ourselves, over the bodies of our foes! I had hoped to do this during our approach in the ship, but time was not on our side.”

“You were too busy crying, you mean,” said another girl, quite cruelly, I felt. Some women, sad to say, do not appreciate displays of weakness in a man. Some women would prefer a violent man to one who cries before them, simply because they will respect a man for his violence – is that not what the entirety of popular entertainment persuades them to do? – but despise him for any show of weakness. If men learnt not to fear the laughter of women, they would fear little else.

Most of the other palanquinettes laughed, but I stood my ground.

“If I decided to cry, you can rest assured it was for your own good! Okay,” I said, “you go first, joker – name and a sentence or two about yourself.”

She sighed. “Right then. I’m Nina. I have been married for three years, but my husband has been in jail for bank fraud for two of those. I’ve been acting for five years, and I got my start in Grange Hill. Happy?”

“I won’t ask your age, but since I chose you all, I know the range within which you all fall. Bear in mind this is for each other’s benefit as much as mine. I read your biogs when you applied for this job, but you all need to know just who has got your back. Next.”

I will not take the time to describe each of them as they spoke, since you already know that they were all

chosen to fit my criteria – brown-skinned, black-haired, plenty jumping in their shirts. All had British passports (we had been heading to France, and possibly beyond, and I had not wanted to have to make any special visa arrangements, but their ethnicity was as wide-ranging as the number of ethnicities that produce women with brown skin).

"I am Sasha," said the next. "I have been in Spooks as a diplomat's wife, and my ambition is to be a Bond girl. I slept with Howard in Aylesbury."

I winced.

"My name is Benny. I slept with Howard in Bury St Edmonds. I am not really an actress – I'm a model – but I thought I would be able to handle this job. Right now I'm wishing I had a bit of training in stunt work."

I held up a hand. "There is no need to say where you slept with me. I realise it might have been a bonding experience for all of us, Arelline aside, but it is a little embarrassing to hear it said out loud. Let us keep those beautiful memories in a special place in our minds for the moment."

"I'm Sela. I like kittens and ecology. I have a degree in food science, but decided to act instead." She shrugged.

"Bas. I do kung fu and I'm a vegetarian. I feel very badly about the men we have had to kill, and wish there had been a better way."

"So do we all," I said sadly, putting an arm on her shoulder. "But sometimes the scum have to pay."

"Arelline. I like fast food and science fiction. I'm engaged to be married."

"Science fiction, hmm? Have you read any of my novels?"

"No."

"Helena. I was recently injured, but I think I can make it. I am acting because the opportunities came my way – I've been doing it since I was a little kid. But I do want to go back to my education at some point. Having to squeeze it in between shoots really made me value it."

"It did the opposite for me," said the next girl. "My name is Parveen. I have played every role in *The Bill* and *Casualty* from baby, to little sister, to rebellious teenager, to arranged marriage victim, to nurse. I hated the lessons – I just wanted to get back out there again, and show them I could do so much more."

"That's exactly what you are doing right now," I said. "When we get back home, none of you will ever be typecast again, unless it's in the role of beautiful leading lady of action. You will pick and choose your roles, and if you find you can't, I will dip into my

bank account and we make ourselves the film you all deserve!"

"That just leaves me – I'm Juanita. My parents served in the Brazillian embassy in London for twenty years, and I was born and grew up here, eventually taking British citizenship. I always wanted to act, but this is my first big break."

"So that's Juanita, Bas, Nina, Parveen, Arelline, Helena, Sela, Benny and Sasha. My little troop. My beautiful band. My arresting army. I do not know what is through this door, but we are going to step through it and find out. It might be death. It might be life. But we will face it together, and if I die, it will be with your names on my lips."

As I approached the door it slid open to the right. I had not been sure whether to expect a flood of light, or more murkiness, but in fact in was neither – through the door flashed laser fire – quick, harsh and bright – and Sasha and Benny fell to the ground, instantly burnt beyond recognition.

I swore, let out a scream, and forward-rolled through the door. I felt hot hot heat across my back, but ignored the pain – my anger let me. On the other side, aware of nothing but the dim silhouettes that turned to send laser fire in my direction, I sprawled out upon the ground, threw my hand forward, and slashed my wooden knife against a grey leg. A man fell upon me – I twisted the gun from his hands and stuck fingers into each of his eyes. My thumbs jammed into his mouth, I threw him up against one of his fellows.

That one stepped aside adroitly, but then fell, the side of his helmet exploding through his head.

My remaining girls had charged through, taking advantage of the distraction I had caused.

I rolled around, spinning my legs beneath me, checking the room for other enemies. The only silhouette visible was the one now falling slowly to the ground, a laser gun falling away from its hand, the other hand stretched out in surprise.

I got to my feet, and held out a hand to my palanquinettes. Sela took my hand, Arelline took hers, and so on, till we all stood there in a chain, looking at the sky.

We stood outside what in medieval times would have been called a fort. What was it here? A research station? It was not large – its body only perhaps as large as that of the ship docked with it.

The land about us was red and dusty, scrub brush here and there doing its best to mask a harsh landscape. Rocky outcrops on the summits of hills dominated the horizon, none of them more than five hundred metres away from us.

But as I said, we were looking up, not around, and

we held one another's hands tightly. Our guts revolted against what our eyes were telling us. We all needed reassurance that we were not insane. We needed reassurance that there was still hope.

Three moons shone down on us from a violet sky.

The Mantor Strikes!

"It seems we are on another world, after all, and in the middle of nowhere, with no one else to fight," I said to the actresses. "Having discovered this, I no longer feel I can drag you all along on this expedition. Two more of you have died, and the rest probably will too if we go on. I had thought we might emerge from the ship into an enemy base, and so we did, but it seems we are not close to the centre of events – this is perhaps a minor outpost of some kind."

I explained that it would probably take me a couple of days to learn how to program the ship to return them to Earth, and until then they should try to relax, not stray too far from the base.

"Once you are safely home, and can warn Earth of the aggressive spacefarers we have encountered, I will strike off across this rugged landscape, and make my way to somewhere a man can do some damage, and possibly find a musician to join his band."

I chose not to hear any debate on the matter, leaving immediately to begin my task.

Arelline followed me, and irritatingly would not stop talking while I examined the controls on the panel. They were quite alien, naturally enough, to anything I had seen before, but certain logical principles had to apply, and by following a process of deduction I felt certain I would be able to master them – with luck that would be before I damaged or destroyed the ship with my tinkering.

"I think you are doing the right thing, and being very brave to go on alone, if it means anything, Howard."

I grunted, refusing to take my eyes from the controls.

"I guess it doesn't," she said, and ran from the room.

I turned to look after her – had she been suppressing a sob? I reminded myself that she was engaged, but then another part of me reminded myself that more than one of the other palanquinettes had been married, stopping none of us!

In the end, it took me less than a day to get the ship

under my exact control. I did not know where we were, but I had been able to access a list of the most recent voyages of the ship, and by comparing others with the one by which we had come to this planet I was able to gain some idea of the settings required to drop the girls off in London. Just out of showmanship I decided to have them alight in Trafalgar Square, ensuring plenty of tourists with video cameras, and thus lots and lots of media exposure. The papers and news channels would be full of them for weeks to come, then the magazines would run features, and then, if there was any justice in the world, they would fight it out over who became the biggest star.

I *hoped* for their dignity that the boom in celebrity-led reality shows would somehow have evaporated during our absence, but in my heart I knew there was every chance one of them would be eating insects on live television within the year.

During that day, a hasty funeral had been arranged for the two who had died, and I had left my work to say a few, brief words, which felt all the more empty for being so heartfelt.

"If it seems appropriate to the rest of you, I would like to express my feelings through a poem, as follows:

*Low, low Lord, that ties this cord,
And cuts it where he pleases.
Take these girls to you,
And make them happy,
With many fine wines and cheeses."*

All were overcome, and it was with great difficulty that I managed to finish the last line. My emotions very nearly got the better of me, as they had in the ship, but I pinched myself, hard, on the chin, and remembered that I had to send the rest of them to safety before I could indulge my weakness once again. The girls busied themselves burying the four men we had killed upon our arrival, though that was done without ceremony.

Shortly afterwards, I got them all to file into the ship, and said goodbye. "I love you all, and wish each of you the best in life. Please give my commiserations to the families of those who died, and assure them that upon my return I will do all I can to cement their place in history, for they gave their lives all the more bravely for never having been expected to risk them at all."

As the door to the ship closed on them, Arelline hopped out.

"Get back in, you little fool," I said angrily.

"No," she said, and that was that.

I made the final adjustments to the controls, and

the palanquinettes, all save beautiful, proud Arelline, flew back to Earth. Behind them an iris closed to shut off the sky.

"We should take a nap," I said to her.

She agreed, and the two of us dropped to the floor and fell asleep.

The noise of a roaring beast awoke me. At first I thought I was back in the hotel room with the mountain drummer, but then I awoke fully to see I was still in the enemy outpost. The terrifying braying came from outside, but from the way the iris was wobbling I wondered how long that would continue to be the case.

I quickly tried to wake Arelline and Johnny. Both were fast asleep still, and it was hard to rouse them. I resorted to shouting their names.

"Johnny! Arelline! Get up – a monster attacks!"

We had been curiously complacent about our safety on this alien world, you might think. We had taken no precautions against being attacked, whether by animals, monsters, or the fellows of the men we had killed, and I cannot adequately explain why. We were tired, that is for sure, and at the end of our tethers, which could explain a lot, but there was also a false sense of security in numbers. When there were so many of us, we felt safe, even though a single man with a blaster could have finished the lot of us in seconds, had he taken us unawares.

Now that there was just the three of us, oddly enough I felt much happier, and freer, even if less safe. Much of the responsibility was lifted from my shoulders – no longer a commander, I was now a trooper – not exactly a lone wolf, but no longer the head of a pack, who had been looking to me for leadership and guidance. Now I could relax a little, and enjoy being scared, because if I fell victim to whatever threatened me, there were no ramifications other than for myself. Of course, Johnny Quondam and Arelline looked up to me, but I had no responsibility for them, other than that which every human being owes to his or her fellows.

"Let's see what it is!" I said with glee. "Johnny – make sure you do not forget that camera of yours! Get it turned on and pointing at the iris. I think we may have a treat on our hands!"

I gave him a moment to set himself up, while Arelline grabbed herself a laser gun and pointed it in the right direction.

A button was pressed, the iris opened, to reveal the broad orange shoulders and head of the most ferocious creature I had met (to that point – worse was to come later in my adventures, if you can believe it).

Its head seemed to be made entirely of teeth, almost like the inside of a shark's mouth, but facing outwards. Having since given it some thought, I believe the purpose of those external teeth could well have been decorative, to terrify its victims, or to attract mates, which would have accounted for their almost baroque over-elaboration – it was like looking at a pine cone soaked in blood. On the other hand, once it had killed its prey, they would have allowed it to rend the flesh in seconds, simply by digging its face into its meal and twisting its head about.

Its every aspect spoke to its viciousness. Sharp ridges criss-crossed its neck, its claws, when it raised them to the gap, were as long as a man, and its eyes, though only barely visible through all those teeth, were the colour of blood. As the monster pressed its attack on this unexpectedly open way into the outpost, its chest heaved and fell like a damnable piston, and its putrid breath poured into the chamber, stinging our eyes, and leaving us gagging for breath.

I started to wonder if perhaps I had let my curiosity get the better of me, and I could see that the others were already wondering the same thing, despite the incredible footage Johnny must have known he was getting.

They both looked at me with intense fear in their eyes, but I held up a hand and gave them a wink. By her motions (she could not make herself heard above the racket of the monster) Arelline made it known that she desperately wanted to start shooting, but I shook my head.

The monster then seemed to falter in its attack a little, almost as if it was giving up. (I later found out that this beast was called a mantor, as you might have guessed from this chapter's title.) I frowned, pursed my lips, and waved at Arelline to let off a shot or two. She was puzzled – why would I want her to anger it now that it was about to leave? I gave her another wink and pointed to the mantor again.

She let off a shot, hitting the creature in its face, or its mouth – the two were practically synonymous. The laser seared off a tooth, just above the scarlet green of the gums (whatever colour things were on that planet, they were a shade of purple – if I were to stick with traditional ways of describing colours, my narrative would be full of purple, purple, and purple, so you may find that I stretch the English language in my descriptions from time to time).

The mantor howled in agony, a scream that rattled everything in the building, from the steel ceilings to my very bones, and leapt up at the gap in the wall, frenzied in its new determination to get at us. I waved Arelline and Johnny back, just for safety, but stayed in my position, waiting for the right moment.

Then, it was there! The mantor was halfway through the hole, legs on one side, arms on the other, and I brought the iris shut around it. It was trapped! There were a few nervous moments where I worried if the trap would hold, but after only half an hour the monster gave up its struggles, and I knew we had won. Eventually it fell asleep, for want of anything better to do.

Johnny and Arelline returned to my side.

“So what did you do that for, boss?” asked Johnny.

“That, my friends, will be our steed!”

Laugh While the Iron’s Hot!

Arelline looked at me with a measure of disbelief. “You think we are going to be able to ride that thing? Have you lost your mind, Howard? It would sooner eat us than let us smile at it!”

“She’s right, Howard,” said Johnny. “There’s no way that we will be able to tame it.”

“My friends,” I said with some smugness, “you do not reckon with the power of poetry!”

Both of them sighed, but I did not sag. I pushed my chest out further. “Music might sooth the savage breast (or is it beast? – it is one of those things that I feel I ought to know, but have never cared enough to investigate), but it takes poetry to bend the savage breast to your will!”

“Are you sure you aren’t taking yourself a bit seriously?” asked Johnny. “I have read some of your poetry. I thought it might be a good idea when I was applying for a job with you. But, man, it isn’t good. There’s a reason it took a tune to make you famous.”

I ignored his cheekiness. “You will see. But that is not for you to worry about. While I get on with making friends with our monstrous morning alarm, the two of you will have your own tasks to get on with.”

They looked at each other and shrugged.

“As long as you don’t risk our lives,” said Arelline. “I respect you, Howard, up to a point, but you have to keep our safety in mind.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I said. “I keep my own safety in mind at all times, and if you see me sitting upon the creature’s back, you will know I have determined it to be safe to do so.”

I set them to packing the foodstuffs from the ship, and any others they could find, into any suitable bags they could find. There was not a lot to this outpost,

but after circumnavigating it (being careful to avoid the rear end of the sleeping carnivore) they discovered a couple of storage areas, accessible with the help of a blaster and a large rock. It was an odd building. There was nowhere for anyone to stay, no sleeping quarters, no recreation area, nowhere to eat. I got the impression that the soldiers were just dropped off there, probably from a nearby city, and sent on their way to Earth. That gave me some hope that such attacks could be stopped, and would not escalate, because it seemed to imply that they were being launched in secret. Whoever sent those scum to ruin my holiday was not doing it proudly, sending his or her men out from the town square with a fanfare at their backs. The troops were being shipped off to an outpost in the wilds where they could not even spend the night.

That made me think for a minute. If there was nowhere here to spend the night, then the soldiers would have been expected to return to the city upon landing back on this planet, wherever it was. That meant someone would soon be missing them, and probably sending more troops out to investigate. (That meant the graves of my two dead palanquinettes would almost certainly be desecrated by investigators. I decided not to mention that to the others. I felt awful about keeping that ugly secret, but there would have been no way to avoid it happening, other than to take the bodies with us, and that simply was not practical. One sour part of me suggested disinterring the bodies and feeding them to the mantor, but I did not even get so far as considering the practicality of that before dismissing it.) If we made an effort not to leave any trace of ourselves other than those bodies, perhaps the investigators would come to the conclusion that all the Earthlings had returned to their own planet, and we might escape detection for a little while.

It all added up to one thing – we needed to get moving quickly.

Fortunately my work with the mantor had gone well.

My first step had been to kill a small animal to feed him – I found a suitable candidate hiding in some shrubbery twenty metres or so from the outpost. I had developed some hunting skills during my time in the village of Ban, though they had been a predominantly agrarian people. On this planet I had an additional advantage – the wildlife were not alert to my scent! This meant I was able to sneak up on the furry little fellow without his twitching a single time. However, when I drew my wooden knife from its sheath the first time he had reacted furiously, and dashed away from me as if the devil himself were on

his tail. I quickly guessed the problem, and used sand to wash away the blood of the various soldiers I had tangled with.

The second time I approached my prey, he was totally oblivious to his impending death, and fell to my blade as if it had been his life's very goal.

I took the corpse into the outpost, and slowly, carefully, approached the mantor with it.

First, he sniffed, and did not wake, probably happy for the time being to dream about food, a dream where it would be plentiful and he would not be restricted in how much he could eat of it, but I swung the dead critter around my head, casting its scent all about the room, and eventually the mantor's stomach (assuming its biology was anything at all like that of Earth animals) forced it to wake. Dream food was fine for the mind, more than enough to sustain the imagination, but monsters cannot live on dreams.

It awoke, and screamed.

I dropped to my knees. It was the most soul-rendering noise I had ever heard.

But I tried to hold firm.

I held the creature out in my hand, and began to recite some poetry – though recite might not be the correct word, as this was not pre-written poetry – it was brand new, composed on the fly to fit the moment, to engage the beast's heart, and tie it to me. So it might be better to say I extemporised poetry; created it, made it, and performed it, all at once.

I shall reproduce a sample of it here, but bear in mind it was never intended for human consumption. I merely offer it to you to give a flavour of the moment.

*"Mighty monster oh so high
You might wish to rule the sky
You live for death
And have bad breath
But you have never told a lie.*

*Lord of the beasts, oh deadly threat
Would that we had never met
You have no love
Push comes to shove
And now our joined fates must be set.*

*Oh tooth-faced monster, standing there
I hope you will become my chair
We will ride far
You, my car,
Will become a transport rare."*

As I said, that was not intended for an intelligent readership, but it seemed to do the job. I would perform my extempore poetry, give the creature his

food, and then repeat the process every hour or so. By the third or fourth iteration the creature did not even bother to scream at me – the poetry brought it instant calm, and so my work was almost done.

All that remained was to rig a means of riding upon it. I had Arelline and Johnny (when he was not too busy filming my poetry sessions) search for branches, vines and the like, but they could find nothing so large, and so I was left with no option but to burn handholds for ourselves in the beast's torso. It was not something that made me happy, but we had to ride, and we had to ride soon.

A direct blaster or laser hit had next to no effect up on the mantor's hide, but I found it was possible to burn out a hole by using the laser guns to superheat a piece of steel railing that the three of us managed to wrestle from the outpost wall, and then stabbing the end of that railing into the creature.

I allowed time for the wounds to cool – they were instantly cauterised, so there was no risk of infection – and then, after catching some small scaly creature, went into the outpost to talk to the mantor face to face again.

*"I am sorry
For your pain
I say*

*I am sorry
For the stain
I say*

*I am sorry
That we must
I say*

*I am sorry
So I bluster."*

He seemed to take it well, and in just an hour or two the three of us were riding on his back, being carried across the landscape in almost as much comfort as I had been in my palanquin just a day or two before. That is as long as you define comfort as being free from the threat of imminent death – if you are the kind of weakling who asks for more than that, shame on you, and shame on me, for feeling the same way!

In point of fact, we were quite miserable, hanging on for dear life as the mantor loped across the land, being thrown from one side to the other by his mighty lopes, our meagre baggage slung under his fierce belly, subject to being scattered across the ground should he decide to rid himself of it. Should he ever tire of my poetry, we would probably fall victim to the same fate, but for now we were free, and we were flying!

Gertrude and the Thringrar A Short Story

Ranjna Theaker

Artist and novelist

Most of the town knew that Gertrude was special, but it was only after the Thringrar invasion of our small town, Mittleville, that we all really acknowledged how special Gertrude truly was.

Gertrude lived alone in a large house with three bedrooms. She had no pets, relatives, or friends to entertain in her home. Instead, Gertrude chose to spend most of her time alone painting and drawing pictures of all sorts of objects from her house. The smallest room in her house was filled with sketches of her favourite red-spotted mug and her favourite blue-spotted plate. There were 150 sketches, of all sizes, of her blue-spotted plate; and 1,272 of her red-spotted mug. This was because Gertrude liked her red-spotted mug more than her blue-spotted plate. The reason I know this, and the exact number of Gertrude's sketches held in the smallest room in her house, is because often she would visit my newsagents, purchase a small six-pack of multi-coloured crayons, and inform me of the number of sketches that she had created (without me asking her I might like to add). Sometimes I would not see her for month – at other times she would come in five times in one day.

The number of boxes of crayons I ordered had increased ten-fold because of Gertrude. She was just about the only person who bought those crayons. Every now and then a mother would come in and purchase a packet to keep their child company until their chicken pox or measles had passed, but it was Gertrude who desired them the most. Once I had forgotten to place a new order of crayons and I explained the situation to Gertrude but she stared strangely at me with her small but piercing light brown eyes. She could not fathom that there were no crayons available to purchase. Gertrude spent three days sitting in the corner on the stool in my shop and only left when the crayons had been delivered. She sipped from her flask; did not eat; did not speak; and

closed her eyes only once in a while, during the three whole days. It was as if she were a zombie, making quiet and sluggish movements at times. I was terrified. Being relatively new to the town of Mittleville, I had not totally been convinced by the talk in the town that Gertrude was not quite sound in the mind and perhaps had gone insane from living alone in her house for over fifty years, but after watching Gertrude, nervously, sitting on that stool for three days, awaiting the arrival of a packet of crayons, I began to understand why most of the townspeople crossed to the other side of the street whenever they saw her. It was the mere fact that she was so unpredictable that frightened most of the townspeople. Even the young children made no attempt to tease her; she made everyone feel so uncomfortable, that they all stayed away from her.

Out of curiosity after the three-day incident with Gertrude, I decided to make an attempt to delve into her history. I discovered that she was an only child. That was all I discovered. There were no records in the town hall of any of her family. There was nothing. I did not stop there, though. I decided to interview a few of the older members of the town. Most of them had all their faculties intact and the interviews were very pleasant. I thoroughly enjoyed the homemade carrot cakes and flapjacks that I consumed at those interviews. However, I did not discover any extra information about Gertrude. The only conclusion I came to was that Gertrude was about ninety years old. And that was it. Yet that information puzzled me because Gertrude looked closer to forty than ninety.

I left my investigation of Gertrude at that – mainly because I knew that the only way I was going to find more details about Gertrude was to go straight to the source, Gertrude. And I knew after only a few conversations with Gertrude that no one could ever really have a sane conversation with her. Here is an

example of one conversation I had with her. It was about a year ago, when I decided not to cross to the other side of the road as I saw Gertrude approaching. This conversation clearly illustrates the point I am making:

Me: "Good afternoon, Gertrude."

Gertrude: "10,000 steps."

Me: "I'm sorry, what did you say Gertrude?"

Gertrude: "Up the stairs and down the stairs. Tomorrow."

Me: "That's nice. Um... I suppose I might see you tomorrow for your usual packet of crayons."

Gertrude: "The hedgehog was slow yesterday. Thank you. Bob-bye."

I did try for several days to decipher the code in the conversation. But it was futile. After discussing the conversation with other townspeople, I realised there was no code. A number of people reiterated similar conversations they had had with her and I noticed that there was a pattern of incomprehension. Every now and then when things are a bit quiet I wonder if perhaps there is a code and that I should I try to crack it. I would imagine having my name published in many science journals as "The Man Who Cracked the Gertrude Code". Oh, what a feat it would be! But then I'd just decide to have a cup of tea instead and watch some television. It was obvious that Gertrude truly was unique. Neither I nor the townspeople could ever have imagined that this uniqueness was going to save our lives and our town, Mittleville.

It all started on a quiet Sunday afternoon as I was having a delightful conversation with Miss Longbottom in my newsagents. She was a very pretty young woman. She had soft-flowing locks of black hair which bounced gently on her shoulders every time she giggled. I often thought of becoming more closely acquainted with Miss Longbottom but I knew that Mr Wagstaff, who was at least ten years older than her, had let the whole town know of his romantic intentions towards her. So I had buried my feelings for her – the main reason being that, despite being a good few years older than me, Mr Wagstaff was about a foot taller and a foot wider.

As she giggled at one of my fine jokes and her hair bounced wonderfully on her petite shoulders, little Alfred Simkins came running into the shop. He was covered with mud.

"Oh my goodness, Alfie, what have you been doing?" shouted Miss Longbottom.

I came out from behind my counter and knelt down beside little Alfred. I wiped his face with my handkerchief and then placed my hands on his shoulders in an attempt to stop him shaking.

"Alfred! Alfie, what happened?" I said calmly.

Alfred Simkins looked straight at me and held his arms out. I put my arms around him and then Alfred cried and cried and cried.

It was about three hours before we knew what had happened. After we had taken him home, Alfred's mother had tucked him up safely in bed and cuddled next to him for a while, till he fell asleep. Mrs Simkins came downstairs and told me, the Mayor, Mrs Maplestaff and Doctor Randall what Alfred had seen. (Mittleville was a small town so it had not taken long for the more important members of the town to rally round to the Simkin's household. I was only there because I had seen Alfred in his petrified state before any of the others.) Mrs Simkins did not look at any of us. We all waited nervously and then Mrs Simkins sat down in her largest green armchair and looked up at her living room ceiling. She looked at all of us and said:

"The aliens have landed. The invasion has begun."

Nobody said anything for a few minutes. And then I asked, "Which aliens?"

"The Thringrar," answered Mrs Simkins.

I opened my mouth to respond but Mrs Simkins resumed. "They have no legs, they are blue, their skin is as strong as steel, they have two arms, they carry laser guns and only answer to their king, King Thringrar the Greatest. They are here to invade our town Mittleville. They are here to enslave us all."

A town meeting was convened straight away. Nobody questioned what Mrs Simkins had said. It was too bizarre to ignore or laugh at. The town was terrified. The Mayor told all the townspeople that they must not panic. He insisted that other towns would come to their rescue and that was there was no need for violence. Mrs Maplestaff, a very strong-willed and energetic woman, on the other hand, demanded that the town break off into small groups, weaponize immediately and launch a massive counter-attack against the Thringrar, and then try to ascertain the whereabouts of King Thringrar the Greatest, capture him, torture him and take their town back. The town was split as to which way to go.

That was when the town meeting was broken up by a group of Thringrar. They had come to the meeting and demanded the allegiance of the town to King Thringrar the Greatest. Whoever disobeyed would be punished severely – "by being zapped into a million smithereens", they said. And they also mentioned that they had enveloped the town of Mittleville in a huge force field. No one could get in and no one could get out without the authorisation of a high-level member of the Thringrar government.

Most of the town succumbed to the Thringrar. It

was going to be difficult to oppose them as they had implanted a small metallic device into the back of every townspeople's neck. If anyone disobeyed any order given by a Thringrar, no matter how insignificant, they would instantly receive a painful jolt of electricity to their body. Each time they disobeyed, they received this jolt, which would actually weaken their eyesight. Eventually, after at least ten to fifteen jolts at most, a townspeople would be blinded for life. I was one of the first of the townspeople to lose my eyesight; it took fourteen jolts in all. The Thringrar often dragged me out of my shop to use me as an example of the power they yielded over us. Yet losing my sight seemed only to strengthen my resolve to defeat the Thringrar. The Thringrar underestimated our will to be free.

There was only one human resident who did not have a device in the back of the neck. It was Gertrude. The Thringrar regarded her as harmless as she was oblivious to the goings-on of the town. Gertrude had even spoken on occasion to the members of the Thringrar race and not even bothered to take a second glance. She just saw them as new townsfolk and that was that. This infuriated the rest of Mittleville. There were a few townspeople (who became known as the Mittleville Underground Movement – MUM; the head of the group being Mrs Maplestaff), however, who made several attempts to approach Gertrude and gain her services for the movement. Exactly what services Gertrude could supply to the movement were unknown, but Mrs Maplestaff strongly came to believe as time went by that Gertrude was their only hope of defeating the Thringrar, and that she would have to help, one way – or another.

I remember one evening I was lying in bed, almost asleep. It was difficult to fall asleep with a metallic device in the back of your neck. There were in fact a good number of townspeople who had developed an allergic reaction to it. The only way to stop the rash spreading was to apply shoe polish to the back of the neck.

I turned onto my left side and almost jumped out of bed when I felt (from out of nowhere) Rodney Maplestaff, Mrs Maplestaff's Number Two.

He put his hand over my mouth and whispered into my ear, "Give this to Gertrude."

Within seconds he had disappeared. I hoped he would make it home safely – the Thringrar had made it perfectly clear that there was a curfew after

9.00 pm. The curfew was created to put a spanner in the works of the activities of MUM. But we all knew that the curfew would never make Mrs Maplestaff and her courageous team give up.

Gertrude entered the newsagents at about 11.00 am the following morning. It was a very nerve-racking time for me. I had not been sure when Gertrude would come to my establishment as she was very unpredictable. I could not wait to give Gertrude what MUM had given me for fear of being found out by any one of the Thringrar who roamed the town with their laser guns, zapping our townspeople just for kicks and later pretending that the unfortunate Mittleville resident was a member of MUM.

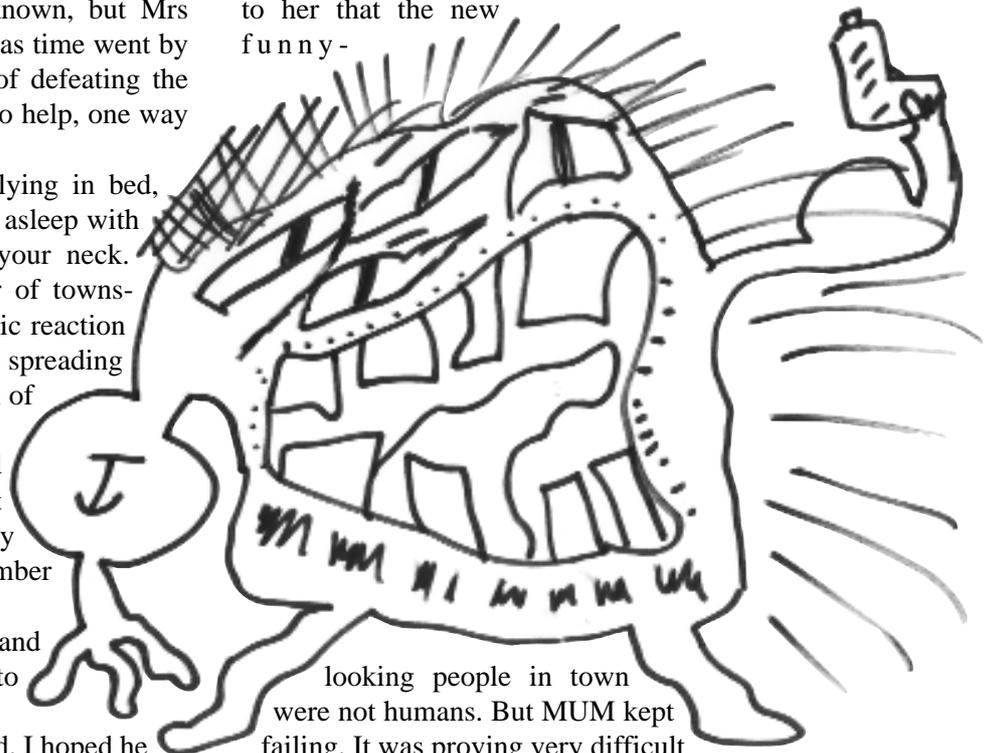
"Hello Gertrude," I said.

"Here are your crayons."

Gertrude left the shop. She did not speak to me at all. I watched her from the window. She opened the bag I had given her and took out her crayons. I watched attentively as did various members of MUM who were placed strategically around my building and Gertrude's route home. Gertrude then threw the bag into a bin. I saw several members of MUM place their heads into their hands.

It took several attempts by MUM to get the attention of Gertrude. Some of these attempts involved hiding out in Gertrude's house and leaving her messages telling her all about the alien invasion. Some members tried to speak to Gertrude explaining to her that the new

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looking people in town were not humans. But MUM kept failing. It was proving very difficult to get Gertrude on-side and aware of the invasion. Then one day Alfred Simkins, the first member of the

town to be face to face with the Thringrar, suggested that MUM were wasting time and effort trying to explain what the mission was to Gertrude. Alfred said that they should just put the means of destroying the Thringrar into her hands and find a way to send her (unknowingly) into action.

Mrs Maplestaff thought that Alfred's plan was genius. In fact she made Alfred Simkins her Number Three in command. All MUM had to do was direct Gertrude to the right place and the right time with the right device to defeat the Thringrar. It could be done, she hoped. The only problem MUM envisaged would be if Gertrude were to start questioning anything and be too terrified to enter King Thringrar the Greatest's spaceship. But that was very unlikely as Gertrude never questioned anything, she just did not need to or want to. And Gertrude was never scared as she never could comprehend anyone's desire to harm her or anyone else. In fact most people thought that Gertrude was not even aware of the fact that evil existed. That was the genius part of the plan, I thought (as well as its most morally objectionable, but we had an alien invasion to deal with).

The mission had begun. I was to tell Gertrude that her crayons were at King Thringrar's spaceship. The only problem with this idea was that Gertrude might have turned into a zombie and stayed for several days in my shop, and so, as I informed Gertrude that her crayons were not here today, Alfred Simkins shouted from outside the newsagents, "Crayons this way, crayons this way. Get your crayons at the car boot sale on Leyton Street."

Gertrude walked out of the newsagents and immediately began to follow Alfred Simkins. This was brilliant. The Thringrar, stationed around the town, were a little bewildered by these goings-on but came to the conclusion that a car boot sale on Leyton Street was going to be pretty harmless, especially if the main item for sale was going to be crayons.

As Gertrude followed Alfred all the way to Leyton Street, Rodney Maplestaff, who was standing behind a stall, called to her.

"Hello Gertrude", said he. "The crayons are at the end of the street." He pointed.

Gertrude looked at Rodney, but did not look in the direction that Rodney was pointing. Instead she turned in the other direction. Rodney began to panic. It was at this moment that the Thringrar noticed Rodney reaching into his pocket and taking out a walkie-talkie. They immediately knocked Rodney to the floor and zapped him into a million tiny specks of dust.

During all the commotion, part of the mission had to be moved forward. Instead of placing a glass tube containing mercury into Gertrude's possession when she was only a few feet away from King Thringrar's spaceship, also known to be the Thringrar base, I had to come out of my hiding place and put the tube into Gertrude's hands now. Mrs Maplestaff banked on the fact that as I was blind (from being jolted too many times by the Thringrar) the Thringrar would not watch me very closely, so I could place the mercury tube safely into Gertrude's hand.

Also, cleverly, as a diversion, Mrs Maplestaff came out of hiding from behind a car at the pretend car boot sale, and started spouting expletives at the Thringrar and also chanted over and over again, "Death to the Thringrar, Death to the Thringrar!" Mrs Maplestaff fell to the floor. She stopped moving.

Gertrude was not really meant have the tube of mercury in her hands so soon. It was too risky, as once she became aware of it she might have decided to throw it away. But the mission was almost over; she just had to keep hold of the mercury a few minutes longer...

And she did. Our special hero entered King Thringrar's spaceship, Thringrar headquarters, and I can only imagine what happened next. Perhaps she looked at King Thringrar as she walked in; perhaps he looked at Gertrude and stared in shock. At first he the King would not have known what to do, but maybe when the guards gathered around Gertrude he waved them away. Did she say something to make him smile? Was he intrigued and amused by her innocent insanity? She probably walked around a bit, before noticing there was something in her hands and letting go of it. I assume the tube of mercury rolled down the table and then smashed onto a set of important switches or the like.

Whatever happened within, those townsfolk who had not been blinded by the Thringrar saw a large explosion, followed by several smaller explosions all over the ship.

Mittleville's townspeople covered their eyes as the sparks, fire and smoke sprouted from King Thringrar's spaceship. And then to their astonishment the force field fell. Mittleville was no longer isolated. It was time for the Thringrar to admit defeat.

Gertrude had saved Mittleville from the Thringrar without even knowing it. Her name would live on – and a statue was even built, to honour her, and to remind us of how we had let her down.

Excelsior

Rescuer

Steven Gilligan

A writer

Not long after the disastrous discovery of the wrecked corridor, Adam found himself being deposited in a large recess at the top of a smooth marble wall in the corner of a vast room, that Excelsior had chosen for reasons of his own. The alcove looked as if it had been a crack in the marble masonry that had slowly widened over time.

Adam sat down and looked around. It seemed like it would be fairly comfortable, at least for a little while. The stone was hard, but not so hard that he would be unable to sit peacefully, and the space was considerably warmer than the cell that he had started out in. The huge room that he was now in the top corner of was pretty featureless apart from the ceiling and the floor. The ceiling had a massive round window in it, like a lens with a spiral pattern built into it with lead piping. Outside, he could see that the sky was mostly clear, with only a few white clouds, and he guessed that it might have been mid-afternoon, but there was no way he could be sure. The floor was even more impressive than the window in the ceiling. An elaborate mosaic pattern mirrored the spiral of the window, but with an even more elaborate design. It was coloured with reds, oranges, ochres and yellows. So effective was the design that it looked to Adam as if the sun had been embedded in the floor.

“Wait here,” said Excelsior.

Adam looked up from the mesmerising pattern on

the floor and stared at the silver machine with a wry smile. “Where could I possibly go?” he said.

Excelsior paused and then said, “Yes, I understand. My concern was unwarranted.”

Adam laughed. “Yes!”

“I will go now,” said the robot.

“Wait!” said Adam.

“Yes?”

“You said that you would answer my questions.”

“I said that there would be plenty of time for questions, but I also told you that I might not be able to give you the answers you seek. You may ask whatever you like.”

“Why did you come for me? Who sent you?”

“I do not know.”

“What?”

“I do not know why I am here. All I know is that I was activated and that my programming was to come here for you.”

“Well, where did you come from?”

“I understand that I was already inside this prison, but access to my memories about that particular time and place is unclear. It would seem that my data has been altered, but I am unable to ascertain when, how and why. My primary memory is of standing above the bars to your cell and tearing them out with my hands. So, it is possible that I might have come from somewhere else.”

“I don’t understand.”

“To be honest, neither do I.”

“Where are you going to take me?”

“That is an interesting query. From what I can retrieve, it would seem that I will receive instruction once we have exited the prison. Either some latent memory will become active or I will receive instruction from an external source unclear to me presently.”

"Oh." Adam was clearly more confused that he had been before he had asked the question.

"Yes."

"Why are there no other people here? This whole place is massive, but it's empty."

"Yes. Your observation is astute." Excelsior paused to consider this, but answered, "I do not know."

"But it is a prison, right?"

"Are you a prisoner?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

"Then it is a prison. Now, may I ask you one question?"

Adam was started. "Of course!" he said.

"Why were you imprisoned here? What was your crime?"

"Oh," said Adam. "I, I, er... I stole."

Excelsior eyes seemed to redden even more. "What did you steal?" it demanded.

"It was nothing," said Adam, defensively.

"Tell me."

"I stole an apple."

Excelsior seemed to consider this for a moment. "Apple," it said. "The fruit of a tree of the genus *Malus*, rounded in form and with a crisp flesh."

"I guess," said Adam.

"Why did you take an apple?"

"I was hungry. I didn't mean to do it, but I couldn't help myself. I hadn't really taken anything before and I don't know why I did it. At first the stall holder at the market didn't seem to care, but he was really angry afterwards. But, it was days ago and nothing happened. The police weren't called or anything. Miss Aeolia from Indigo House paid him a shilling for it and I thought it was all right after that." Adam paused for breath before continuing. "So, I think I was brought here because of that, but I don't really know. The men who came and took me didn't say anything at all. They took me right from my bed at the house. It was the middle of the bloody night!

They were really rough and it took them hours to bring me here. I think I was in a carriage or something, but I could see because they put a rough, old over my head. It stank of oil and they tied my hands and feet up so when they got me out of the carriage and shoved me along, I just kept falling over and hurting myself, but they just picked me up and shoved me along again." Tears were about to form in Adam's eyes, but he managed to hold them back. He was tired and angry and afraid. "I stole the rotten apple because I was hungry and I'm hungry now."

"There are no apples here for you to steal, thief. I have seen no trees at all, neither genus *Malus* nor any other."

"No," said Adam. "Back in my cell I found a little bag stuffed into a hole in the wall. There was a bottle of water in it and a box and a coin. If you could get me the sack I would be grateful. It'll be still in the cell if the rubble you dropped when you freed me didn't break it."

"I move quickly, Adam. In my search for an alternative exit I will also retrieve your bottle and sack. I will scan for sources of nourishment for you too."

"And the coin and the box please."

"Yes," said Excelsior and he disappeared away down a corridor leading away from one of the many exits from the sun-decorated chamber. Adam listened as the sound of its pounding metal feet slowly petered away into silence. Alone in the huge room, he eased himself into the most comfortable position he could manage. With his back against the inside edge of the large crack in the wall, he would have been almost completely hidden from view had someone been standing on the floor below and looking up.

This though made Adam feel safe, the safest he had felt since he had been abducted from his home. Although hunger was gnawing at his empty belly, he was able to relax a little.

He closed his eyes.

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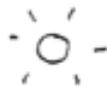
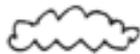
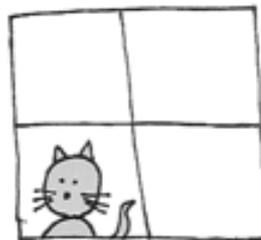
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CRAZY IVAN

AND THE
FORGOTTEN
CAT



GODDAMIT!
I'VE FORGOTTEN
MY CAT. I'VE LEFT
IT AT HOME UPSTAIRS!

