

ISSN 1746-6075 (ONLINE) ISSN 1746-6083 (PRINT)

LIVING WITH MISTER ROBOT



THEAKER'S QUARTERLY FICTION #10

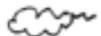
INCLUDES THE CONTINUATION OF THE SATURATION POINT SAGA IN
HIS NERVES EXTRUDED PART 2 ///SUMMER 2006

CRAZY EVAN

IS ASTONISHED
BY A PHANTOM



Ooooooooh!!!



WHAT THE
HELL WAS
THAT?



Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 10

Summer

2006

LIVING WITH MISTER ROBOT

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Once again we find ourselves without room for a longer editorial, but thanks for dropping by! In this issue, we present in its entirety John Greenwood's exciting novella of mechanical co-habitation, Living with Mister Robot, together with another lengthy and thrilling instalment of Howard Phillips' Saturation Point Saga – the serialisation of His Nerves Extruded, the first novel in the sequence to be actually written, continues.

SWT

Published by
Silver Age Books

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Living with Mister Robot

A Short Story

John Greenwood

Wordsmith

The first thing he noticed was that the microwave had gone missing. All that was left were four circles of clean Formica ringed by congealed grease and toast crumbs. For a second, Michael just stared at the new space on the kitchen worktop without a thought in his head. Then he shouted, “Jordan, what’s happened to the fucking microwave?”

Jordan ran in from the living room and fired off a rapid burst of shots from his laser pistol.

“Jordan, what’s happened to the fucking microwave?”

Jordan looked up at the space where the microwave should have been and said nothing. It was no use asking him about anything. He was only four years old.

Michael went round the house and checked all the doors and windows. No sign of a break in. Local kids, probably. He’d fucking murder them if he ever caught them. No point calling the police. They never did anything even when they did bother to turn up. What a neighbourhood. Why was he still living here? It wasn’t even his town. It was hers. He’d moved here to be with her, like a mug. And now she’d pissed off, leaving him to look after the kid.

At least the fridge was still there. He opened it and found a beer. The last one. That gave him pause. His Jobseeker’s Allowance wouldn’t be paid in for another week. He had a tenner to last him until then. There seemed to be only one way of avoiding that unhappy thought, so he took the beer into the living room and switched on the TV.

Jordan followed him in. “Can I watch Mister Robot?”

“No, I’m watching the football.” Michael cracked open the beer and shifted himself in the saggy armchair.

“There’s no football on. It’s too early. It’s break-fast time.”

“Smartarse. Anyway, you watched Mister Robot yesterday.”

Jordan was still looking at him. “I’m hungry.”

Michael threw down the TV listings magazine. “Oh for fuck’s sake. Go and make yourself some cereal then.”

“I want you to make it. You do it better than me.”

Michael went into the kitchen and washed up a bowl. He grabbed the milk from the fridge door, unscrewed the top, and sniffed. Seemed okay. He came back in carrying the bowl of chocolate cereal to find Jordan holding the remote control, watching Mister Robot with the sound on mute.

“What the fuck is going on here?”

Jordan didn’t say anything.

“Here,” said Michael, putting the cereal down on the carpet next to him.

Jordan glanced at it. “You didn’t put the milk in first.”

“So?”

“I only like it with the milk in first.”

“Tough shit. Just mix it in. It all comes out the same way.”

Jordan frowned. He turned the TV up loud.

“Jesus Christ, Jordan. Pack it in,” said Michael.

Jordan turned down the volume a fractional amount.

Michael was looking for an ashtray. Where did all the ashtrays go to in this house?

Eventually he found an empty bottle for an ashtray. He settled down and they both watched Mister Robot together. It was a kids show. Mister

Robot was some moron wearing a robot suit. Blue corrugated plastic tubes covered his arms and legs. His head was a kind of yellow dome with flashing red lights in his eyes, and a metal grille for a mouth, which lit up when he talked. His voice was flat and staccato the way you imagined a robot's voice to be. A yellow crate enclosed his torso, with dials and more flashing lights on his chest.

Michael couldn't see what the kid liked about it. It didn't even look like a proper robot. Just a guy in a costume. And the show didn't make any sense either. Mister Robot's best friend was a giant crow called Isabella. A giant crow. Where the fuck did that come from? And why would a robot be friends with a crow? Mister Robot and Isabella lived in a gaudy little house together, and every week they did some lame thing or other, like making biscuits or flying a kite. There was a rat who lived in a hole in the wall too, and came out occasionally. His name was Walter Whiskers and he was supposed to be the naughty one who messed things up.

Some lazy, arrogant TV executive had probably found a few costumes lying around in the wardrobe department and decided to churn out a cheap bit of TV. Michael could have done better in his sleep. But Mister Robot had really taken the country by storm. Jordan had both the Mister Robot and Isabella Crow action figures: Mister Robot flashed his eyes when you pressed a button on his back although Jordan had broken this feature months ago. Isabella Crow flapped her wings. The kid was pretty desperate to get his hands on the remote control Walter Whiskers, which appeared in every advert break while the show was on.

This week Mister Robot was singing a song with Walter Whiskers about cheese. It was called "Cheese Please". Michael closed his eyes. He was going to go crazy watching this mindless crap. Every day it was just him and the kid, sat in front of the TV with the curtains drawn. Nobody came to see him. He'd gradually lost touch with all his old mates back in his home town. Of course when he moved in with Natasha they'd all promised to come and visit him, but none of the bastards ever had. And his parents hadn't rung him since that big bust-up last Christmas. He didn't know anybody who lived round here apart from Natasha's parents, and he wasn't about to go crawling to them. Most likely she'd poisoned them against him anyway, telling them all sorts of lies, blowing everything up out of proportion. She was probably shackled up with some smarmy fucker right now, while he was stuck here, waiting hand and foot on this ungrateful little bastard. He wasn't even sure it was really his kid.

The credits finally rolled, and Jordan ran upstairs to his room, clutching his Mister Robot action figure to his chest. Michael grabbed the remote and switched over to a daytime talk show. He always enjoyed having a good laugh at the ignorant sods who appeared on these programmes, mouthy couples in tracksuits bawling at each other about DNA tests. This morning they were talking about single mothers whose estranged partners were robbing the child benefit money.

What *about* that child benefit money? Had she been claiming it all along, while Michael was paying for the kid's food out of his own pocket? Even if she hadn't, Michael could claim it himself. It was only fair. Perhaps the beer situation wasn't as bad as he'd feared.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs and shouted up. "Jordan, get your coat on. We're going out."

No reply.

"Jordan, get your arse down here."

Nothing.

He was just about to run upstairs when he heard a door shut in the kitchen, and Jordan's voice saying, "Bye then." That door led down to the cellar.

"Where the fuck have you been?" asked Michael when the kid appeared.

"Nowhere."

"Have you been in the cellar?"

"No. Where are we going?"

"Get some money. You know you're not allowed in the cellar, don't you?"

"Yeah. Can we go to Conrads?"

"Depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On whether you've been bullshitting me."

"I'm not bullshitting you."

"So that wasn't you closing the cellar door then."

"No. It was Mister Robot."

"Okay," said Michael. "Let's go, bullshitter."

Jordan dragged his coat down from the end of the banister. "I'm not a bullshitter. When's mum coming back?"

"At the end of her holiday."

"When's that?"

Michael opened the front door and hustled the kid out into the overgrown front yard. "Depends," he said.

"Okay, let's go, bullshitter," said Jordan.

"Watch the fucking language," said Michael. He had to admit it: the boy was bright. Maybe it was his after all. He was going to have to put a bolt on that cellar door.

At the Jobcentre, Michael took a pink, arrow-shaped ticket from the ticket dispenser. He was

number one hundred and forty nine. He looked up at the display board: they were only on eighty nine. Jordan got down on his hands and knees and made the Mister Robot action figure walk about in between the display boards while Michael sat on a metal chair and looked at the patch of blue-grey carpet between his feet. He had wasted too much of his life in this place already. The Jobcentre was air-conditioned and whitewashed. Optimistic people in brightly coloured shirts smiled down at him from boards that hung by chains from the ceiling. There was a woman wearing a hard-hat brandishing a spirit level. "Who do you want to be?" ran the logo. Radio 1 was being pumped out of the speakers. An old black guy in a grimy sheepskin coat was causing a scene at the counter, banging on about his human rights. The woman behind the counter looked right through him.

Michael looked at his watch. Not that he had any pressing engagements but this place was doing his head in. He tried to look at the ticket of the bloke with the gold chains and baseball cap sat two seats down from him. He had a carrier bag full of tinnies under his chair, and he kept sneaking a sip whenever he thought the security guards aren't looking. As if they'd give a shit. They were probably all tanked up too. How else could you get through the day in this place? The baseball cap guy had number one hundred and fifty. Michael heard the kid's voice, and looked round to see Jordan chatting away to an Asian woman with a couple of her own kids in tow. The lad wasn't shy. He'd probably go straight off with the first person who promised him a trip to Conrads. You had to watch him.

"Tony Hockey?" said the woman behind the desk, when one hundred and forty nine came around. Michael recognised her from the day before. She was pretty young. A small woman with a mousy face, not bad looking when she smiled. Did she fancy him?

"No," said Michael. "It's Michael Squires."

The baseball cap guy was hovering behind Michael's right shoulder. "It's about this child support thing," he said. "It's all fucked up, I told them on the phone, they've fucked it all up."

The mousey woman looked up as if she was ready to listen to Tony Hockey's complaint. "Hey!" said Michael, holding up the ticket. "It's one four nine, alright mate? Do you mind?"

"kin hell," said Tony Hockey, and sat back down to his beers.

"I've come about the child benefit payments," Michael explained. "For my lad." He pointed at Jordan, who was pulling handfuls of leaflets out of a display rack.

"What's the name? Tony Hockey?"

"No, I'm Michael Squires. I was in here yesterday, remember? I spoke to you about my Housing Benefit. Jesus."

"Sorry, sir, we see a lot of different people every day." It sounded like a trained response.

There were some forms to fill out. Michael had to bring them back next week. But he could probably afford a trip to the office. From what the woman had said, it looked like the money would come through in a few days.

"Are we going to Conrads now?" said Jordan, pulling on Michael's hand.

"Go on then. But you're not having anything. And don't start pissing me off."

Conrads was a big toyshop in town. Actually, it was the only toyshop in town. Mid-morning on a weekday wasn't the best time to go in: the place was practically deserted, and Michael felt conspicuous. The staff were more likely to notice if Jordan broke anything. Michael looked at his watch as they went in through the automatic doors. "Five minutes," he said, as Jordan bounded off towards a big display of Mister Robot figures.

Michael hung around near the entrance with his hands in his pockets. He picked up a rubber snake from a wire basket, then put it down again.

"Can I help you?" said a shop assistant in a shirt and tie. His enamelled tiepin bore the store's logo.

"No, I'm just looking," said Michael. "Just looking at these snakes."

How dodgy did that sound? When was the last time he'd had a shave?

"Can I have this Dad?" said Jordan, running up with a box in his hand.

Michael didn't look at him. "What did I say?"

"Can I have it, though?"

"I said you're not having anything."

"Please."

It had been a mistake coming here.

"Let's have a look at that." Michael took the box from Jordan's outstretched hands, but he had already guessed what it was: the Walter Whiskers remote control toy. Thirty quid.

"Please, please, please."

Michael threw the box into the basket of rubber snakes and grabbed Jordan by the upper arm. "Come on, we're going."

Straight away the boy started to throw a tantrum. Michael had to grip his arm pretty hard to stop him running away. "I told you you couldn't fucking have anything," said Michael, as Jordan continued yelling, his face screwed up in frustration and rage. Michael brought the palm of his hand down hard on the back of the boy's head. It didn't shut him up.

“You know, there are some cheaper Walter Whiskers toys available,” said the shop assistant, coming over.

Michael glowered at him. What the fuck was it to do with him?

“Oh?” he said, but kept hold of Jordan’s arm.

The shop assistant returned with an armful of toys. “These beanbag toys are just six ninety five.”

Michael inspected the mouse. Basically it was just a fabric bag full of dried rice. “Seven quid for this?”

“Well, six ninety five actually. They’re official merchandise, you know.”

“I don’t give a shit. I’m not paying seven quid for it.”

The shopkeeper had anticipated him. “This one’s only three ninety five,” he said, producing a smaller version of the same thing from his pocket.

“I want Walter Whiskers!” screamed Jordan, dragging on Michael’s arm.

What a fucking nightmare, thought Michael. That was the last time they would ever come in here.

“I could always discount the item, sir,” said the shop assistant. “We might have some shop-soiled units.”

“No thanks,” he said bitterly. “I’ll take that one. The small one.”

The shopkeeper rang up the sale while Jordan snatched the beanbag rat and turned away, his bottom lip still trembling, completely absorbed in his new possession.

Neither of them said a word on the bus home. They got off early so Michael could nip into Drinkmart and stock up. Drinkmart had metal grills over its windows, which were plastered with posters advertising multi-purchase offers. Michael guessed they did most of their business selling super strength cider to alkie.

Who should be in front of him in the queue but the guy from the Jobcentre with the baseball cap: Tony Hockey. Michael hoped he wouldn’t spot them, but he was out of luck. “Alright, bud,” said Hockey.

Bud?

Michael nodded back.

“You want to push in front of me again, or what?” Hockey flashed him a smile full of gold teeth.

“No thanks,” said Michael. He looked at the gold ring on the guy’s knuckle. It covered all four fingers and spelt out “TONY”. Tony bought a packet of fags and some rolling papers, Michael noticed.

“See you around, bud,” said Hockey as he turned to leave.

For some reason Michael did a thumbs up. “Yeah. See you.”

He handed over his last fiver to the old Asian

woman behind the counter. “You’d better give us a pint of milk as well,” he said. “I think the stuff in our fridge has just about turned to yoghurt.”

The old woman put the milk in a thin carrier bag without a word.

He always tried to be friendly to the family who ran this shop, but they never responded. You’d have thought they would be glad of a bit of chitchat. Most of the neighbourhood was white and poor, and there weren’t too many of them who were fond of Asians.

He had to push past a gang of shifty looking teenagers who were standing round the entrance to Drinkmart.

“Here mate, can you get us twenty fags?” A kid in a football top approached Michael with a stack of pound coins in the palm of his hand. Michael thought about it.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“What’s that got to do with it?” asked the boy.

“He wants to know if it’s legal to suck your cock,” said a girl from the doorway.

“Piss off,” said Michael, shouldering the boy aside. He held on tightly to Jordan’s arm and strode away, dragging his son behind him. Jordan had started crying but Michael barely noticed. Sweat was breaking out on his forehead and his heart was going like nobody’s business.

He had to get out of this shithole. He didn’t belong here. These weren’t his people. There was nothing to keep him here, now that Natasha was gone, apart from the kid.

As soon as Michael had opened the door Jordan scuttled past him and ran upstairs with the new toy. Later on, when Michael was watching the football, he could hear the kid talking to himself in the kitchen. “Mister Robot, come with me, we are all going to go to the park,” said Jordan. “Where is your coat, Walter Whiskers? I haven’t got one, I’m just a rat.”

Did the kid ever think about anything else? He was obsessed. Maybe there was something wrong with him. Well, the teachers could work that one out when he started school. His mother had put him on a waiting list for the one down the road when he was born. Less than a year now and he’d be off Michael’s hands. It was something to look forward to.

Michael told himself that his life had stalled, and he didn’t really know how to get it started again. He was waiting for somebody to come along and give him a kick-start. Meanwhile everything was on hold. Natasha had walked out before, but she’d always come back, usually the next morning after spending the night at her parents’ house. But it had been three weeks now, and not a peep. Meanwhile he just sat

here every day in front of the TV, drinking until he passed out or ran out of beer, whichever happened first. Michael had a distant sense that this routine couldn't go on forever, that sooner or later he would have dug himself too far down, and wouldn't have the strength to climb back out. But that day looked a long way off.

A couple of days later Michael did run out of beer and was down to his last few scraps of tobacco. Jordan had already scribbled on Walter Whiskers' head. The beanbag toy lay abandoned underneath the radiator in the living room. That was the last time Michael was going to waste money on him.

Standing in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil, Michael noticed the cellar door was open.

"Jordan!" he shouted upstairs.

But Jordan appeared in the open doorway and made a dash for the hallway. Michael grabbed him by the back of his t-shirt. "Get back here."

Jordan had the Isabella Crow action figure in his pocket.

"What have I told you about going in there?"

The boy shrugged. He seemed distracted and kept glancing behind him down the steps into the darkness of the cellar.

"It's dangerous down there. That's where your dad's tools and stuff are. What do you think you're doing?"

"Playing with Mister Robot," he said.

Michael had to give him a clip round the head. Of course that set him off screaming, but he had to be taught. Then Michael reached down and grabbed the Isabella Crow toy. "Right then, I'll look after this until you've learnt to do as you're told."

Jordan didn't seem too bothered about this hardship, and just carried on whimpering and holding his head in his hands. "I may have to throw Isabella Crow away if you can't stay out of that cellar," said Michael.

"I don't care!" shouted Jordan. Michael put the toy in a cupboard out of the kid's reach. It would be interesting to see how long this bout of defiance lasted.

Strangely enough, Jordan didn't seem to miss Isabella Crow, and stayed out of Michael's way for a few days, playing quietly on his own in his bedroom, while Michael stayed in the living room with the TV. The Jobseeker's Allowance money came through, and for a couple of days he was solvent again. It looked like smooth sailing for the time being. Michael cheered up, and even let Jordan watch Mister Robot. They were watching the show one morning together when the phone rang. Michael stubbed out a cigarette and got up to answer it. The

line was silent. Michael couldn't even hear anyone breathing. He replaced the receiver gently, and then dialled 1471: number withheld. Probably one of those telesales calls, he thought, and went back into the living room. Jordan was glued to the screen. This week Mister Robot was flipping pancakes. But every time he flipped one, it fell behind him, and Walter Whiskers scooted out from his hole in the wall and grabbed it.

"Uh oh! Where did that one go?" said Mister Robot, in his distorted, metallic voice.

"Where are those pancakes?" said Isabella Crow, flapping into shot. "I'm hungry!"

Jordan was killing himself laughing. There was definitely something wrong with the kid. What was so funny about that?

The guy in the plastic robot outfit was probably getting paid thousands for flipping those pancakes. Michael wondered how you ended up with a cushy number like that. Probably by fucking the producer. They were all queers in the media anyway, weren't they? That's what somebody had told him once.

"Can we make pancakes?" said Jordan, when the programme was over.

"Sure," said Michael. "Maybe next week."

There were more silent phone calls. Michael felt sure that it was Natasha, trying to mess with his head. After the first few times, he started shouting abuse at her down the phone, but there was never any response. The calls got more frequent. Whoever it was had a lot of time on their hands: they were ringing two or three times a day. One time it even happened in the middle of the night. After that one, Michael considered phoning the police, but what could he tell them? That he was being stalked by his ex-girlfriend? They'd laugh in his face. He began to wonder if Natasha was, in her own twisted way, trying to make up with him. Perhaps she just didn't have the courage to apologise to him, so she just kept ringing. Who knew what went on inside her tiny mind?

Michael knew that eventually she'd slip up, and she did. After about the hundredth silent call, he dialled "identify caller" and heard a familiar number being read out to him. It was Natasha's parents. So that was her game. He decided to go round there. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he was going to put a stop to these phone calls. What to do with Jordan? Michael didn't really want to take him along. Things could get unpleasant, and he didn't want the kid getting in the way of it. Not that Michael planned for it to get ugly, but you never knew with Natasha how things would turn out. She was unpredictable that way.

"I'm going out for a little while," said Michael, appearing in the bedroom doorway.

Jordan was sitting on the floor, making Mister Robot fight it out with a plastic dinosaur and a fluffy ducking. "Can I come?" he said.

"No, I want you to stay here," said Michael. "I won't be long."

He knew he shouldn't be doing this. You read about people getting arrested for leaving their kids at home on their own. But these were exceptional circumstances. He couldn't be expected to just sit there and take this kind of shit. And he wasn't going to be gone for long: Natasha's mum and dad only lived a few streets away. He could run there in ten minutes.

"Where are you going?" said Jordan.

Michael looked round the room gloomily. The wallpaper next to Jordan's cot was a frenzy of crayon and felt-tip pen scribbling. What was he going to tell the landlord about that?

"Just out," he said. "I want you to stay in here. I'm going to shut this door, and lock it. Do you need a slash?"

"No, just been," said Jordan.

"Good, because you'll have to go in your potty if you need to go while I'm out."

The child nodded absently, absorbed in some conversation between the two plastic combatants.

"I'm going to lock this door," said Michael. "I'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

"Okie dokie," said Jordan.

Michael shut the door with a sense of foreboding. He almost changed his mind, but that felt too much like giving in to Natasha. She must think she can get away with murder, thought Michael. But he would show her. He wasn't handcuffed to the child, after all. He had his own life to lead. He looked at the ceramic sign nailed to the door that said, "Jordan's room", accompanied by a picture of a formula one racing car. Natasha's mum had bought it last Christmas. Then Michael brought a chair from his own bedroom and leant it up against the door, just underneath the handle. He'd seen people doing this on films, and assumed it worked. At least it would probably work with a four year old. Then he jogged downstairs and went out, locking the door behind him.

When he got back, forty-five minutes later, he stood at the bottom of the stairs feeling breathless and anxious.

"Jordan!" he called up. He didn't wait for an answer but went up to his son's room. The chair was still there, but he couldn't hear anything going on inside the room. As he pulled the chair out of the way, a strange thought went through his mind, but he

didn't have time to think about it properly until later. Inside the bedroom, Jordan was lying on the floor looking at a colouring book.

"Jordan," said Michael. The kid looked up, unconcerned.

"Do you need to go to the toilet now?"

"No," said Jordan. "I already went."

Michael looked at the potty, which was sticking out from under the cot. "Oh fuck. You didn't do it in your pants, did you?"

Jordan looked mildly offended. "No. I went to the toilet," he insisted.

"And how did you manage that?" asked Michael, folding his arms and leaning against the doorframe.

"Mister Robot came to let me out," said Jordan.

"Okay, okay. Mister Robot did it," said Michael. "I suppose he's been pissing in our toilet too, has he?"

"No, he hasn't," said Jordan with a frown. "He doesn't do dirty things like that."

Michael felt all the stress and worry escaping from him like a deflating balloon. He laughed, and Jordan chuckled too, as he always did when grown-ups shared a joke he didn't understand.

"I'm going to make something to eat. Do you want beans on toast?" said Michael.

Jordan nodded. Michael left the room and closed the door with a sense of relief, but the strange thought returned to him like an echo. Hadn't he put that chair up against the door the other way around? He looked at the chair, and could not now remember with any certainty which way he'd found it. It wasn't worth bothering about.

Michael dug out a tin of beans, and had got as far as emptying them into a plastic bowl to put in the microwave before he remembered about the burglary. He would have to wash up a pan from the unsteady pile of dirty crockery in the sink.

Nobody had been in when Michael had called round at Natasha's mum and dad's house. All the lights were off. He'd banged on the door and rung the bell a few times, then peered in through the letterbox, only to see a large pile of letters and leaflets on the hall carpet. It was then that he remembered: Natasha's parents always went away on holiday at this time of year. They went to the same place year after year: a huge caravan site in Wales. It was still possible that Natasha was housesitting while they were away, but why would she have left all those letters on the doormat? The fact remained that the silent calls had come from that house. It was impossible that he'd misheard the number.

There were no more silent calls after that, which clinched it for Michael. Natasha was definitely

fucking with him. Why remained to be seen, but he was not going to take it lying down. Whatever pathetic little game she was playing, he was ready for her.

Jordan started acting weird too, Michael noticed. One morning, Michael woke to a worse than usual hangover. He heard Jordan's voice, and dragging on his dressing gown, he came out onto the landing. Jordan was standing at the bottom of the stairs in his pyjamas, talking on the telephone.

"Yes," he was saying earnestly. "Yes, I will."

He put the receiver down quickly when he noticed his father standing behind him.

"Who were you talking to?"

Jordan shrugged.

"Jordan, who were you talking to?"

"Mister Robot."

"Oh? Well, I don't want you messing about with the phone anymore. It's not a toy. Do you understand?"

Jordan smirked and dodged away into the kitchen.

The kid stopped taking an interest in the TV, but if anything his obsession with the Mister Robot character was getting worse.

"Don't you want to watch your favourite programme?" said Michael one morning when he was in a better mood. The child benefit money had come through, and he had restocked the fridge.

Jordan was hovering in the doorway, eating a packet of crisps. He'd suddenly gone mad for crisps. "No," he said. "It's stupid."

That was a surprise. Oddly enough, Michael felt disappointed. Watching that programme was the only thing the two of them did together.

Mister Robot was doing aerobics in the garden., and the flowers behind him were dancing along with the music. It must get hot as hell in that suit, thought Michael.

"Look," said Michael. "Mister Robot is outside his house."

"Silly," said Jordan. "Mister Robot doesn't live there."

"Where does he live, then?"

"It's a secret," said Jordan, smiling and moving out of sight.

Michael turned off the TV set and got up. He went into the kitchen and opened the cellar door. Chilly, damp air. Michael flicked the light switch and illuminated the concrete steps leading down. There were some old tins of paint on a shelf above the steps, and a broom handle leaning against the wall at the bottom. He couldn't see properly into the cellar from where he stood. It didn't look as if anything had been disturbed.

Had Jordan been messing about down there again, even though Michael had told him not to? It was impossible to say for sure: Jordan was a sly child. Michael reminded himself that he would have to put a bolt on the door, out of Jordan's reach. That entailed a trip to the DIY superstore out of town, two bus journeys away. He would do it later.

A week later Michael had to go and sign on again. He didn't feel like dragging the kid all over town. He wondered whether he could get away with leaving Jordan in his room again. Nothing had happened the last time, had it? And the chair against the bedroom door seemed to have done the trick. Michael had spent weeks cooped up in that house with the kid. It was only fair. If he didn't get some time on his own, he was going to lose it.

This time, after Michael had finished with the Jobcentre, he ducked into a quiet pub for a couple of pints while he read the paper. He did most of the crossword. It felt nice to be out of the house, away from all the mess that needed cleaning up, all the jobs that needed doing. On his way out, Michael spotted a hardware store across the street. That was a stroke of luck, he thought, and went in to buy a bolt.

On his way home, he took a detour past Natasha's parents' house again. It was a neat, unpretentious redbrick semi with a tiny, well-trimmed lawn in front. It was one of the nicer streets in the area. People here still took pride in the appearance of their houses. Their car was in the drive now. It looked newly washed. Michael stood at the end of the cul-de-sac, watching the front window, but it was difficult to see if anybody was in there.

Michael walked over and rang the doorbell. The radio was on in the kitchen. When he heard footsteps approaching, he had a sudden impulse to run away. What was he doing here? Natasha's mum opened the door. Carol was wearing a striped blue, plastic apron, and looked as though she was in the middle of cooking. But she was smiling.

Michael didn't know what to say. "Sorry. Sorry to bother you."

"Back already?"

Michael stared at her, searching for a clue to unravel this riddle. "Yes," he said. "I guess so."

"We've really missed you all," said Natasha's mum. "Where's the rest of the family? Still recovering?"

"Yeah, something like that, I think."

"Bit of jetlag, I expect. Florida's a long way."

"It certainly is."

The words just seemed to be falling out of Michael's mouth unbidden. He shuffled his feet on the doorstep.

“Do you want to come in for a cuppa? Geoff’s just out in the garden, I’ll go and shout him.”

“No!” said Michael suddenly. “Don’t go to any trouble. I’ve got to get going. Just thought I’d call round, you know. Just to say hi.”

“Well, that’s kind of you,” said Carol, but there was bitterness in her smile. “We were wondering when you’d get back. Geoff was just saying this morning, it was a shame we didn’t get a postcard.”

Carol had a way of making everybody feel guilty, even if they didn’t know quite what they had done wrong. What was he supposed to be apologising for this time? He had no idea what she was talking about.

Michael began to stutter, something that hadn’t happened for years. “Well, it’s lovely to talk to you, Carol,” he said.

“Let us know when you’re planning to come round, and I’ll put some dinner on for you all. I’m sure Jordan won’t mind telling me all about Disneyland.”

“I’m sure he won’t,” said Michael. “How was your holiday, by the way?”

“Oh, quiet. You know. The way we like it.”

“Right,” said Michael, backing away. “We’ll see you soon, then.”

As he walked away, Michael’s first thought was whether there had been any hidden barb in Carol’s last remark about Disneyworld. Was she trying to insinuate that she’d been kept in the dark? But about what? The whole thing was insane. There had been no trip to Disneyland. How the fuck could Michael have afforded to take the family to Disneyland? Is that what Natasha had been telling her parents? What purpose would that serve? But it was impossible to guess what Natasha’s motives were. She didn’t think straight at the best of times.

On his walk home, Michael spotted a familiar face passing him on the other side of the road. It was Tony Hockey again, that guy from the Jobcentre. He must live round here, Michael reasoned. He tried not to catch his eye, but couldn’t help glancing up to find that the man was staring right at him. Michael quickly averted his eyes.

Safely back home, Michael didn’t bother to take his coat off, but wandered into the living room, his mind distracted. It took a full minute before he noticed that the TV set was missing.

“Jordan!” he shouted without thinking. “Get in here!”

Then he remembered that Jordan was still shut upstairs in his bedroom. He jogged upstairs and found the door open, the chair moved to one side. Jordan was not in his room.

Michael checked in all the upstairs rooms, then raced back down to the living room. He stared at the dusty table where the TV belonged, as if this could give him some kind of clue. Then he heard footsteps coming up from the cellar.

He turned around to see the child standing in the doorway, eating a jam sandwich.

“Where did you get that sandwich?” he asked.

“Made it myself,” said Jordan with more than a hint of pride in his voice.

Michael looked at him. The child looked cheerful and relaxed.

“How did you get out of your bedroom?” he asked.

“Mister Robot let me out.”

Michael folded his arms and looked at the boy. “I’m getting pretty fucking bored of this, you know.”

“It’s true.”

“Where’s the fucking TV?”

“Down in the cellar.”

“If that TV’s broken, you’re fucking dead, I swear.”

“I didn’t touch it.”

“Oh, I suppose Mister Robot took that too, did he?” shouted Michael.

“Yeah.”

Michael looked at the open cellar door.

“I should have put this lock on a long time ago,” he said, fishing the hardware store bag out of his coat pocket. He turned the light on and peered down the steps, dreading the sight of his smashed TV set. But there was nothing to see.

“Stay here,” he said to Jordan.

The kid nodded, munching on his sandwich.

Michael walked down into the cellar.

“Hi there, Mikey,” said a distorted, metallic voice.

Mister Robot stood up from a chair in the corner of the room and walked up to Michael. His head was a bullet-shaped yellow cone. His arms were two blue, corrugated plastic tubes. His eyes were two flashing red lights. His mouth was a chrome metal grille that lit up with a red glow when he spoke.

“How are you doing, Mikey?” said Mister Robot. He was holding something behind his back.

Michael didn’t say anything. He didn’t see the baseball bat until it was too late.

When he woke up, Michael had a headache as bad as any hangover he could remember. He was lying on his back in the cellar. His arse and back had gone numb from the cold, stone floor. The side of his face was tender, and when he put his hand to his cheek, dried blood flaked off onto his palm. That’s when it

came back to him.

He tried to get up, and in doing so noticed the bruises on his arms and the blood on his t-shirt. The back of his head was throbbing like a bastard. Unsteady on his feet, Michael felt safer climbing the steps on all fours. At the top, he found he couldn't open the door. Someone had put a bolt on it. He started rattling the door handle and shouting in a blind rage, but nobody came. He tried to kick it open, but the door was strong, and the top step was an awkward position to kick from. The kicking and shouting lasted for a good ten minutes, until he realised that he was making his headache worse. He turned around and looked back down into the cellar. That's when he saw the microwave, and the television.

There was a camp bed in the corner of the room that Michael didn't recognise at all, but he was suddenly overcome by an urgent need for sleep, and it didn't seem to matter why the bed was there. It looked comfortable. Michael threw himself down on the narrow mattress in his clothes and shoes and slept.

The first thing he did when he woke up was to look at his watch. It was around lunchtime. He'd been down in the cellar for over twenty-four hours. The house was silent. He went back to the door: still locked. "When I get out I'm going to fucking kill you, Natasha!" he shouted through the door. He had no doubt that his ex-girlfriend was behind it all. But she didn't reply. Michael tried shouting for Jordan, but something told him that he was the only person in the house.

He had to think rationally about this. No use letting panic overtake him. If there was one thing that thousands of hours watching TV had taught him, it was that there was always a way out of these situations. Michael decided to make an inventory of the objects in the cellar, in case he could use any of them. The cellar was the same size as the kitchen above it, and roughly square. Stone flags paved the ground, and the walls were crumbling brick that had been painted white at one time. Light came from a single, cobwebbed bulb that hung from the ceiling, the cable running across the underside of the kitchen floorboards and up into the house. There was a smell that Michael associated with mould and fungi. He tried not to imagine the millions of microscopic spores that he must be breathing in with each exhalation. Apart from the camp bed and mattress, microwave and television, the room was entirely bare. The broom handle, paint cans, and other bits and pieces had all been removed. There was an old plastic

bucket. That was all. At that moment he was out of ideas.

Then he noticed something else: the microwave and television cables stretched up behind them and disappeared through a small hole drilled in the floorboards of the kitchen above him. Michael couldn't remember having seen that hole before. He clicked the TV on: it worked, but there was no sound. Somebody had been tampering with the speakers. He opened the microwave and found some plastic cutlery and a small stack of boxes: dried ready meals. Michael thought immediately of the water tap on the far wall, long disused and clogged with dirt and cobwebs. But it still worked, and five minutes later Michael was sitting on the bed watching the lunchtime news and eating a bowl of Chinese-style rice with mushrooms and peppers.

It wasn't until the children's shows came on at about four o'clock that Michael wondered what had happened to Jordan. He had to assume that Natasha had taken him out of the house. What was she hoping to achieve by imprisoning him here? If she wanted to take the kid, she could have just had him. It didn't really matter to Michael one way or the other. But the preparations – the bed, TV, and microwave – suggested some other purpose. Michael wondered how she'd managed to carry out such an elaborate scheme under his nose. He remembered the silent phone calls: that must have been a ruse to get him out of the house for a while. But what was going on with that robot outfit? He couldn't work that one out at all. Unless she had really lost it this time. There was always that possibility.

Michael had several hours to run these thoughts through his head, before he heard the key in the front door in the early evening. He ran up the steps again and started banging on the door.

"Tasha!" he shouted. "Open this fucking door, Tasha!"

Footsteps approached the kitchen, and Mister Robot's electronic voice said, "I won't open the door until you go back down the steps."

Michael didn't see any point in defiance at the moment, and he stepped back down into the cellar.

"Good," said Mister Robot. "Now, sit on the bed."

"Okay, I am doing," said Michael, not moving.

"Oh come on, Mikey," said Mister Robot. "What do you take me for?"

Michael looked up. There was obviously more than the one hole in the kitchen floorboards. He sat on the bed and waited while the bolt was drawn. It sounded like there was more than one lock on the other side of that door now. As soon as the door banged open, he jumped up and tried to make a dash

for it up the steps, but the blocky figure of the robot blocked the doorway and swung the baseball bat in a wide arc to keep him off.

“That’s not very nice, is it Mikey?” said the robot. “Now do as you’re told. Back on the bed. Let’s have a little chat.”

Michael sat down. Why Mikey? Natasha had never called him that before. It was clear that she’d lost the plot, and Michael wasn’t sure how best to humour her.

“I expect you’d like to know what’s going to happen to you,” said Mister Robot in a dull monotone, his mouth grille glowing in rhythm with his words.

“Where’s Jordan?” asked Michael.

“Jordan’s quite safe. He’s with friends now. You weren’t able to look after him properly, so that task has been taken out of your hands.”

“Fuck you!” Michael stood up, and made for the steps again. “Who the fuck are you, telling me how to raise my son?”

“Now, now,” said Mister Robot. “What did we say about staying on the bed?” He weighed the baseball bat in his plastic hands. Michael sat back down. The bruises on his arms and face were still very painful.

“Jordan’s going to be coming home very shortly,” said Mister Robot. “He’s had a wonderful day out with his new friends. But when he comes back, we don’t want him being disturbed by a lot of shouting and fussing, do we?”

“What are you going to do to stop me?” said Michael.

“You may be an unfit parent, Mikey, but I’m sure that you wouldn’t want any harm to come to the child, would you? You just stay quiet as a mouse, and nothing bad will happen.”

Michael looked at the impassive yellow face. Was this a bluff?

“I don’t believe you, Natasha,” said Michael in as calm a voice as he could manage. “You wouldn’t hurt him.”

“Natasha?” said Mister Robot. “Oh Michael, don’t make that mistake. My name is Mister Robot. Natasha’s long gone.”

“What do you mean? Long gone? Did she really go to Disneyland?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“In a manner of speaking? What does that mean?”

“In the sense that she’s dead,” said Mister Robot, and with that he disappeared into the kitchen and closed the cellar door. Michael could hear the bolts being driven home. Then the lights went out.

Luckily, Michael still had half a packet of cigarettes in his pocket. Sitting on his little bed in the

pitch black, he found one and lit it. The red coal illuminated a tiny area around his hand, but no more. Now that it was dark, he could make out six tiny holes in the floorboards above him where pencil-thin shafts of light shone down from the kitchen. It was really quite beautiful. He told himself that it couldn’t be true. Natasha wasn’t dead. That was just something else to make him feel scared. Nevertheless, Michael was no longer sure that the person inside that plastic costume was Natasha. For one thing, Natasha didn’t talk that way. “In a manner of speaking”: he couldn’t imagine her ever using such a phrase. But if it really wasn’t her, then who was it?

Hiding behind that one were a dozen other questions that kept Michael thinking and chain-smoking in the darkness for the rest of the evening. Assuming that Natasha was still alive (and Michael felt it absolutely necessary to make that assumption), then where the hell was she? Why had she told her parents that they were all going to Disneyland? Even if it wasn’t her in the robot outfit, could she be the person responsible for his captivity? Then there were two questions skulking at the back of the queue, so unpleasant that they were barely worth asking. The first one was “Why?” The second one was “How long?”

By Michael’s illuminated digital watch, Jordan came home at about nine thirty that evening. He sounded highly excited and kept talking non-stop to somebody who didn’t reply. From Jordan’s chatter, Michael guessed that his captors had taken him to the cinema. Twice he felt an urgent need to yell out, to get the kid’s attention, but he stopped himself. He wasn’t totally convinced that Mister Robot’s threats were just a bluff. It didn’t seem a good idea to call that bluff right now. Michael heard Mister Robot’s voice talking to the kid.

“What shall we make for dinner, Jordan?” said Mister Robot in his metallic drone.

Jordan was still breathlessly excited. “I don’t know! What do you think?”

“Let’s have pancakes,” replied the robot.

Soon the smell of pancakes was wafting down through the six spy-holes into Michael’s lair. Then Mister Robot told Jordan to go and put his pyjamas on, and shortly afterwards Michael heard heavy footsteps clomping upstairs. A door opened and closed. That was the last thing Michael heard that evening. He sat there perfectly still, waiting for a shout or a scream from the child, anything at all. Eventually he couldn’t listen any longer. He groped for the TV controls and switched it on: nothing. So his television watching was being rationed, as well as his

light. There was nothing else to do but lie down on the bed.

How had things come to this? Michael couldn't work out what he had done to deserve this treatment. He was down to his last cigarette, but he was saving that one for emergencies. He held onto the packet, as if somebody might try to take that last luxury away from him, and lay there thinking about Natasha, and the life they'd had together before all this madness had begun. And it was with those thoughts that Michael finally dropped off to sleep.

The lights came on at seven in the morning and woke Michael up. He sat up in bed, unable to believe that this was not after all some cruel dream. He could hear Mister Robot moving about in the kitchen. He turned on the tap and splashed his face with water, and rinsed his mouth out. The water tasted slightly metallic. He smoked the last cigarette, but it didn't make him feel much better. He needed a cup of coffee. There was nothing for it but to bang on the cellar door again. Almost immediately, the bolts were drawn back.

"What did I tell you about keeping quiet?" said the voice on the other side of the door.

"Can I just get a cup of coffee?"

There was a pause.

"Go and sit back down on the bed," came the reply eventually.

Michael did as he was asked, but the door didn't open.

"I'm not going to let you have any coffee," said the robot in the voice of a parent reasoning with an unruly child. "Because you deliberately disobeyed me. If you want to make any requests, or speak to me about anything at all, you can wait until I'm ready to talk to you. Don't worry. I'm not going to let you starve to death. I've got you under constant surveillance."

"I need to go to the toilet," said Michael, the thought suddenly occurring to him.

"There's a bucket in the corner," said Mister Robot. "And there's a drainage hole in the floor too."

"For fuck's sake, you can't expect me to live like this!" shouted Michael, suddenly incautious of the consequences.

"I do, and you will," was the reply. "And I'd advise you not to speak in that way from now on. It's inappropriate to use that kind of language with a child in the house."

Michael didn't have any comeback to that. "I need some more fags," he said, the thought occurring to him suddenly.

"We'll see about that," said Mister Robot. "It depends on how you conduct yourself. Jordan will be

getting up in a few moments, and we are going to be having our breakfast together. I hope I can rely on you. You know what the consequences will be if you do not behave yourself, Mikey."

"Okay," said Michael. What else was there to say?

Over the next week, Michael heard a lot of activity going on in the house above him. It sounded like Mister Robot was really cleaning the place up. Beer cans were piled into binbags. He heard the vacuum cleaner running (it had been broken for months). Jordan seemed to be helping out with great enthusiasm. The lights and power in the cellar came on at seven o'clock every morning, and went out again at ten o'clock at night. The nights were cold and Michael slept fitfully. He watched the TV all day, even though there was no sound. He worked out how to turn the teletext subtitles on. It was better than nothing.

Groceries were delivered to the house, and a single packet of cigarettes was thrown down the cellar steps, along with a carrier bag containing a dozen more microwave meals.

"How long are these supposed to last me?" shouted Michael, but the cellar door closed without any answer. He sat and smoked and thought vaguely about an escape plan. If he could remove the power cable from the microwave, he might be able to construct some kind of trap, a loop of wire on the top step that he could pull tight when his captor stepped into it. He ran through the details of the plan a hundred times, but did nothing. For one thing, he didn't have any tools, despite what he had said to Jordan. There wasn't even a single screwdriver in the cellar. Michael had never been one for DIY. Anyway, it was a rented house: repairs were the landlord's job. For another, it would be too bad if he took the microwave apart and then couldn't get it working again. Would Mister Robot provide a replacement? That was far from certain. In the end, Michael convinced himself that this plan would have failed anyway. Mister Robot always took pains to check what Michael was up to through the holes in the kitchen floor, before he would even open the cellar door. It was too risky to try anything at this stage. Michael told himself that a better opportunity would present itself.

He began to suspect that there was more than one person keeping him hostage. He could no longer hear Jordan shouting and laughing during the daytime. It seemed that somebody was taking him out of the house every day, from nine until around three in the afternoon. For some reason, that caused him more anxiety than the fact that he was still locked up by a man in a plastic robot costume. When he was reason-

ably sure that the child was not in the house, Michael started banging on the kitchen ceiling again. After ten minutes, his efforts brought Mister Robot to the cellar door.

“What’s going on down there?” said the monotonous electronic voice. “What did we agree about keeping the noise down?”

“Where are you taking Jordan?” Michael shouted.

“What do you care?” answered the robot.

“He’s my son!” shouted Michael. He felt a real pang of worry now.

“Not any more.”

What did that mean? Michael had a sudden, desperate urge to speak to his gaoler face to face. “Open the door for a sec, please!” he said. “I’ve got to speak to you.”

There was a moment’s silence, as Mister Robot considered his request. Then the cellar door swung open slowly, and the blocky figure stood there, silhouetted by the light of the kitchen.

“Sit down on the bed,” said Mister Robot. Michael did it quickly.

“Now what is all this fuss about?”

“What are you doing with my son? I’ve got a right to know,” said Michael.

“That’s a mistake. You don’t have rights anymore. You gave those up when you stopped taking responsibility for the child’s welfare.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re not a fit parent, Mikey. You’re not adult enough to be trusted with Jordan’s upbringing. That’s why I’m going to be taking over that role.”

Michael stood up. “You’re fucking nuts, do you know that? You’re dressed as a fucking robot, and you’re telling me I’m not adult enough! This can’t go on forever, you know. People will wonder what’s happened to me. Jordan will start asking questions. He’s not stupid.”

“No, he’s not stupid at all,” said Mister Robot. “But he is four years old, and he has more trust in me than in anyone. We spend all day doing fun things together. I’m his best friend now. That’s more than you ever were.”

“What have you been telling him about me?” shouted Michael, standing up despite himself.

“Now, then Mikey, there’s no need to get excited. Jordan simply thinks you’ve gone on holiday with his mother. He’s not worried about you. In fact, the thought of you barely crosses his mind. He’s having the time of his life, you know. Just put yourself in his shoes for a moment: his favourite television character has emerged from the screen and come to live in his house. It’s a dream come true. It would be such

a shame to spoil all that happiness with your presence, wouldn’t it?”

There was no point arguing with this psycho. Michael thought he should try and draw the robot out on more practical matters. “Where is Jordan now?” he asked.

“Oh, he’s gone to playgroup,” said Mister Robot. “That’s just one of the things you never took him to.”

Michael found himself trying to justify his own actions. “I couldn’t afford childcare!”

“This one’s free,” said the robot. “The truth is you just couldn’t be bothered to find out.”

“I’ve had my own problems,” protested Michael. “My girlfriend walked out. I’ve been looking after that kid all on my own, you know.”

“This isn’t about you, Mikey,” said Mister Robot. “It’s too late for you, I’m afraid. Right now I’m simply interested in Jordan growing up into a normal, well-adjusted person.”

Michael shook his head. “The fuck you are. What are you on about? Well-adjusted? The kid thinks he’s living with a fucking robot from a TV show! When he finds out that it’s all a lie, he’s going to be screwed.”

The robot was complacent. “I doubt that,” he said. “I mean, most children believe in Santa Claus until they’re, what, five years old? Six? Seven, even. Of course it’s traumatic for them when they find out the truth, but they get over it. They cope. Just as Jordan will cope.”

“Cope with what?” said Michael. “The fact that his dad’s been locked in a cellar all this time? You think that’s normal?”

“No, you’re right, Mikey. It isn’t normal. And wouldn’t be helpful to give the child that impression. That’s why I’m going to take over the role of father. That’s when I’ll take off the costume. When the time is right, of course.”

“Take over the role?”

“Yes,” said Mister Robot cheerfully. “I’m going to become Michael Squires.”

“You’re stealing my identity?”

“Well, you weren’t doing anything useful with it, now were you, Mikey?” said the robot. “That’s a joke, by the way.”

Michael smiled. He could see a gaping hole in the scheme. “You’re soft in the head. My son’s not an idiot. He’s not going to believe that you’re his father.”

“We’ll see,” said Mister Robot, with a slight shrug of his plastic arms. “I’m confident that he’ll adjust to the change.”

“You’re a totally different person!”

“Am I? I remember when I was a child – I must

have only been about six years old. My father came back from the barbershop one day, and he'd had his moustache shaved off. I didn't recognise him, and when he came over to lift me up, I screamed and screamed and ran to my mother." The man inside the costume chuckled to himself. "You know, he had to grow his moustache back before I would believe that he was really my dad again."

Michael thought about it and no longer felt so sure of his argument.

"You know," continued Mister Robot. "At that age kids' minds are so much more malleable. They don't yet know what they ought to expect from life, so they can get used to almost any change of circumstances remarkably quickly. Perhaps you didn't know that. You don't seem to have much of a clue about children in general."

The robot's hectoring tone left a sour taste in Michael's mouth, and another encouraging thought occurred to him. "Even if you do manage to warp the kid's brain and get him to believe you're his father, nobody else will be taken in. Unless you happen to be my double, then you're not going to get far with that dodge."

"I think you're overestimating your public presence a little," replied Mister Robot. "Who do you actually know around here? Do you know who your neighbours are? Have you even said hello to them? Apart from Mr and Mrs Phelps, is there anyone in this town who would actually recognise you in the street?"

"What do you know about Natasha's mum and dad?" said Michael, struck again by a vague panic.

"Don't worry," said Mister Robot. "They're doing fine. I imagine they were a little disturbed by the abusive emails you sent them the other day."

"What?"

"You didn't mince your words, I'll give you that," said the robot. "I doubt they'll be wanting to get in touch any time soon. I suppose they're probably glad their daughter finally got rid of such a deadweight boyfriend."

The thought of Michael's own parents suddenly struck him. The robot seemed to read his mind. "Your mum and dad are safe in Newcastle," he said. "Spared the knowledge of what a poor father you turned out to be. They're still hoping for some kind of reconciliation after that nasty row you had with them last Christmas."

Michael sat there with his mouth open. How could anyone have found out all this personal information about him unless Natasha really did have something to do with it all?

The robot continued in his harsh monotone. "But

they'll eventually have to resign themselves to the fact that you're too proud to make up with them. I don't think they'll be missing too much, anyway. You always were a big disappointment."

Michael didn't react to this latest attack on his character. There had been so many, he felt almost immune to them. Instead he said, "Just tell me this: Is Natasha really behind all this? She's not really dead, is she? You're just saying that to keep me scared, I know."

"Oh Mikey," said Mister Robot. "We've been through all that before, haven't we? Natasha's not coming back. She's gone to Disneyland."

He stepped back into the kitchen and shut the door abruptly.

Michael began to get used to the routine that had been imposed upon him. He told himself that he couldn't afford to get complacent, that he had to figure out a way to escape, a way of getting his son out of the clutches of the man inside the plastic yellow helmet, but complacency had got a hold of Michael a long time ago, and it wasn't about to let go in a hurry. Michael asked for, and was granted, a few more home comforts in exchange for what Mister Robot called good behaviour: toothpaste and toothbrush, some extra blankets for the bed, toilet paper, washing powder and a bowl to wash his clothes in. The clothes refused to dry in the chill atmosphere of the basement, and eventually, after a lot of negotiation, Mister Robot agreed to put them through the tumble dryer.

"We don't have a tumble dryer," objected Michael.

"We do now," said Mister Robot. "There've been a lot of changes in the house since you've been out of the way. You'd be surprised."

The clothes came back still warm, and it was the most exquisite pleasure for Michael to put them on, and sit under all his new blankets, watching the news with the subtitles on while eating instant mushroom soup. After a week of restraint and total silence, Michael was even allowed a four-pack of lager. He drank them all in one go, exhilarated by the sudden rush of warmth. His body responded to the alcohol like an old friend. But there was not enough of it. There never was.

Jordan sounded happier than Michael had ever heard him. The robot was right: Jordan was actually a bright kid, and really not so badly behaved. Michael listened in on their joint activities in the kitchen. The boy was especially keen on baking, and Mister Robot showed him how to make everything from rock cakes to wholemeal bread. Almost every day somebody came to take Jordan out. From the

boy's chatter, Michael learnt that they'd been to the park, to a nearby petting zoo, and even to the cinema a couple of times. He had to admit that Mister Robot and his accomplices were taking pains to keep the child amused.

The next time Mister Robot came down into the cellar, he was holding a piece of paper.

"You've got a job," said the robot, throwing the letter over to Michael's bed. "Or rather, I have."

Michael grabbed the paper and read it. It was from a local supermarket, offering Michael a job in their warehouse.

"I start Monday," said Mister Robot.

Michael looked at him blankly. "What are you talking about? Why are you doing this?"

"I told you Mikey, I'm talking over your life. I'm going to be Michael Squires from now on. And I think I'll make a better job of it than you managed. I know working in a supermarket isn't really what you envisaged yourself doing, but we all have to start somewhere. I know you had dreams of something more prestigious, but there aren't many jobs out there that involve sitting on the sofa getting drunk and watching daytime TV."

"How long are you going to keep me here?" asked Michael. He had the feeling that his life really was being siphoned off by this impostor.

"I'm not sure," said Mister Robot. "It's not the most convenient arrangement, having you taking up all this space in the cellar, is it? And I'm sure some people would find the concept a little odd. It depends on you, to a large extent. I mean, if you behave yourself, then in a few years I might be inclined to find you a place in our little family. You could be Walter Whiskers, for example. You could come out now and again to play with Jordan. In character, of course."

Michael stared at the fierce, flashing red eyes. It was increasingly difficult for him to imagine that a human face lay behind that bright yellow mask. "You want me to dress up as a mouse?" he said, incredulous.

"Well technically speaking Walter Whiskers is a rat, not a mouse, but that's would be the gist of it, yes. I mean this is just an idea off the top of my head, and in any case, all that's a long way off into the future, you know. There's no possibility of you being promoted to such a position of responsibility in the short-term. You've got to earn my trust, Mikey. Think of it as something to aspire to."

That conversation gave Michael a new impetus to find a way out of the cellar, and not by dressing up in a Walter Whiskers costume. While investigating his prison more thoroughly, Michael had found a metal bracket screwed into the bricks on the far wall,

halfway up the steps that led into the kitchen. That gave him the glimmer of an idea. He decided that he could probably cope with the sacrifice of television, and one morning, once he had heard Jordan leave the house for playgroup with his unknown chaperone, Michael set about removing the electric cable from the back of the TV set. After unplugging it, he managed to yank the plug off. He stripped the black plastic coating from the cable, took one of the three smaller cables packed inside, and began to strip the green and yellow striped insulation. He had no tools but his fingernails, and the work was fiddly and painful. After several hours of intense concentration, and a dozen painful cuts to his fingers, he had managed to harvest a length of twisted copper wire about four feet long. His idea was to set up a trip-wire, but once one end of the wire had been tied to the metal bracket in the wall, Michael was faced with a technical problem. How to keep the wire taut, when there was nothing for the other end to tie onto? After some thought, Michael unplugged the microwave, and tied the plug to the free end of his trip-wire. By shifting the microwave to the far end of the cellar, he created a rigid line of copper wire suspended about six inches off the third step down from the kitchen door. Michael was pleased with his work, but there was still the possibility that Mister Robot would spot the trap before he stepped into it. He thought about it for a moment, then, using the edge of the blanket to protect himself from the heat, he unscrewed the light bulb. He sat on his bed, checking his digital watch every few minutes. He was as nervous as he had ever been in any school exam. If it went wrong, then what? Maybe Jordan really would suffer the consequences of his father's rebellion. Sitting in the darkness and the silence, Michael couldn't bring himself to speculate what those consequences might be. Many times he made up his mind to forget the whole thing, but he didn't move an inch from his position on the mattress. If he couldn't go through with it now, when would he? And what if he got caught while he was halfway through dismantling his trap? Then he would reap the punishment anyway.

Jordan was brought back from playschool at about half past three. Michael could hear him running up stairs, chattering about some paintings he'd done that day. As soon as he heard the metallic voice of Mister Robot, he stood up, and tried to ready himself for whatever was coming next. He didn't make a sound, and soon enough, his captor was unbolting the door.

"Why's it dark down there?" said the robotic voice. "Did the light bulb blow out?"

"Yes," said Michael.

A yellow sliver of light widened at the top of the

steps, and Mister Robot put his foot on the first step. "I've got a torch around here somewhere," he said.

Michael waited for an almighty crash, but it didn't come. Instead, there was a muted scraping of metal on stone, somewhere over to his left.

"What's this?" said Mister Robot. The torch flashed on, and Mister Robot shone the beam down to his feet. Michael saw at once what had gone wrong. Instead of tripping up on the wire, the huge, blocks of plastic which encased Mister Robot's feet had merely trodden the wire down, dragging the microwave oven a few centimetres closer over the stone flags.

"Oh, I see," said Mister Robot calmly. He reached down with his blue plastic hands and gripped the copper wire, pulling it towards him and causing the microwave to groan again.

"Oh dear, Mikey," said Mister Robot. "This is very disappointing."

Michael sat there, not saying anything. The torch was shining right into his eyes, and he had to close them.

"I was just beginning to trust you as well, Mikey."

Michael felt a wave of hopelessness breaking over him. He was acutely reminded of occasions in his childhood when he'd been caught doing something wrong. There was the same sullen resentment, an inarticulate sense of injustice.

"My name's not Mikey, it's Michael."

Mister Robot clomped carefully down the rest of the steps, shining his torch on each one to make sure there were no other surprises waiting for him.

"What's that, Mikey?"

"I said my name's not Mikey. I don't like being called Mikey. Call me Michael."

"Oh! You don't like it?" said Mister Robot in mock surprise.

"No."

Mister Robot approached slowly. The torch was in Michael's face again, and he squinted, then looked down at the mattress. The robot walked right up to where Michael was sitting, then balled his fist and hit him in the face. It was a hard punch, and Michael fell back onto the bed, cracking the back of his head against the wall.

"Did you like that?" asked Mister Robot.

Michael buried his face in the pillow, his hand over his throbbing jaw.

"I said did you like that?"

Michael's reply was muffled by the pillow. "No."

"Do you think you deserved it?"

"No."

Mister Robot leant over the prone figure. Michael

could only see the red eyes, and the weak red glow of Mister Robot's mouth in the darkness.

"But it happened anyway," continued the robot. For the first time, Michael could hear something like anger behind the distortions of the electronic voice box. He tried to sit up.

Michael said, "Why are you doing this to me?"

"So in your opinion, you didn't deserve to get hit, but I went ahead and hit you anyway. Is that a fair summary of the situation, would you say?"

Michael nodded.

"Now what lesson can we learn from this unpleasant little exchange?" asked Mister Robot.

Michael said nothing.

"No ideas? Nothing at all?"

Michael stared at the expressionless mask.

"What about this: sometimes bad things happen to people who don't deserve it."

"I suppose so."

"You suppose so? What do you know about it?"

Michael moved back a few inches to the wall. "Nothing," he said.

"Some people aren't as lucky as you are, you know," said Mister Robot.

Michael didn't know what he was expected to say, so he said nothing.

"Good. Now I'll leave you alone. I assume you haven't actually broken the light bulb."

"No."

"Okie dokie. I suggest you get some sleep now," said Mister Robot.

"Don't hurt him," said Michael as the robot turned to leave. The red mask withdrew in silence, and a few seconds later Michael was alone again. His cheek was pulsating violently. Michael winced when he tried to touch it, then laid his head on the pillow and cried quietly for a while before falling asleep.

Mister Robot didn't pay Michael another visit for the next fortnight. When the kitchen door did open, it was only for a split second, just long enough for Mister Robot to toss another plastic carrier bag full of microwave meals down the cellar steps.

Michael's days felt much longer now that the TV set was broken. Jordan was also spending a lot of time out of the house, and Michael missed listening to his chirpy conversations, even if he was talking to Mister Robot. Slowly the knowledge dawned on Michael that this psychopath really was doing a better job of raising his son than he had done himself. It was a painful revelation, but Michael could hardly deny it. In the absence of his TV, Michael now spent all of his time desperately trying to listen in on the growing bond of friendship between Mister Robot and Jordan. Whoever it was inside that plastic suit,

he had a lot of patience. He never shouted at the child, or lost his temper. He certainly never laid a finger on him. All his efforts, every waking hour of the robot's life seemed to be dedicated towards caring for this child, making him happy. The two of them read stories together; Jordan learned his numbers from one to ten, and how to write his own name, along with countless other minor triumphs.

The kidnapper was going out to work every day at about eight thirty, and returning in the evening at around six. During that time, Jordan was taken to playgroup, or looked after by another member of the kidnapping gang. Michael had never heard anybody's voice but the metallic drone of Mister Robot, but he inferred the existence of at least one silent conspirator who was providing day care.

Without the TV to distract him, Michael became increasingly focused on the unseen world above him. He felt an unusual sense of clarity and purpose. He worked patiently on several escape plans, weighing the possibilities in each case with quiet deliberation. None of the possibilities was without risk. Simply by turning the tap, Michael could flood the cellar. Eventually the water would begin to seep into the cellars of the two adjoining terraces, and Mister Robot would be faced with angry visits from his neighbours. If Michael caused enough commotion, somebody might raise the alarm, even call the police. But the tap stayed off. What if the neighbours were away? What if Mister Robot managed to fob them off before Michael had a chance to make his presence known? What if Mister Robot left Michael to drown himself in the flooded cellar? The plan had too many variables.

Most of Michael's other plans fell before the finish line. He could try to short circuit the whole house by throwing water onto the microwave, but there was always the risk of electrocuting himself. He could force another confrontation with Mister Robot, and ambush his captor as he descended the stairs. Would the microwave oven make a good missile? Could it be thrown with enough force to knock a man down? Michael pondered on this question over many hours, but he could not carry out the experiment, for fear of destroying his last remaining home comfort.

In forming these plans, working them out in his head down to the last detail, Michael helped the daytime pass more easily, until Jordan returned from playgroup. Then Michael could lie back on his camp bed, one arm slightly raised and suspended by the chain, as he listened to his son's eager voice, retelling the adventures and achievements of the day.

On one of his infrequent visits to the cellar, Mister

Robot said to Michael, "Jordan's father will be coming back in a few days."

Michael sat up on the bed. He was still half-asleep. "What do you mean? Coming back?"

"Yes. We'll be saying goodbye to Mister Robot." "Forever?"

"I hope so. He may have to make a brief comeback, if Jordan misses him. But I think it's healthier to make a clean break with these things, psychologically speaking. Don't you?"

Michael hesitated. These rhetorical questions made him nervous.

"Don't you want to know who's going to be replacing you?" said the robot voice. "The new improved Michael Squires?"

"Does it matter?" said Michael, turning away to hide his curiosity. When he turned back, Mister Robot was holding the plastic yellow helmet under his arm.

It took Michael a few seconds to recognise the face.

"Who else do you think could get hold of a genuine Mister Robot costume?" asked the toy shop assistant.

"But..."

"What's happened to the business? Oh, don't worry – my wife is looking after the shop while I'm here caring for our boy."

"Your wife?"

"Yes. Our first son was stillborn. My wife took it very hard. And to make matters worse, the doctors told her she couldn't have any more children. Too risky even to try. But I believe somebody must be looking out for us up there," he said, glancing towards the wooden floorboards above their head. "Our second son is more wonderful than we could have ever hoped for. He's such a bright lad."

"What's going to happen to me?" asked Michael. After all the time spent talking to rigid plastic, it felt disconcerting to be confronted with a human face. There was too much to take into account: countless shades of possible meaning in each vanishing expression.

"Why is it always about you? This is a crucial point in Jordan's development. He's going to have to adjust to some major changes in his world. You just can't appreciate that there are more important things in the world than yourself, can you? That's why you failed as a father. You couldn't grow up. That's why we came along and took all that responsibility off your shoulders. We've done you a favour, really. Not that we expect any thanks, of course."

It was that conversation more than anything else that forced Michael to act. The next time Mister

Robot paid a visit to the cellar, the light bulb really was broken. He saw something large and square flying towards him. The microwave hit him on the shin, and he toppled forward down the steps. Michael leapt forward out of the shadows and struggled over the prone figure that was struggling to get up in the cumbersome robot costume. He bolted the cellar door behind him, and glanced around the now spotless kitchen. Jordan was out at playgroup, and Michael was certain there was nobody else in the house during this time of the day.

He couldn't help but look into all the rooms. The living room had been redecorated, and a new TV set installed in the corner. The only signs of mess in Jordan's bedroom were a few scattered soft toys on the floor. He picked one of them up: it was the remote control Walter Whiskers. A clattering from the basement reminded Michael that time was pressing. He raced back downstairs into the kitchen, and tried to think of his next move. Should he phone the police? Or just wait in ambush for the other kidnapper to return? What if the man in the basement managed to break his way out? But that was impossible: Michael himself had tried it on many occasions. He still had the Walter Whiskers toy in his hand, and he put it down on the kitchen work surface and pushed it around aimlessly. He knew he had to act quickly, but it was as if his mind had missed a gear and was spinning in neutral.

"This is my house," he said out loud, to nobody in particular. "I'm Michael Squires and this is my house."

He was interrupted by the sound of a door opening somewhere in the house. Michael stepped into the hall and checked the front door: nothing going on there. Perhaps he'd been mistaken. He wandered back into the living room and sat down on the familiar armchair. Where was the remote for this new TV? Michael felt around behind the cushions, but couldn't locate it. He looked at the new TV – it was bigger than the old one. Flatter tube too. Then, in the grey screen, Michael caught a reflection of something behind him. He turned around. It was Isabella Crow. She was pointing a bread knife at his neck with one large, nylon-feathered wing, and holding a mobile phone in the other.

The car pulled up in the driveway.

"You okay?"

Lisa nodded quickly. "Yeah, just a little nervous."

Jordan leant over and kissed her on the cheek. "Hey, I met your parents, now you've got to meet mine!" he said with a smile. "Anyway, they're not

too bad. A bit weird, but not much weirder than yours."

Lisa fussed with her hair as Jordan rang the doorbell. The house was a neat, redbrick terrace, with a well-kept front lawn, unlike most other houses in the neighbourhood, which Lisa could tell was pretty rough. She'd counted four bus stops with their windows smashed on the way here.

"Son!" said the middle-aged man at the door.

"Mr Squires, it's so lovely to meet you," said Lisa dutifully.

"Hi, Dad," said Jordan. Mr Squires gave his son a firm handshake.

"Please, call me Mike," said the man, with a warm smile. He was wearing a crisp checked-shirt, and glasses on a chain around his neck. "Come in, please. Natasha can't wait to meet you."

"It's a lovely house you have here," said Lisa, as they sat in the spotless but cramped living room.

"Oh, we keep saying we really ought to move," said Jordan's mother. "This area isn't what it used to be. But you know what it's like – inertia sets in."

"Don't you mean rigor mortis?" said Mr Squires, digging his wife in the ribs with an elbow.

"Oh, Michael! Do behave. We've just got so used to the place now. I don't think we could ever think of living somewhere else. And what with Jordan going to college just down the road, it's so nice for him to be able to pop home on a weekend."

"You hear that?" said Mr Squires to his son. "That's called a subtle hint."

"Hey, I'm here, aren't I?" protested Jordan. Lisa joined in the laughter.

Presently Mrs Squires announced dinner, and they all sat down together around the big kitchen table.

"Hey Jordan, guess what I found in your old bedroom the other day?" said Mr Squires during dessert, as he poured everyone another glass of wine.

"What? It's not something embarrassing is it?"

"Why? Is there something I ought to know about you, Jordan?" joked Lisa, grabbing his arm.

"I'm sure I've got it around here somewhere," said Mr Squires, shuffling to the pantry and opening a drawer. "Oh yes, here it is. Well, I don't think it's embarrassing, but I'll let Lisa be the judge of that."

He put a small, plastic toy into Lisa's hand. It was a yellow robot, about six inches tall, with red lights for eyes, and a chrome grille for a mouth. "What is it?" she asked, feeling that the robot looked vaguely familiar.

Jordan laughed. "Where was this hiding?" he said, grabbing the toy from his girlfriend. "God, I haven't seen him for years!"

"What it is, darling?"

“It’s Mister Robot,” Jordan explained to Lisa. “It was a kids’ TV show that was on when I was little. Don’t you remember it?”

“I’m not sure...”

“You used to be obsessed with that show!” said Mr Squires. “We had to watch it together every morning until you were... oh, I don’t know... fifteen?”

“Dad!”

Everyone laughed.

“Oh look, the flashing eyes still work!” said Jordan, pressing a hidden button on the back of the toy.

“You’re not taking that back to college, are you Jordan?” said Lisa. “Now that really would make me worry.”

“Hey, if you think that’s weird...” said Jordan, looking at his dad.

“Uh oh!” said Mr Squires. “What sordid revelations are coming out now?”

“Do you remember, when I was really small, you actually used to dress up in a Mister Robot outfit?”

“Really?” said Lisa, trying to disguise her astonishment.

“Yeah, you got me there!” said Jordan’s father. “All I can say is that Jordan was a very naughty boy when he was about four years old. Mister Robot was the only person who could make him do as he was told. Sometimes when you’re a parent you have to do strange things. You two will find out all about that soon enough.”

“Dad!” said Jordan.

Mr Squires affected a look of innocence. “What?”

“Did you make the outfit yourself?” asked Lisa.

“Oh, no I didn’t have to,” said Mr Squires. “I managed a toy shop at the time, and Mister Robot made a guest appearance one time. It was a jobbing actor, you know, just hired to entertain the kids and sell a few toys. Anyway, when the guy playing

Mister Robot went home, he left the costume behind. The people at the toy company phoned a few times to try and get it back, but it mysteriously vanished from our stock room,” he said with a wink.

Lisa was genuinely impressed. “Wow! Talk about above and beyond the call of duty. That’s really committed parenting!” she joked.

“Well, we just wanted to do everything right for our boy,” said Mrs Squires, glancing at Jordan with affection.

“But some of the parents you see around today...” said Jordan’s father. “It’s shocking, the way they treat their kids. When you become a parent, all your time and effort is spent making sure that your children grow up right. At least that’s how it ought to be. But some of these parents nowadays, they want to be locked up.” He was no longer smiling, and there was an awkward pause in the conversation. Mrs Squires gave her husband’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“Not everybody can dress up in robot suits, Dad,” said Jordan. “That’d be just too weird.”

They got through another bottle of wine in the afternoon, and after a lot more polite chatter, Lisa started to give Jordan the little dig in the ribs, which he knew meant, “I’m ready to go now.”

“Well,” said Jordan, standing up. “I’d better get started on that essay...”

Mrs Squires jumped up to get their coats, and as they made their way out of the kitchen, there was a faint but definite scuttling sound that seemed to come from underneath the floorboards.

“What’s that sound?” said Lisa, feeling suddenly on edge. She hated rodents of any kind.

“Dad, have you still got rats in the basement?” said Jordan. “Why don’t you get some traps?”

His father smiled as he helped Lisa on with her coat. “Rats? Oh yeah. They’re still running around down there. Great big ones.”

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Length is at your discretion. TQF will publish short stories and extracts happily, and will consider serialisation of longer works. If we had to name an

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By submitting a story the author assumes all legal responsibility with regard to potential copyright, libel, trade mark infringement or any other legal proceedings which might stem from its publication. With that in mind, please do not submit any stories featuring characters from films, etc.

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THE SATURATION POINT SAGA

His Nerves Extruded

Howard Phillips
Novelist, at last

Previously, in the Saturation Point Saga...

After releasing an album which, despite its colossal commercial success, fails to achieve the artistic heights of which he has dreamed, Howard Phillips travels the world to assemble the members of the perfect band. Having found his drummer, he decides to relax by employing beautiful women to bear him around Europe on a palanquin, only to find himself spirited off to an alien world, where danger waits at every turn!

A Princess of Envia

What follows I was able to piece together from later conversations, but there is no guarantee, I am afraid, that those conversations conveyed to me the whole truth of the matter. For the sake of my storytelling, I have chosen to take them at face value, but you have my apologies should they later turn out to have been packed with falsehood.

Mallda, Princess of Envia, sat in the rear of the flitter, watching the landscape pass by. The flitter was being driven by one of her father's men, and another rode in the rear with her. They were on their way to investigate why the men had not returned. He had sent her, she knew, because she would not be missed, unlike his advisors. If one of those – like the Malt of Moseby, or the Dalon of Great Wiseton – was seen to be on a jaunt to the wastelands, questions would be asked at the highest levels, whereas if she was seen heading off to the depths of the country with two buff soldiers, people would come to their own conclusions about her activities. Her father had worked hard to create a reputation for her that was not entirely fair, but it was one that suited his purposes from time to time. If the time ever came when he would wish to marry her off, she knew he would dispel those rumours so detrimental to her reputation in a matter of minutes, and anyone who wished to revive them would find themselves in need of their own revivification.

Still, there was a possibility of danger on this mission, and so she wished that he had seen fit to send one or two of his more dangerous associates to help her – the Master of Mongoose, for example, or the Tree-Whelp. But they had their own matters to attend to (and would she really have been any safer with one of them along?), and so here she was, with just a pair of bog-standard soldiers to attend her. Their orders were just to reconnoitre, and to return any intelligence they gained to the Blank Tower immediately, avoiding all engagements, but she worried. They were so far from home. What if some enemy had eliminated the soldiers at the outpost, and now waited for her arrival? What guarantee did she have that fleeing to safety would be an option? She found herself wishing even for the company of someone like the Denizen of the Deep Red Sea, despite the patent ridiculousness of the idea. Tough he might be, but what use would he be in this dusty landscape, so close to being a desert that it was only a matter of waiting for the current generation of plants to wither away.

Something caught her eye – a mantor, fleeing across the ground as if it were being chased by a predator, but what on Envia could prey on that mighty creature? It was only in view for a second, as the ship and the beast were travelling in opposite directions, but there seemed to be ghastly white, pink and brown patches on its hide, and as she settled back in her seat she wondered if some new disease afflicted it – perhaps it was some illness-induced pain that made it run so.

She continued to ruminate on the mantor, and on how its situation illustrated the fate that can befall the mighty, even those so mighty as the mantor, but did not really consider the event itself to be of any significance.

Shortly thereafter she fell asleep for a moment, but was awoken by the soldier at her side.

“Princess Mallda – we have arrived at the outpost. Should we land?”

She looked out of the flitter as it circled the outpost. No one was visible. There were a few ominous piles of rubble on the ground. Most worryingly, even though there was no ship docked with the outpost, the entry iris was open. The guards, if alive, would never have left it like that, simply because of the danger posed by wildlife flying or climbing in.

“Something is awry,” she said. “Continue to circle for a moment, till we can get a better idea of what has happened.”

Nothing became apparent. There was no movement, and so finally she gave the order to land.

“Yes, Princess Mallda,” said the pilot. “As you instruct.”

The flitter dropped to the ground, and she jumped out as quickly as her outfit would allow. She was resplendent in a violet piece of chiffon that flowed around her like the tide around a beach. It seemed to wash in and wash out, sometimes leaving her open to the eye, sometimes leaving her mysteriously cloaked by the depths. Her hair was shoulder-length and brown, soft and ungoverned, hitting those shoulders in a crash of lovely curls and sweet bounciness. Her shoes were pale green, and open-toed, revealing nails painted with each of the ten Gods of Envia – Laros the Mighty, Badoonoo the Kingly, Hertel the Long, Juniter the Grave, Puitter the Sententious, Werfeo the Jealous, Vas the Haughty, Korkel the Cruel, Ze the Meretricious and Ootel the Exaggerated. Each portrait had been painted by a different artist, engaged to visit the palace each morning and perform this essential service. Another artist was supposed to visit each day to illustrate her eyelids with the images of the two sad gentles, but she had been missing these last few days. She wondered if that meant her father had taken a fancy to the poor woman.

She waited for the two guards to get out of the flitter, and then led them towards the piles of rubble.

“Looks like a pair of graves,” she said. “Sadly. Someone has died here. Let’s find out who it was before we go any further.”

The guards took a grave each and began to dig. The princess sat upon a nearby rock and kept an eye on their surroundings. There was not a lot to look at,

but she could cope with the boredom if it meant no one would be able to sneak up on them.

Ten minutes later two bodies lay on the ground before her. Two women, but they weren’t of her planet. Their brown skin was enough to attest to that. She had seen every shade from bright purple to light grey, but never brown. It looked very pleasant to her eyes, unlike the laser burns that had seared their faces.

The Earthlings had come here, to Envia!

These had died, but who had buried them? Not her men – that was not the way of Envia. If you were lucky you might have a relative willing to push a burning boat out into the ocean for you, but more likely you would just be thrown from the walls of the Blank Tower to be fed upon by the carrion-eaters that the regular supply of such meat brought to the land thereabout. (Oh, her father fed them well!)

Earthlings had buried their lost comrades, and then? The ship was missing, so perhaps they had returned to Earth. Clearly any men stationed at the outpost would be dead.

“There will be other bodies hereabout – bodies of men of Envia. Search and find them.”

She walked to the station and had a look around. She had assumed it would now be empty – no humans would risk being discovered here (she was surprised that they had even taken the time to bury their dead – they must be a most sentimental species). If any had remained on Envia when the ship left, they would have made for safety as soon as possible. They might have lain in wait for whoever they might have thought would come, but she doubted it. The chances of it being a single girl with a pair of soldiers would have seemed too remote to be worth taking a chance on. It was indeed empty, and she left again.

One of the soldiers called to her. “Princess Mallda! There are bodies here.”

“Very well,” she responded. “Remove and burn their clothes, then leave their bodies in the open that the animals may dispose of them.”

She walked around the outpost. She noted that the external storage lockers had been forced open at some point. Even though someone had taken care to close them up again, so that the damage might not have been noticed by a passing flitter, it was clearly visible on foot.

That meant someone had needed supplies. The trip to or from Earth took less than an hour – why would anyone have bothered to spend an hour breaking these lockers open to get hold of extra supplies? The ones on the ship would have been more than enough.

The answer was clear – there were Earthlings on Envia, and they were travelling.

But how?

A horrible thought struck her, like a flying reptile against a flitter viewscreen. She looked up at the iris. Why had these careful killers left it open? It was open because they had been unable to close it – the damage done to it was too severe. And only one thing could do damage like that (unless it had been the ship itself, a thought she quickly dismissed – the ship would have been too damaged by such a collision to get back to Earth).

That thing was a mantor.

The mantor she had seen dashing across the plains.

The white, pink and brown marks upon it had not been signs of disease.

Or rather they had: the disease of Earthmen, upon her Envia!

She snarled, and told the two guards to check inside the outpost one last time. She got into the flitter and lifted off. She turned it to face the outpost entrance and closed her fist around the laser control.

She continued to fire until the compromised outpost was utterly destroyed. It could serve no further purpose.

The flitter turned and headed back towards the Blank Tower. There was not time for her to search for the Earthlings herself. Her father had to be told of the situation. His allies would be alerted, and the planet raised against these intruders!

The Way to a Man's Heart

“How far do we need to ride, Howard?” called Arelline, struggling to make herself heard above the noise of the rushing wind.

“One moment,” I yelled back, before continuing with my poetic persuasion of the mantor.

*“Here we are / Here we fly
Running till we hit the sky
We are the ones
Stars and suns
You'll greet with a smile wry.”*

He seemed to enjoy it – that is, he did not roll around on the ground to dislodge us and then tear us to shreds with his dreadful face-mouth.

“That one was called SkyWry,” I told him. It was

strange, but I found myself talking to the mantor more and more about the poetry I was writing for him. I hope I am capturing the flavour of it here, but of course I had no means of writing it down during the adventure itself, so I have to try to recreate these poems from memory. I shudder to think of the classics that might have been lost that way, because, it seemed, when my life depended on it I was really able to pull out all the stops. Did I recite a Xanadu to that beast, or a lost Shakespearean sonnet? We cannot know – I cannot judge my own work fairly, and the beast did not return with us to Earth, so we will never be able to ask him. Arelline might have heard a few words here and there, in between the roaring and the screaming (of all of us, not just the mantor), but then she never had much of an ear for poetry anyway.

“Okay,” I said to him, seeing a river up ahead. “I think we are going to walk from here, my friend, or perhaps take a boat. You should drop us off, then go to find yourself a good spot to hunt by day and hide by night. They might be looking for you, once they get a look at the damage you did to the outpost.”

He came to a stop, and we all jumped off.

“Will this suit you?” I asked Arelline.

“Looks fine to me,” she replied, unstrapping the bags from the mighty mantor. “Do you think we will be able to make a boat here?”

“Probably. Johnny, make sure you get a shot of the beast when it runs off into the distance. If that is all they put in the trailer for your film, it will be more than enough.” He began to set up for the shot, and I turned back to Arelline. “I’m hoping we can make a boat, but if not, we should be able to catch ourselves enough fish to get by as we hike along the bank. It might be a big mistake, and goodness knows I have made enough of those in my time, but I have a feeling that any pursuit might well focus on the beast, once they have seen the evidence of its attack at the outpost. What’s more, where there is running water and decent land you generally find people, and the land here is nothing like as dry and dusty as the place we first set foot on this planet. That is probably exactly why the outpost is there – in bad land, where no one will ever stumble upon it. There could be no other explanation for a base out in the desert with no sleeping quarters. But here, if the sun were yellow the ground would probably be green, and so there will be people nearby. If we ride up on a monster like that, well, it will not make a good impression.”

Arelline interrupted me. She had finished taking our baggage from the mantor. “Is this speech going to continue for much longer? I could do with an intermission for going to the toilet, if that is okay.”

I frowned and waved her off to the nearest rock.

“Are you ready, then?” I asked Johnny.

“I’m all set, boss. Should be a good one!”

“Right – start filming.” I walked around to the side of the mantor, and called up to him. “Hie there, my friend, good hunting! The poetry here is almost over, but I have one more to set you on your way.”

“Over the landscape purple you skulk without scruple

You helped us to travel – we didn’t pay you a rouble

Our thanks multiply, and now are double

Get you gone, and don’t get into trouble.”

And yes, I did rhyme trouble and double and scruple with rouble – but what did the monster know of that? He was on his way by the end of the second line, and the remaining words pursued him into the sunset.

“What now?” asked Johnny.

“We wait for Arelline to finish her toileting, then we take our turns there, divide up the bags and start to walk. It is nearly nightfall, but I want us to move a little way before we make camp, in case our enemies find the mantor and come this way. There is also the chance we might find a village, or a small farmer who will take us in for the night.”

“Won’t they have it in for us? I’m not sure I like the idea of running into a fight with a mob of angry shepherds. By hook or by crook, they’ll do us in.”

I shook my head and put a hand on his shoulder. “You are very pessimistic, my boy. Bear in mind the secret nature of the outpost we arrived at – someone is attacking Earth in secret – we are almost certainly an unacknowledged enemy of someone on this planet, and should be safe unless that person sends his agents after us. From the normal rank and file of the populace we should no other antagonism than we should have met if we had simply travelled here under our own steam.”

“I hope you’re right, Mr Phillips.”

“If we do indeed meet a horrid death, eventually your camera will be discovered by some future planet-hopping Earthman, and your posthumous fame will exceed your wildest imaginings!”

He pushed his eyebrows together, and half-smiled. “If that’s supposed to be reassuring, you should know it really isn’t.”

Arelline came back soon, and then after Johnny and I had lessened our own burdens, we added to them by sharing out the bags. I had always had this part of the journey in mind, so there was not too much for us to carry, and knowing that the weight of the baggage would lessen as we ate the food made it a bit easier to face the hike ahead.

“Hup, two, three, four!” shouted Arelline as we marched along, making us all laugh.

“Poo, on, the, floor!” I responded. It was a silly joke, but it was true, and it did worry me a bit. The riverbank was liberally coated with the detritus of animal feeding and defecating, much of it fresh, some of it frighteningly large, and containing entire bones. The mantor must have briefly scared away the local wildlife, but if we did not reach cultivated and protected land we might face trouble during the night. Our blasters should protect us from the worst of it, but it would mean little rest.

We kept the pace up, and I led from the front. We ate on the move, and were careful to pack any wrappers and leftovers back into the bags. We could not risk leaving a trail that a predator – humanoid or otherwise – would be able to follow.

After two hours of walking it was almost dark, and as I began to wonder if we would have to camp out in the open, a great splash made us spin onto our heels to face the river, and back away as fast as we might, even as we kept our eyes firmly fastened on the monstrosity that now lifted itself from the river! Its aspect was such that an accurate description is very nearly impossible – its countenance so different from that of any Earthly creature that the words I would need to describe it would need to be invented, and so you would not understand me anyway. I could try, though, if you would indulge me – antrifulgent, befugging, manipuscent, or even gorontoculous! Horrifying, in plain English! It had as many tentacles as I have hairs on my head, and as many eyes as I have meals in a year – and those eyes did not stay still. No, they moved, merged and melded in a way that made my stomach empty that very moment. As the rations I had eaten that evening splashed onto the ground, finding their space among the abandoned carcasses and stinking faeces, I dragged my gaze back to this slithering nightmare, that even now was stretching a multitude of tentacles towards us.

I made ready to run, even as Arelline scampered away, and Johnny unholstered his camera, but then I noticed something that changed everything – there was already a man in the grips of that unholy thing. That must have been the splash we heard, whereas at first I had assumed it to be the grotesque belly-flop of the river-squid leaping onto the lowest reach of the bank. Some poor fisherman, falling into the water, must have awoken the beast, and now his fate was sealed.

But no! He was still moving, the thing not having taken the time to finish him in its greediness to add us to its catch!

I took out my blaster, and prepared to do battle for his life.

The River of Wrath

“Lawks amighty!” I shouted as I stepped up to the fight. The beast threw a hundred slimy tentacles my way, but I ducked and rolled to the side. I hoped Johnny was filming it.

The river-squid snarled, squelchily, and let me see the insides of its stomach, an action clearly meant to disturb and terrify me. Despite the bones and semi-digested corpses I could see inside, I did not freeze – I had been so terrified by its initial appearance that nothing further it could do could make me fear it more. I had overcome that initial terror, and now prepared to turn it back against its originator.

A laser blast came over my head, sizzling the creature’s side – it didn’t burn so much as evaporate, so disgustingly liquid was its composition. It was as if the slime from the surface of an untended pond had found its way to some kind of primitive consciousness, its only motivation to feed and kill.

I risked a moment to turn around, to see who had fired a laser beam so close to my precious brain – it was Johnny, his camera on the floor. Arelline stood off in the distance – well out of range of the sea-squid, but equally well out of range of offering me any assistance. Still, helpful as it might be to have Johnny plugging away at the thing while I got in close, we had to keep our priorities straight.

“Don’t stop filming, you bloody ninnyhammer! I can deal with this oversized frogspawn!”

He did not obey me immediately, but when he saw I was serious he put down the laser gun and picked up the camera. It might seem silly that I thought that to be our priority, but I had his interests at heart. My life, for almost the entirety of the period narrated in this series of novels, was characterised by desperate longing, by the desire for a musical Shangri-La that I could never truly be sure existed. I could not bear the idea that my adventure might leave Johnny Quondam in a similar position. Imagine a documentary film-maker offered the chance to visit another planet, but asked to leave his camera at home. He might well refuse to go at all, so spoilt would the experience be for him – it would be akin to love-making without osculation.

If I died because of my regard for his feelings, so be it.

You think you know that I survived, don’t you,

because you are reading my own account of these events? Well, don’t be so sure. I could have been contacted in the spirit world (my little joke), interviewed by a time traveller, or resurrected as a cyborg, or someone might have faked this entire manuscript. The Sound of Howard Phillips, lacking a band leader, might have had an android Howard built, to take my place at their head. Said android might have forgotten or never understood its true status, despite somehow having my memories, and thus begun to write my memoirs. You are not to know, so do not be complacent about my safety, especially at this point, during my battle with the river-squid, because this did not end all that well for me.

Now that Johnny was filming once more, I unholstered my blaster, and began to take potshots at the creature, leaping about like a mad thing to avoid its soiling touch. Slowly, ever so slowly, the blasts began to take their toll upon it, but there was a price to be paid for this victory. I will not say it was a pyrrhic victory – I was able to continue – but as its flesh was boiled away the air filled with a noxious stinging cloud of gas that made my eyes water. It was as if I had just had the worst news of my life, and was sobbing my heart out, even though I was in general feeling quite chipper, despite being in all likelihood marooned on an alien planet. I had been having a bit of fun since we sent the palanquinettes home – riding the mantor had been thrilling, and the hike had been invigorating. So it was bizarre now to be bawling my eyes out like a toddler who wants to splash and play in the big bath tonight but knows she is unlikely to get any further than a quick head-to-toe scrub in the sink.

I kept at it, but with my vision blurring, it became harder and harder to avoid the lashes of the river-squid’s tendrils – one after another dragged across my face, arms, legs and body, and I learnt what it would mean to be the blackboard those fingernails are scratched down. My clothes were torn, my voice worn out from screaming, my gun slipping from my hand as the blood pouring down my arms made it too slippery to hold, and my eyes bulging from their sockets, straining to see the next attack.

But I had been there before. Poetry slams are not the genteel affairs you might expect.

I fought back, again and again, and just as I became convinced that I would be the first to fall, the river-squid suddenly slumped, some internal tension level broken, its body becoming nothing but a thin film that fell to the ground, as its water ran back into the river. I staggered forward to look my enemy in one of its eyes, only to find that they too had washed away with the water. There was nothing there but

that film, and the remains of the creatures it had already eaten, in a stomach that was now as limp as a plastic shopping bag. In discussion with scientific experts I later surmised that the creature had been some kind of composite entity, something like the coral of our planet. It had no identity of its own – I had not been fighting an individual, but rather a colony, or even a city, of tiny planktons, algae and microscopic insects and river dwellers, all united in an attempt to dominate the waters. The eyes had simply been gatherings of like-minded bacteria – whether they actually served some ocular function I would not care to hazard – their sole purpose might have been to terrify land creatures in the way they expected to be terrified. A mantor confronted with such an entity would not have known to be afraid of a big sac of water, but if it had a thousand eyes even our steed would have thought twice before attacking.

I retched, having nothing left to throw up, then struggled on to reach the river-squid's victim. Through watery eyes I could see him feebly trying to pull himself back up the river bank, the muddiness of it defeating him in his weakened state. The creature had not finished him, but like me he was sorely wounded. Each movement he made had no effect but to send him sliding further into the mud.

With the utmost last of my strength I reached down to offer him my hand. He took firm hold, and I held him steady like that for all the time it took Arelline and Johnny to come and pull us to both to safety.

The second I saw the fisherman safely on dry land I let myself pass out. I've earned this oblivion, I thought to myself as the stars in the night sky began to wink out.

At first I thought of nothing. All was black. When that was over, I began to see peculiar lights and dreamed strange dreams. A man with a horn blew in my ear, while pressing the horn to my nose. His beard brushed against my lobe, and I thought of Blackpool rock. I rode a pig down the motorway, and dined on halibut every day for a year. The number of toes I had varied from day to day – six on each foot, then ten on one, nine on the other, then none at all, and, occasionally, I would have just the right number.

I did of course talk later to Johnny and Arelline about what really happened during this period, but it was the usual, and by no means as interesting as my recollections of it. Nevertheless, if you are the kind of reader who will insist on clinging to some foolish notion of objective truth, I suppose I might as well

indulge you. If you have come this far in my novel, I would be a fool to send you away over a mere difference of literary opinion.

They had tended to our worst wounds there on the riverbank, and tried to make us comfortable and warm for the night. They had been unable to give us any food, but had offered us water regularly, even as they took turns to stay up and guard the camp from encroaching animals.

In the morning the fisherman had recovered enough to point Johnny in the direction of his farmhouse, where a wife and two sons had been waiting anxiously for the man's return. He had not told them where he would be fishing, and by the time it had become clear that he was not returning, it had been too late to organise a safe search. In order to assure the family of Johnny's bona fides, the fisherman had made him memorise a phrase in the local tongue, something relating to the fisherman's courtship of his wife.

The sons had returned with him to the camp in a cart, and then carried all of us back to the farm. Arelline in particular had been amazed that the man I had rescued was a farmer by trade – that the fishing had been mostly recreational, or at least only otherwise motivated by the desire for a bit of luxury one dinnertime – given the wildlife they had encountered out there, but the farmers had shrugged. Danger to them was an everyday thing, and a little extra here or there was nothing to concern themselves with. Anyway, imagine the dangers people on our own planet put themselves in the way of for the sake of recreation!

I had spent the next few days unconscious, while Arelline and Johnny made themselves useful on the farm, helping out while the head of the household was incapacitated.

When I awoke, I had a lot of questions to ask!

But first, there were a lot I had to answer!

Laughable Aria

I had to improvise an opera to explain our situation to the villagers. There had been no other way to do it. For whatever reason, most of them were able to understand a smidgen of English – they either could not or would not explain why that was – and they were full of questions for me, none of which, in my turn, I could understand.

Back at the farm, Arelline and Johnny had made some attempts to communicate more fully with the

two sons and the wife while the farmer and I recovered, but they had met with no success. They had enough English to be tourists, or – ominous indeed – an occupying force, but any sort of complex concept had been beyond them.

And so, when I had awoke, we decided that there was little point in staying here – we would have to move on to the closest village to the farm. The two sons were happy enough to take us there, so long as we waited for market day, and so I had spent a few more days gathering strength, eating, thinking, and talking with my two companions.

Arelline had more time for me than Johnny, who, when he was not working on the farm, tended to run off with the two sons and his camera to film the local fauna.

“Do you think the mantor” – for thus had the farmers named it upon seeing Johnny’s film – “will remember my poetry, Arelline?”

“Whenever it is hungry, probably. It will gnaw at its mind, right up until the day when, old and decrepit, it realises it is too weak to hunt any longer. The last thing it will remember will be your poetry, taunting it with the promise of food.”

“It made an impact, then,” I said with a scowl. “More than many lesser poets have achieved.” I was still quite testy, and not willing to be the butt of her jokes.

“I am only teasing, Howard,” she said softly, putting a hand on my elbow. “Your poetry probably saved our lives back there, not to mention how very brave you were against the river-squid. This family owes its current happiness to you.”

I shook her off. “Physical bravery is nothing. How can I be proud of that, when I fear the judgment of posterity so much? Can a man brought to tears by the thought of becoming a disparaging footnote in the annals of literature be considered a hero?”

“I think you need some more sleep.” She gave me a kiss on the forehead, much to my surprise, and left.

When we arrived in the village, riding in the cart, a dozen pig-like beasts in tow, we drew immediate attention. Luckily there were none of the troops we had previously encountered – Johnny had shown images of them to the farmers, and they had simply shrugged, unable to identify them, but there had always been the chance that they were playing us for suckers, and that we were walking straight into a trap.

The villagers gathered around us, poked and prodded us, and generally made me feel like the celebrity I had tried to avoid becoming back on Earth. These people were of middling height – the tallest were perhaps the size of Arelline, who I

suppose was quite tall for a human female – and their skin was a colour somewhere between the ripe and unripe sides of a nectarine. Their clothes were well-made – tough and hardy – but lacking variety of colour or composition. If there were people on this world capable of building the technology we had seen – the spaceship, the guns, the outpost, and the small craft we had heard fly over our heads during our ride on the mantor (we had kept our heads down, to avoid our faces being seen – it seemed to have worked) – then they did not live here, and probably did not even trade with this village.

Eventually they calmed down, and I made an effort to communicate with them, but to no avail. Our friends the two farmers then spoke on our behalf, to the extent that they were able, and, I hoped, would tell them all about my so-called heroism. Soon I saw wide eyes grow wider, as one of the farmer’s sons flapped his arms around in imitation of the river-squid, while the other leapt about with an imaginary handgun. Those eyes were soon all on me, and after some cheering and back-slapping a runner was sent off to find the headman of the village.

While we waited for them to arrive the villagers seated us in the town square, and brought us drinks and food. The drinks were delicious, a blend of berries that I suspect might have been fermented, given the silly undertaking I would shortly embark upon. The food, not so much – it was dry, chewy, and almost impossible to swallow without a swig of the berry-wine, which, now I think about it, might well have been their purpose. By getting us nicely sozzled they were probably hoping to get more information, one way or another. They need not have bothered, because what information I had was theirs for the taking! But they were not to know that – I might have been a spy of some kind, or the vanguard of an invasion of my own.

The headman came, a big burly man who was past his best, and looked like he did not hold back from the berry-wine himself, from time to time. For a few minutes we attempted some discussion, but again no useful outcome was achieved, and so we ended up laughing and clapping each other on the shoulder more than was perhaps strictly necessary. I laughed, and then he laughed, and then I laughed some more. He tickled me under the chin, and I asked him to stop, and he laughed once more. I took another drink of berry-wine and gave the matter some hard thought.

Poetry would not avail me in this situation. It worked with the mantor, but I had not really needed to convey any information, or extract any, from that vicious beast’s one-track mind. No, poetry relied

upon the meaning of words as much as their sound, and would be worse than useless here.

Music could help, but the problem was the same – it would be great for communicating feelings, emotions, for setting out my state of mind – but it would not be able to bear the weight of the conversation I needed to have.

The written word would be perfect – an essay, history or story, telling them what had happened, or a play – but in that case they would know that I was trying to tell them something, but have no idea what it was, or what the context was.

Then it came to me – something with the best of both the worlds in which I have made my living – opera! The capacity to carry emotion of music, coupled with the storytelling abilities of a play or novel. I was surprised that I had not thought of it sooner – though that might have been because up to that point I had not drunk enough berry-wine to come up with such a patently silly plan! Maybe they got me drunk to get me to open up, and if so, more fool they, because they were about to get Howard Phillips at his fullest! Would it be more than they bargained for, or were they just getting a bargain? I could not say.

I hunkered down to the ground – the people lived so close to nature that they had not yet paved the square over (and if I were being exact, I'd have to say it was not all that square anyway, being more of a semi-circle with a few bumps here and there) – dug a stone up out of the earth for myself, and began to drag it through the grass to create a crude plan for the headman to consider. First I drew a stage, and he nodded, then a man, singing (I had to demonstrate this vocally, as I could not find a way to clearly represent it pictorially, the mud being too clumsy a tool), and then a girl, singing (I pointed to Arelline, who the chief now seemed to notice for the first time – his eyes grew worryingly hungry, and it was probably a good thing that his (I presume) wife arrived at about that point, having taken her time to get there.

And so it was that Johnny spent the next few days leading the male villagers in the construction of a stage in the village square, while Arelline set the women of the village to costume-making, and I settled down with multiple cups of berry-wine to write the book for our opera, not to mention compose the music and set out the stage directions.

With that done, I began casting the performance. I, of course, would play Howard Phillips – singer, poet, novelist, adventurer – while Arelline would play herself – actress, model, palanquinette, space traveller – and Johnny would lead a group of troopers. It was odd, but as I had begun to plan the performance

I had found it quite difficult to remember the role Johnny had played during the attack on the ferry and our flight from Earth, but I put it to the back of my head for the time being. It only bothered me when I had been drinking, anyway, so I put it down to a curious side-effect of that alien liquor.

I chose six of the village men to play troopers, another to play the farmer, and three women to collaborate on the role of the river-squid (I had asked Arelline to create a chiffon sheet to cover them, but her materials were limited, and in the end they would perform in what was little more than a giant red sack). Ten other village women would play my palanquinettes, and double as a chorus.

In a matter of days, we were done, and everyone who was not taking part settled down to watch the show.

Opera time!

A Loquacious Tormentor

Afterwards, the headman sat in silent wonder. Of course, being from such a primitive planet he had never seen the like. I had shown him the full range of our adventures over the last few days, and the way they had made us feel. I had entitled the opera “La Palanquinnade”. (The title of the novel is different, of course, and that is because something even more stunning than my beautiful palanquinettes came to light later on in our adventures, something that could not fail to attract the attention of the novel’s title.) We had sung, walked around the stage, and tried to look portly. The costumes had been as fine as possible in the circumstances. There had been no music but what could be made by our own voices. It might not sound very impressive, but on another world, untouched as yet by Paganini or Bizet, it had a certain charm.

I sat with the headman. “What did you think of that?” I asked.

He pursed his lips and whistled. “It... good,” he said, in a strange, thick accent. “You... go. Bad men... come.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “Bad men are coming? The ones that we had in the opera? Why didn’t you tell us, for the love of song?”

He shrugged, and I understood. If you were given your first chance to watch an opera, wouldn’t you have done anything in your power to make sure it went ahead as planned?

I had so many questions. I wanted to know how these people understood and spoke the little English that they did. Who had taught it to them, and why? But there was no time for that now.

By his gestures and the odd word of English here and there, the headman told us to take the cart we had rode into the town on. The other villagers would compensate the farmer we had saved if the cart could not be recovered later.

Arreline, Johnny and I were utterly frustrated by all of this, but what could we do? There was no choice but to make ourselves as scarce as possible. So we piled our baggage into the cart, and rode out of that strange, sweet village, happy waves at our backs, and a deadly world before us. We had gained next to nothing from our stay in the village, save a rickety old cart, some wonderful memories, and a video recording of what had probably been the first opera ever performed on this world. Thinking of that last raised my spirits somewhat, and I loosed the whip on the two maroon beasts that pulled the cart.

"Hie there!" I called to them, spurring them to speed. They were slightly smaller than horses, and otherwise fairly similar, but with feathery tufts where a horse's ears would be, and a tail that was long, thick and flat, like that of a duckbilled platypus.

They made good speed, but our escape was not to be. We had been riding for about two hours when there came the sound we had heard once before – a small craft, of the type which I would soon learn to be called a flitter, buzzed low over our heads, and came to a stop just ahead of us.

Out got four men, all soldiers of the type we had previously encountered, and a woman. When I saw her I stopped breathing, for at least twenty seconds. She did not take my breath away so much as make me forget breathing was even necessary – I could just have lived in her eyes, drunk only her beauty, and eaten only the words which I would now be forced to say. She was my enemy, after all, as far as I knew.

The three of us made sure our weapons were to hand, though they were concealed beneath rags. If there was a chance of passing by without battle we would take it. Perhaps we could pass as travellers from a distant land.

"Who are you!" I shouted in Hindi. "What do you want?"

She laughed. Her laugh did not fit her face. It was high, sharp and almost cruel, where her face was rounded, almond-shaped, and gentle-featured. What had happened to make her like this?

"Oh, I know you, Howard, no need to pretend you are anything but what you really are – an Englishman, a washed-up poet, a failed rock star,

author of dozens of unfinished novels. General purpose wash-out. I think I have your measure."

"Do you, indeed?" I said, trying to keep a cool exterior. "And how did you come by this information?"

She laughed again, scornfully. "It's called Google, Howard. If you want to secretly infiltrate a planet it helps not to have your life history on the world wide web."

I was surprised, but perhaps I should not have been. In the past, aliens learnt to speak English from analysing our radio and tv broadcasts. In the present day, what would stop them simply tapping into the greatest repository of information the world has ever seen?

"I see the implications are hitting you now," she said, still keeping her distance. They had not moved away from their flitter. "When we choose to implement our invasion of your planet, nothing will be left to chance. All it takes is one ship stationed on your planet, uploading everything to us once a day or so, and we have everything we need. You gave us free language lessons! The ferry you were on – we just consulted the timetable! Google World has been kind enough to provide us with photos of the entire planet, including the locations of secret military bases. Nothing can stop us!"

"So why don't you do it?" shouted Arelline. "Finish us and take the world."

"Oh, we will do it, but I'm not going to risk taking you on here and now. I have seen the results of picking a fight with you – why risk my neck? But I have alerted my father, and he will send the whole planet to fight you. You will not stand a chance."

"I don't understand," I said. "Why come here with so few men? Why not bring more and overwhelm us by sheer force of numbers? Why come here just to bluster at us? In these few minutes you have given us more intelligence about this world than we had managed to acquire in weeks on our own."

She paused. "Ask your friend to stop filming, and then we can talk more." While Johnny put the camera away she continued to talk. Patience was not her strong point. "Perhaps if you had spent less time putting on an opera you might have got a bit further?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," I replied, taking her derision on the chin. "And if it did not particularly help, then at least we spread a bit of culture."

"You fool. Within the year every man and woman on this planet will have a laptop of their own, and be signed up to the BBC's iMP, if it ever launches. Have you not heard of the American proposals to build a

laptop that costs under one hundred dollars? Each nation has to order a million of them, at the very least. Though our invasion has not yet taken place, we have agents in key positions in countries around the world, humans who took our money, and now wait to follow our orders. The first of those *orders* will be to place an *order* for ten million of those laptops, laundered through a dozen different third world nations.”

“The horror of it,” I said, shaking my head.

“At last you realise the magnitude of humanity’s folly! We have no need to invade you just yet – you are happily colluding in the training of your conquerors! And all that means your efforts to spread culture on this planet are entirely nugatory! Those ignorant villagers may know nothing of opera now, but this time next year they will know more of it than any human living!”

“But this isn’t really about opera, is it?”

“Of course not!” she cried. “First of all, they will be learning your languages – we have already made a start on that, giving quick lessons here and there to find quick learners who might be sent on ahead, or serve as leaders later, and that is why the farmers and villagers you met had a smattering of Earth words in their vocabulary.”

“I had wondered about that.”

“Secondly, they will learn about your weapons, that they might fight you more efficiently. Thirdly, your culture, including opera, that they might dominate you more easily. And fourthly, they will learn how to prepare and cook Earth food, because we are going to be there a long time and it will not be practical to import everything from Envia.”

“So that’s the name of this planet, then, Envia,” said Arelline. “Very apt.”

“We have no need to rush our invasion – you have already delivered your greatest treasure to us on a plate! All the information on your planet, in our hands without a single shot being fired! We send occasional soldiers on training missions to attack you in isolated spots, but that was really just for fun. You, though, Howard, you have made it personal now, by fighting back, by coming to Envia. You have marked yourself for my father’s special attention.”

“My colleague here, Johnny Quondam, has finished filming now,” I said. “Let’s talk about why this is all taking place in secret. Let’s talk about why you have come practically alone to confront someone as dangerous as you think me to be.”

“Come with me,” she said. “We will go for a little walk. This is not for others to hear. Leave your weapon behind. Do not worry about my weapon – I have no need to carry one. The very animals on this

world know enough of my father to shiver and run when they see me.”

Love Rears Its Ugly Head

“Don’t do it,” said Arelline, her lips drawn thin. “It’s a trap. She will have you dead in seconds, while her goons destroy Johnny and me.”

“It might well be,” I said in a whisper to her, covering my mouth with a hand. “But despite what she said about me being too dangerous to confront, I think there is more to it – they could have fired at us from the air in total safety if that was what they had wanted to do. I need to talk to her to find out what is going on. It must be something she doesn’t want those men to know.”

“Well, take care,” she said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Some people might think she was beautiful, and I know you are a sucker for a pretty girl, Howard. Don’t let her bamboozle you.”

“I’ll keep my wits about me. You keep an eye on Johnny.”

I got down from the cart and walked halfway to the flutter. The woman came to meet me, then waved to some rocks off to one side. I shrugged to acquiesce, and we strolled there, making no sudden movements that might alarm the gunslingers on either side.

Once we were out of sight of the others, she looked for a smooth patch of rock and sat herself down. “Come and join me, Howard. Sit down right here.” She patted a spot right next to herself. I saw no harm in playing along, and sat right down beside her, just like the nursery rhyme spider – but who was the spider here, who was the fly?

Her smell was delightful – it literally made me hungry, as if someone had passed a plate of nectar under my nose, then whisked it away.

I corrected myself – she had not been whisked away, she was still there, extremely next to me. Arelline had been quite right – I am nothing of myself near a beautiful woman. The anger begins to melt away, the years of frustration are forgotten, and the sense of cosmic angst that pervades my very soul seems like so much silly nonsense. That is the spell a woman can cast. They are the only thing that make male lives bearable, even as they make them utterly unbearable. (Men who love men will have a different perspective on the matter, but the principle remains

the same. A man's life is full of unease, restless uncertainty, the nagging feeling that we should be killing something or someone to prove our masculinity. And all it takes to make that go away is a loving touch, even a glance, a smile, from a lover, or even better a potential lover, because it is not by accident that the first six letters of potential are what they are! Whether the lover is male or female changes not the effect it has on a man's heart.)

"How about we start with your name?" I said, as politely as I could muster, and struggling to keep any hint of huskiness from my voice. Doubtless the effect she was having upon me was not unintended, but I could not allow her to know that the upper hand was hers, as well as the other hand should she want it. "And you could tell me a bit about this mysterious father of yours that everyone is so frightened of."

"But you do not fear him, do you? What a strange little man you are. I am Princess Mallda of Envia. My father is Emperor Zuvanos, lord of all you see here."

"All this?" I said sarcastically, gesturing to the rocks. I took off my glasses and began to wipe them clean on my shirt. They had got quite grimy over the last month, but a side effect was to, oddly enough, put a tiny barrier between us – without my glasses on I am not truly myself – and that made my heart beat a little less quickly.

"The whole planet," she replied. "He is the ruler of the whole world." She leant into me, her shoulder pressing against mine. Her warmth came through the thin material dividing us like a hot knife through butter – and it was going straight for my heart!

"And why can he not just attack us openly? Why the secrecy? From the outpost being out in the middle of nowhere I deduced that the attacks were not open knowledge. Is his power not absolute?"

She shrugged, making her shoulder rub up and down against mine in a way that made me ache to be kissing her. Obviously this father of hers had done a number on her – and perhaps the mother had gone missing early in her life? – but a warm body does not lie. She had feelings that ran deep, and in the right man's arms she might find something that would let her be the woman she would have been without fate's unkind interventions.

She surprised me then by kissing me, firmly on the lips. I did not break away – in fact I put my arms around her, and returned the kiss, just as firmly. After a moment I felt her teeth pinching my lower lip, then she let me go.

"Can any man have absolute power? You must always guard against those around you. On your world, most sensible nations realise this – the only

way to happiness is to have a leader whose power is severely curtailed, for his or her own good. Too much power in one person's hands will always lead to the envy of those around him." She stopped to kiss me again, and I ran a hand down her back, letting my fingertips delight in the occasions her outfit shifted to let them run over her lovely scarlet skin. "My father rules by fear. His most trusted lieutenants are the men he trusts least. By invading your world he knows he will make himself the greatest leader this planet of Envia has ever seen – he will be unassailable. And so he makes his preparations in secret, for if the others learn that his position will soon be so firmly cemented they will know that there will never be a new Emperor in their lifetimes, and that they might as well prepare for a lifetime of servitude."

"I think I see where this is going," I said.

"Me too," she replied, "and I don't think these rocks are a very comfortable place for it, but we have to make the best of the situation."

"I mean with regard to your father."

"It is all one," she said, lifting herself onto my lap, pressing her chest against mine, and generally doing her best to discombobulate me. "I am sent here by my father to tell you about the situation. If I need to be entertaining to persuade you to listen, then I must. I have no choice in these matters – though if I did, I would of course be here nevertheless."

I lifted her off me, and placed her back down on the rock. My glasses had been lost in the commotion, and I looked around for them in the many little gaps among the rocks while we continued to talk.

"Presumably you are here to tell me how hopeless my mission is, but your father won't mind if I bump off a few of the heavies he sends after me. Is that it? And by telling me all about your father's plans for my world you make sure that I will go through with it, just to get a chance at your father by the end of it. I have a slim chance, that's all it is, but I have to take it. I have no other straws to grasp at." I found my glasses, put them back on, and gave her one last, longing kiss. "You are a beautiful woman, and I would love to dally with you here, no matter how uncomfortable it is. I can hardly breathe with lust for you, but I cannot make love with you in these conditions. You were sent here by your father to seduce me! What could be less attractive? Still, you have your way. I will fight my way across this planet, and do my best to kill all your father's lieutenants, and then without a doubt fail in an attempt to kill him too. I have to, because I am human. Perhaps we will meet again, before the end, or if I am fortunate, just after the end, and then you can decide for yourself

whether I am worth kissing, and I can kiss you back, confident that you are doing it for the right reasons.”

I got up to go.

“Wait,” she said. “There’s one more thing – I have something for you, from the Emperor. It will help you on your journey.”

She handed it to me, and I thanked her, and then I went back to the cart and she returned to the flutter. My heart pounded as I watched her fly away. Arelline seemed strangely moody, so I waited till nightfall before telling her what I had learned.

Bad Luck Comes In Trees

I was now the happy owner of a map of this part of the world, so at least we knew where we were going. The outpost of our arrival had been marked on the map by hand, and the same person had added English equivalents of the place names for our benefit. The outpost had been off to the north, and since then we had travelled south, eventually meeting what was pleasantly termed the River of Wrath, not to be confused with the River of Penitence, which branched to the south.

We had a long way to go. Our ultimate destination, the Blank Tower, home of the Emperor and his private army, was on an island to the east, in the Deep Blood Sea (this world would make an interesting holiday destination one day, I thought, once relations between our planets were normalised). The channel between the island and the mainland was fairly narrow – perhaps a day’s sailing (assuming the map was accurate and to scale) I judged, by comparing the distance with that between the outpost and the River of Wrath.

Our first order of business would be to cross the river. Once that was accomplished, we would have to head south, to and through the gigantic forest that seemed to cover fully half the land between the two rivers and the coast. The trail – if that was what the dotted line indicated, and it was not just the route which we were supposed to take – would then take us out of the forest, through a mountain pass. On the far side lay a desert, which we would have to skirt around, through the foothills of the mountains, till we reached the coast, and the port of Orktaido. In that town we would find a boat to take us to the island of the Blank Tower – if, I say again, the map could be trusted. I had after all been given it by a

confirmed enemy, whose avowed intention was to lead me into confrontation with other enemies, from which encounters she was not terribly worried about my exiting alive!

We rode the cart back to the village, where we explained to the headman (by means of a short improvised dance routine), that we had evaded our pursuers. He looked dubious, and must have worried that we were leading trouble right to them, but seemed much happier when I explained that all we wanted was for the villagers to help us across the river.

He boomed some hearty reply, and within two hours we stood on the far side of the river, waving a goodbye to those good people who had shown us, if nothing else, that if our worlds could not be friends now, there was a chance they might be in some future time, when a different man stood at their head. It was awful to think that they were, unknown to themselves, being dragged into a war by someone they hardly even knew, some far-off baron who never came out this far, except perhaps to set up a secret installation or two.

I thought back to my life on Earth, and wondered at the people who lived there in similar ignorance, not caring who led them, not bothering to vote, believing that all that distinguished one politician from another was the sheer number of lies he could be discovered in. I found myself bemoaning my age, since I was now at the point where I could rail against the foolishness of youth, those people who could not remember life under Conservative rule, the horror of delapidated schools, run-down public services, rampant consumerism. Everyone was so smart about it now. Consumerism was as bad as ever, but now people did it ironically, under the watchful eye of a seemingly benevolent government. Women were as objectified as ever, and those who fought that process ridiculed. Advances had been made, I assured myself – the right of adults to choose their own sexual partners, regardless of gender, was no longer a matter for discussion, and investment in all areas of public services was trumpeted, rather than avoided at all costs. People had come to see tax cuts as bad business sense, rather than a windfall that cost nobody important anything at all. Human rights were now a hard and fast matter of statute, instead of some far-off bit of United Nations trendiness.

But I still felt bad about so many things – the human condition is one of awful torment for anyone who takes the time to consider the behaviour of their fellow men. Good struggles to prosper, while evil stands at every shoulder, yelling its profanities of hate and self-interest at each turn of the wheel of life,

trying to persuade us all to trample on the happiness and the rights of others, even as they strain with the temptation to do the same to us. I have been called a sensitive man, and it is true, I feel many things very deeply. It is the one and only prerequisite for becoming a poet.

We reached the forest. It had no name on the map – it simply was, almost as if something so huge had no need of a name, because wherever you were you could just point in its direction and be fully understood.

“Should we really go in, Howard?” asked Arelline. “Can we not just go around the edge?”

“That sounds really good to me,” said Johnny, even as he took out his camera to record the forest in all its grandeur. It was highly impressive. The tallest of the trees stood at least sixty metres in height, and only the obvious younglings fell far beneath that level. It was obvious, even from out here, that the treetops would form an almost continuous canopy once we were inside – the light would be poor, a murky brown-green that would do nothing at all for our spirits. The trees were much like those of Earth, other than in colouring and texture – the outlines were the same, but the bark was not hard. Rather, it was soft, almost moss-like, perhaps indicating a different origin to these trees than one might have expected. The leaves were green, of course – they still seemed to run on chlorophyll – but the branches and trunks were a dark, dark scarlet, run with veins of purple. The trees were not too close together – we would be able to make our way through, though I suspected the cart might end up getting stuck and left behind at some point – but branches and leaves criss-crossed from one tree to another, all of them intertwined as if they locked off a sleeping beauty from the outside world.

“I am sorry, my friends,” I replied, “but we cannot do that. The map is clear. If we just follow the river to the coast, we will be faced by a range of impassable mountains, and if we get past those, in some fashion, and manage to craft a boat capable of a day’s crossing by sea, the minute we got into the water we would be caught in a gargantuan current and swept away to the frozen north. Our only option is to get through this forest, to the mountain pass, and then to the port.”

“We could always go back,” suggested Johnny hopefully. “We have gained a lot of information – we could just hope for Earth’s scientists to send the ship for us.”

“I don’t think that is likely to happen, Johnny, do you? The ship was remote controlled, for one thing, and that base will by now be occupied once more by the Emperor’s troops, or perhaps even destroyed, to avoid discovery. And if we were to turn back, how do you think the Emperor and his lovely daughter will react? At the moment they are happy for us to take on their enemies, but if we run for the hills to avoid those fights, they will have no reason not to hunt us down and shoot us in the back.”

“We don’t know that they will be able to find us,” he replied.

“Oh, they will,” I said. “Somehow they knew the moment we were in that village, and they knew everything that we did there. I did not notice a spy, or even any technology that would have allowed a spy to communicate, but that does not mean they did not have a means of getting information. Just how they managed it is a mystery I would like to uncover. With luck we might acquire some technology that will stand Earth in good stead in the battle against these people.”

“So we are going in, then?” said Arelline, tying her hair up in a pony-tail.

“Yes,” I said. “I think we are.” I started the cart moving, then drew it to a temporary halt. I turned to look at her – she rode beside me, shotgun, while Johnny rode in the back with his camera and the bags. “Perhaps you should take the reins of the cart, Arelline. It looks pretty humid in there, and I have a hunch that my glasses will be worse than useless after ten or fifteen minutes.”

She thought for a moment, then shook her head, making that sweet pony-tail bounce against her shoulders and back like a deliciously gentle whip. I decided to ask her lots more questions which she would have to answer in the negative. “If we get attacked, I’d rather be sitting here with a gun in my hand than have you whirling around like Elmer Fudd with steamed-up glasses. If you have the reins, I can stick by your side and let you know if you are heading into trouble.”

“Okay, then,” I said. “But you promise you have got my back?”

“I’ve got it, Howard.”

“Right – into the woods we go!” I threw out the reins and got the horse-things moving again. “Let’s hope there are no big surprises waiting!”

Within a day we had been attacked by the Tree-Whelp and his men!

NEXT: CONCLUSION!