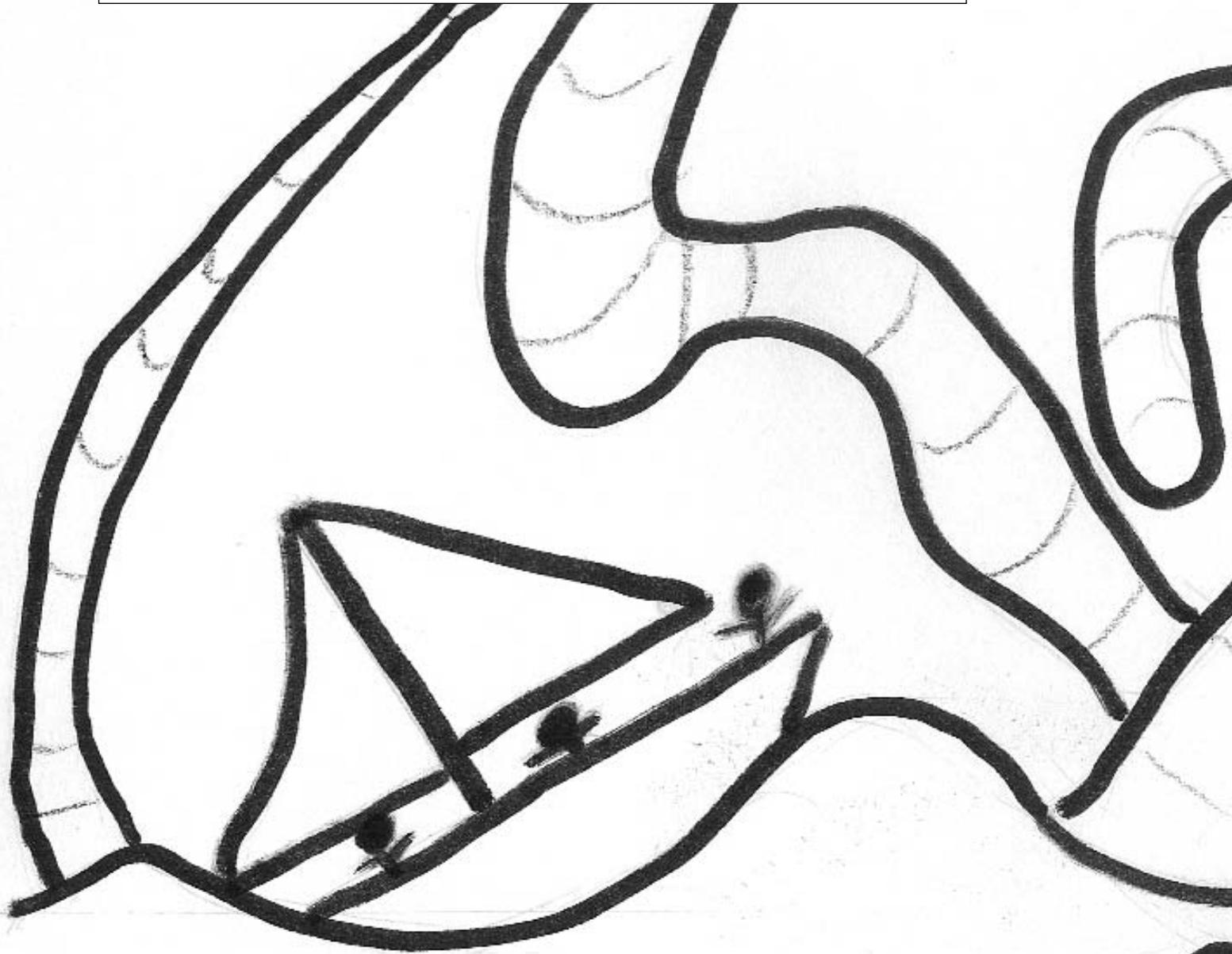


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Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #11
Holiday Special 2006 £3.99

**HIS NERVES EXTRUDED
– CONCLUDED!**



**MEET THE DENIZEN OF
THE DEEP BLOOD SEA!**

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 11

Holiday Special

2006

EDITORIAL

A New Look2

NEWS

Controversy as "Quarterly
Published Six Times a Year"2
Last Days on Earth?2
Artsfest 20062
Alec Abernathy's Meat Search2

THE SATURATION POINT SAGA: HIS NERVES EXTRUDED

Howard Phillips

Our Plans Are Up in the Air3
The Pit of a Pendulum8
Captives of the Mongoose-Men11
Deep Red Sea13
The Denizen16
The Blank Tower18
Love's Last Laugh21
The Extruded One22

The Weaponeers25
The Zuvanos Gambit26
Back to Sadness, Back to Music29

ROBOTS, IN A SPACESHIP

Saying Hello30
Walt Brunston

KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS TAKE CENTRE STAGE: A ONE-ACT PLAY

Stephen William Theaker

Scene One31
Scene Two33
Scene Three36
Scene Four39

THE QUARTERLY REVIEW

World on a Plate40
Black Holes and Revelations40
Jennie Rindon's Cosmic Machine . . .40

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Editorial

A New Look

For this issue, we decided to give the old quarterly another little makeover, as well as adding a few new bits and bobs. The goal of all the changes is to make it a bit easier to start reading, so the font is a little bigger than it was, and each page is a bit less text-heavy. None of the changes

are huge, and deliberately so, but the sum total of them should be palpable. Our *raison d'être* has not changed one bit, though – every issue will provide a great read from start to finish.

This one lives up to that and then some, with the rollicking conclusion of *His Nerves Extruded*, some of the most powerful writing ever seen in this publication! (Also inside: a silly play I wrote fourteen years ago.) – *SWT*

News

Controversy as “Quarterly Published Six Times a Year”

Silver Age Books have this month been responding to angry accusations that by publishing *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* six times a year they have betrayed its very title. The publisher did not wish to comment.

has been proposed by some, but then what – would we do anything but bring ourselves to the attention of the Fungi from Yuggoth as we pass by his home, known to us as Pluto? There is no easy answer, so just take a deep breath and hope dread Cthulhu slumbers a little while longer.

Last Days on Earth?

As all right-thinking people know, great Cthulhu could rise from his watery sleeping place at any time. When he does, we will die, incidentally and inevitably, as surely as if we were the first whale he chose to snack upon when waking. What should we be doing about it? Is there anything we can do? Naturally, travel into space

Artsfest 2006

In the midst of all this sad, bad news, we are happy to report that on September 9 and 10 Birmingham will once again be hosting its annual Artsfest. Last year's was great fun, so make plans to visit and hope for good weather.

Alec Abernathy's Meat Search

Alec Abernathy was apparently spotted today in Birmingham city centre – our informant tells us that he was “looking for sausages”.

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 stalks both day and night!

THE SATURATION POINT SAGA

HIS NERVES EXTRUDED

BY

HOWARD PHILLIPS

THE CONCLUSION

Our Plans Are Up in the Air

At first the forest had seemed quite nice and friendly, but it was not long before we began to feel eyes upon us. We knew to expect danger, of course, but we had thought there might at least be the slightest of chances to evade our upcoming enemies. Whether they were waiting for us all along, or whether we simply made so much noise that they could not help but hear us from the other side of the forest, I do not know.

They let us continue into the night. Perhaps they were not sure enough of their victory to make the attempt during the day, or perhaps it was just that they saw no reason in even risking a single casualty, but they let us ride on, deep into their territory.

Ultimately, we reached a point at which the cart could proceed no further, and so we decided

to make camp there for the night. In the morning we would go on without the cart, and take our chances on foot.

Or at least that was the plan!

They came in the dark.

Arelline was on watch, and did not get the chance to loose off a single blast before the gun was snatched from her hands. She screamed as long, strange fingers ran through her hair, again and again, till one hand took firm hold and dragged her off the cart.

She screamed and screamed off into the darkness, and I woke, screaming myself before I even reached consciousness. Johnny, too, leapt to his feet, looking here and there for someone to lay his hands on, but, before we even had a chance to do more than blink the sleep from our eyes, the fire we had built so carefully before taking to our makeshift beds was put out, and abruptly there was nothing to see.

From that point there was little reason for us to fight back. We could still hear Arelline's

screams, further and further in the distance by the passing second, and so we knew (a) that she still lived and (b) that our only chance of ever finding her was to be captured ourselves.

Instead of wasting time in idle battle, I hid a knife away in my trousers, and pulled my bags over my shoulders. I nudged Johnny and got him to do the same with his bags. Then we both stepped off the cart, and stood there in the dark with our hands up high.

Those were terrifying minutes for me. All around we could hear the wild whooping of our attackers, the noises made by their swinging from tree to tree, the banging of their weapons against tree trunks to intimidate us. I hoped thoroughly that I had not made the worst mistake of my life, or at least that I would get the opportunity to make more foolish ones in the future, if I had not done so in the past.

I have always been mortally afraid of the dark. I hide that fear well – even clasp it to my chest for the sake of my art! – but it has been a curse all my life. During my twenties it became a greater problem than I had ever previously foreseen. In retrospect, I trace it back to when I was a teenager, and I tried LSD for the very first time. It had been at a music festival. A single tab had been enough to make me utterly fearful for my life, every policeman I saw a judgment day angel ready to rend my soul for its evil, every car that passed by, sending its beam into the mist, an emissary from the other side there to pick me up, every festival-goer we met either a threat beyond words or a soulmate torn away from me by life and fate. The next day had been no better, watching the veins in a friend's eyeballs swell and pop as we rode the coach home, time after time, till I was forced to wake him up just to make it stop.

Ever since that day my nights have been filled with phantasms, ghouls, babies cackling upon the top of my wardrobe, elderly women offering kisses, telephones and other everyday objects floating across the room, and so on. It made every night an opportunity for shrieking terror to strike at me, and though in some ways I was grateful, in that it provided constant sustenance for my horror writing, and, just as usefully,

allowed me to see for myself what more simple-minded individuals would consider to be indisputable evidence of the existence of the supernatural, but in other ways I was not, in that I never lay down to sleep with the eagerness I see in others. Far from it: I rage against the dying of the light every single day, and struggle to find excuses to stay awake. A part of me knows that eight hours' sound sleep is probably the best recipe for happiness that exists, but that part of me that knows fear will eke out every bit of wakefulness, and has to be dragged kicking and screaming to the pillow.

I was very frightened.

I had not got a good look at our attackers, so my imagination went insane with mad conjecture – they were giants, they were zombies, they were titanic parrots! How did I know they were swinging through the trees? It could have been any kind of movement that made that noise! What would they do with us once captured? Eat me, marry Arelline, and make Johnny their slave?

As you can see, I was on the verge of hysteria, which makes it all the more admirable that I stood my ground and waited for them to come.

After those few minutes of stark terror I felt a hand, long, thin and dry, drag across the top of my fingertips, barely enough to be registered as anything real, but enough to send me into internal paroxysms of fear. It was akin to the slight touch you might feel in your hair as you ride a ghost train. At a fairground the touch would simply have come from a piece of dangling cotton, but that was not what I felt in that forest of Envia.

Twenty seconds later there came another touch, firmer this time, then another – a slap on the hand, this time, almost a high five. Then one bold enemy let his palm strike fully against the side of my head as he swung by, and upon falling to the ground I was buried beneath a horde of the creatures. I made no effort to fight back, but let myself go limp, against every one of my body's frantic urgings, and took their blows. Eventually it was over – they had tied my hands and feet, and slid a pole between them. As the journey through the woods recommenced, one of them

noticed I was still somehow awake, and threw punches at my head till I knew no more.



I awoke to a purple sky. I blinked. Where were the trees?

Then I looked down.

I was suspended high in the air, between two of the tallest trees in sight. My hands were tied behind my back, and then constrained, like the rest of me, by a tough leathery harness that bound me to a thick steel hawser that spanned the distance between those trees.

I threw up, and tried not to watch how the far the vomit had to fall.

I closed my eyes, but that just made me notice the swaying of the trees, and my stomach churned more awfully than it had done with my eyes open. I had to be brave, so I opened my eyes, and tried to get some bearings. The situation was poor, but I was still alive, so it had its redeeming features.

The forest stretched in every direction beneath my feet, with the trees between which I hung being about ten or twenty metres taller than their nearest rivals, and being about forty metres away from me on either side. I suspected that the beings who had captured us had not engineered this position just for my benefit – it might make sense for them, if they generally travelled through the trees, to have a quick way through where possible – this might be a sort of bypass or motorway for them, by which they could avoid unnecessary encounters with the lesser beasts of the forest.

Looking around, I saw several other steel cables like mine, a network of them running over the lid of the forest, and there, just at the very edge of my range of vision (thank goodness my spectacles had survived the night's violence), I made out first Arelline, to the south, and then Johnny, to the west, similarly suspended.

This was a pretty pickle!

I tried calling out to my friends, but the distance was too great, and whether they heard me or not, the only response I got was a flight of

startled birds leaping up from the canopy, crying their eyes out at the unexpected sound of my voice.

I took a series of deep breaths, and considered my options. I was bound too tightly to really consider making an escape, and it was obvious I could not rely on my friends for any assistance. The likelihood of any rescue from Earth was so feebly distant that I would be as well waiting for Father Christmas to help out. I could expect no assistance from Princess Mallda. I had made an impression on her, of that I was certain, but she would have nothing to gain from setting me free. If I could not defeat these forest people on my own, it would only convince her that I was not worth her attentions after all.

And so, I did what any poet in a similar situation would do.

“This is the tale of Julius Caesar,” I began in my normal speaking voice, before moving on to a recital of a hurriedly improvised poem. Perhaps it would be a wasted effort, but if I could manage to get the tree-folk, or at least their leader, who would be most likely to understand English, to hear me, there might be a chance for us yet. My history might well have been shaky, but that did not matter – the only purpose of the poem was to make a point, and if the history (even if I had known it) had not fit my point, I would have thrown it away anyway.

*“Julius Caesar, champion of Rome
Yearned to sit on the royal throne
In battle in Gaul
He gave his all
Then in victory homed.*

*Pompey saw what was coming next
He was highly extremely vexed
He tried to muster
‘Gainst Senator Bluster
All served just to perplex.”*

They started then to come. I heard them in the branches below me, rustling their way within earshot. None could yet be seen, but the whispering and chattering left me in no doubt as to my audience.

“Without opposition, Caesar would rule

*All others who hoped for power fools
He'd rule for ever
Their chance would ever
Be no warmer than cool.*

*At the moment the Senate could fight
They could counter Caesar's might
Yet who listened? No one!
They were all fun
Till the middle of night.*

*Then Caesar's men upon them fell
Cementing power, their death knell
He was winning
Just beginning
To rebellion quell."*

The whispering now turned to muttering, the occasional whoop and shout rising from beneath the canopy. Either my poetry was really unpopular (unbelievable!), or I was getting through to them. I would not have expected them to understand English, other than their leader, but who knew how close this race might be to the Emperor? They might all have undergone language training, in preparation to be special shock troops in the attack on Earth. But if this dread Zuvanos would set them upon me, it was only fair to return the favour. Even if I died, perhaps my words would give them pause. Perhaps that pause would last long enough for them to think. And if they thought long enough perhaps they would think about fighting. If I could start a civil war among the people of Envia, might they wear themselves out before setting off for Earth? So even in the face of almost certain death, I still held out a tiny hope that my actions might do some good. I had no family back on Earth to speak of – though I had friends – the team at Silver Age Books, the members of my former band, The Sound of Howard Phillips, and, waiting for me back in a hotel room, the single member so far of my next band, Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point. That's not to mention my surviving palanquinettes, assuming they had been able to return home in safety. But even if I had not had those friends to care about, I would still have saved Earth, because that is the planet that held my art

– my music, my books (unpublished and unfinished though they were, someone of a later generation might well care to complete and publish them), my poetry – in short, the very essence of who I am.

I went on with my poem.

*"Caesar with his enemies was cruel
With his friends was crueller still
He laid them out
Without a shout
And sent their families the bill.*

*His glorious victory guaranteed him
The people's love through thick and thin
He was evil
A lying weasel
His allies of past now seemed dim."*

I stopped to breath, and to try to think of an interesting next verse. There was a danger of repeating myself, but that was not terribly important. The object of the poem was to get my point across, and if that meant saying the same thing in one hundred different ways till our captors caught my meaning, then that was what I would have to do.

Relax, though, reader – I am not going to make you read every verse! I think you have probably read enough to get a taste of the moment, and that is all that is needed. If I wrote down the rest, I would only be further embarrassed by tenuous rhyme, awkward scan and tedious repetition.

But dull as it might be for you, it seemed, slowly but surely, to be affecting our captors. I poised for the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon. Above the canopy the sun was twice as hot – under the leaves it had been humid and muggy, but our skin had not burned with anything except the bites of a thousand ticks. Here, strung up like a vilified trapeze artist, I baked like a potato in a microwave – or like plastic in a fire – I melted and singed all at once. My voice almost gave out more than once, but I kept going through the pain. I had to do it, for Earth, for Arelline, and most of all for myself. How often had I been told – at school by my teachers, at home by my parents, and in later life

by my publisher, that poetry would never amount to anything, that it was a waste of all effort expended in its pursuit? A thousand times and more besides. But I had continued to dream, and continued to write, and those struggles now added to my stamina, to my determination, to my godforsaken lack of any other options, to keep me going when a lesser man might have stopped, or died, or turned to empty threats and ineffective raving instead.

In the midafternoon I heard sounds of conflict below – shouts of anger, squeals, clashes of weapons, and finally the sound of a body falling through the branches to hit the ground with a thud. A few seconds later came a great guttural cheer, and for a minute I paused, hopeful that some young upstart had paid heed to my words, and had fought successfully to take the crown. But no other sounds followed, and so I resumed my marathon. If some upstart had paid heed, it had clearly resulted in no change in the situation. I went on, then, with new stanzas, hoping against hope that the challenge had come from a hardliner, from one faithful to the Emperor – perhaps a spy or an agitator, I reassured myself – one who had not wished his people to go on listening to my seditious words.

More words fell from my lips to the ears of those below, and I hoped against hope they would have some effect. For the rest of the afternoon I ploughed on, hardly able to breathe, my throat rasping with dryness, my lungs scraping against my ribs with every breath, my arms and legs utterly numb. I had to close my eyes to keep the sun out, but it seemed to shine brighter with every second, as it fell from its noon-day height right into my field of vision. Who could have imagined a purple sun could hurt so much? You would imagine it gentle, forever lulling, creating a permanent bedtime atmosphere, but up there that was not how it was. Perhaps that colour was only its disguise, in any case – it was a wolf in sheep's clothing – because it seemed likely that something in the planet's atmosphere caused the strangeness of the daylight, rather than the sun itself.

If it was a yellow sun, it had found its way to me, and seemed to regard me with in a particu-

larly baleful way, as if I had tried to escape the attentions of its far-off brother, and it was paying me back for my cheek in running away. If he had known I were from England, where a hot sun is an infrequent sight, would he have gone gentler on me? I did not know, and scrunched my eyes up against its attack, continuing with my poem all along, each word dragging my chapped lips apart in a hundred places. At the end of each verse I licked my lips, desperately drinking the blood back in before it could evaporate in the heat.

When evening came, it was a blessed relief in a hundred ways, but I could not rest. More words, more words. I dragged them out. From time to time now I struggled for anything even resembling a rhyme, but I carried on regardless. They had to hear my words! They had to! At the back of my mind was the thought that I was effectively painting Julius Caesar as one of the worst despots to ever walk the Earth, as opposed to my personal view of him as a highly remarkable figure, worthy of study for his good qualities rather than his bad, but it did not matter. The forest people beneath my feet, whoever and whatever they were, would not be voting in any historical popularity challenges! I just had to get them to think about Emperor Zuvanos, and his likely behaviour once his rule was absolute.

Eventually night fell, and I could speak no more. Any attempt to open my mouth brought fits of coughing, and racking pain. My throat spasmed, and my eyes fought to water, but could not find the fluid.

When I fell silent, they came for me. They emerged from the canopy, one by one, creeping over the leaves to reach the trunk of the tree to which the hawser was bound.

I strained to see them, and this time, the light of the moon picked out the horrible form of the one that led the way, as it slid down the cable to me. Three quarters the height of a human, its arms were twice the length of mine, but half as thick. A simple jerkin covered its body, though it struggled to contain the bristling hair that covered the creature, from the squat square head to its long prehensile feet. Only its face was spared from hirsuteness, though upon seeing it I

begged for mercy and wished the fur could have spread that much further. A horrid twisted nose displayed a nostril immediately beneath each eye, while the mouth let loll a foot-long tongue, one that was visibly rough like that of a cat. Its eyes were as wide as its head, stretching from the sides, elongated and fierce, meeting in the middle, barely a centimetre between them. It smiled as it saw me looking at it, and let out a yell.

“Howard Phillips, I have you!”

It was like no speech I had heard before or since, scratching against my ears like the passionate mewlings of a cat. This, I surmised, was the Tree-Whelp, in the seconds before it reached me and began to strike me about the head.

No harness held it aloft, but it seemed careless of the drop, holding to the cable first with a hand, then with a foot, then with its tongue, apparently so that each and every part of its body could hit me in turn. There was nothing I could do in response. Even if I could have escaped from the harness, my knife would have fallen from my numbed fingers just as quickly as I would have fallen myself. I had to take it. My efforts at poetry had done nothing but annoy it, or at the very best entertain it – in its repeated blows I could see no sign that it had been persuaded to help me.

At last, I fell unconscious, for the second time in twenty-four hours, and I wondered if I would ever get the chance to worry about whether these attacks might cause any long-lasting brain damage.



I awoke to daylight, finding myself out in the open, the trees to my back. Arelline and Johnny had made a fire, were boiling some water for tea, and were skinning some small creature, preparatory to roasting it.

I tried to sit up, but succeeded only in groaning. It was enough to bring Arelline to my side, where she plastered my face in kisses. (I thought I saw a twinge of annoyance in Johnny's face at that, but I imagine I would have been

jealous of such kisses too, had he been on the receiving end of them. She had wonderfully soft, warm lips; tiny hot pillows that she pressed against my burnt, cracked skin.)

“I don't know what you did, Howard, but they must have liked it. They took us down yesterday afternoon, brought us here, and told us to wait for you. Last night they dropped you off, brought the cart, and wished us good luck!”

She squeezed a rag over my mouth, wetting my lips just enough to allow me to essay a few croaky words.

“That, Arelline, is the power of poetry.” She frowned, and then smiled. “You can carry on kissing me, if you like, but I am going back to sleep now. Wake me up when dinner is ready. I am very, very hungry.”

The Pit of a Pendulum

After we had made our way through the mountains, we took a little while to repair the cart, rest the horse-things, and regain our own energy ahead of the ride across the desert-fringe. Our intention was not to head into the desert proper – there was no need for that. We would head north-east, skirting the hottest part of the desert, staying within reach of the streams that came down the mountainsides, only to boil when they hit the sand. My guess was that a day or two's riding would bring us to the cliffs from which we would be able to see the Deep Sea of Blood. From there it would just be a matter of following the coast to the southeast, where eventually we would reach the cleft in the cliffs where the port of Orktaido had been established.

“I am getting a bit tired,” said Arelline, sitting in the back of the cart, looking around at the forbidding desert on one side, and the imposing mountains on the other. “This has been a long and hard adventure.”

“Too true,” I replied from the shotgun seat, turning to face her. “And as yet it has not

produced a musician for my band. Perhaps fate is not on my side this time – or perhaps I have been diverted, sent on a more urgent side-quest. I don't know."

Johnny was at the reins, and he kept his eye on the ground before us. There was no trail, but at this halfway point between the heights and the dunes the ground was fairly flat and steady.

"Fate!" he laughed, without looking at us. "Surely you don't mean any of that, Howard? It's all a load of poetic nonsense."

I shrugged. "It probably is, Johnny. It probably is. I had a vision – or two, really. One came in a dream. I played in a band, the like of which the world had never seen before. It inspired me to make the Fear Man album."

"I think everyone knows that story by now, Howard!" said Arelline. "It's been told in every newspaper, on every tv pop show, and I think they even did a comic of it at one point."

"Very few people know about the second vision. After I recorded my musical interpretation of Stephen William Theaker's novel *The Fear Man*, I despaired. I had no idea how to achieve my dreams – the album I had made did not even come close. So I let the band make what they could of the ideas, music and sounds I had given them, and went to Stratford-upon-Avon with a copy of *The Guardian* and a tab of LSD, and brought about my second vision."

Arelline was intrigued. "And what did you see that time?"

I laughed – it still hurt a little. I was almost fully recovered from my ordeal at the hands of the Tree-Whelp and his people, but it would have been a few days more before I would have been fully up to strength again. What a shame that I did not get those days before danger struck once more!

"I don't actually know! That is the strangest part. But whatever I saw, it took me off to the Himalayas, where I found my drummer, and then it ended up bringing me here."

"It's always something with you, Howard," said Johnny, turning to give me a quick smile. "You couldn't have put an advert in the NME, like anyone else?"

I shook my head vigorously. "No. It is all

probably a fool's dream. Like you say, it isn't really fate – that is just the poet in me speaking. It is my subconscious, silently ploughing its way through all the information my conscious mind gathers, cataloguing, researching, noting, correlating. I think the LSD simply forced it to bring its work to the table, even if it was half-finished. I might have waited an entire lifetime to be sure of what I needed to do, and I could not take that chance. When I met the drummer on the ghastly mountain I knew that I was on the right track."

"And now he's waiting for you, in a hotel?" said Arelline, quizzically.

"Yes," I replied, with a half-smile and another shrug. "I couldn't think what else to do with him. He's got room service and a very well-stocked credit card. He had not had a very pampered life on the ghastly mountain, so he is probably happy for any comfort he can get now. I bought him complete season box sets of a dozen of the best tv programmes of all time, so there's plenty to keep him going."

"And you think he'll wait? We've been here quite a while."

"He'll wait. He owes me, and he knows what I am trying to do. He'll wait."

I handed her the gun and we swapped places, so I could lie down for a nap in the cart. I was asleep in seconds.



I woke to chaos – we were falling! The cart smashed against the walls of something – the sky grew small, a tiny box high above us – Arelline screamed, the horse-things fell silent, and Johnny shouted for his camera. As the cart crumpled beneath me, but we stopped falling, I forced my aching body up, and grabbed Arelline, both to support her and myself.

"What's happening?" she cried.

There was no way of knowing – all was dark, except for that patch of violet sky, apparently so high above. Then I reconsidered – it was not a cloudy day, so there was no way of gauging scale – it could have been a tiny patch of sky, and we had not fallen far, or it could have been a large patch, and we were deep deep down.

Then I had not even that to go on – darkness drew across our solitary source of light, and Arelline and I clung to each other in the darkness, something that in other circumstances I might have relished. As her chest pressed against mine, I felt her heart thumping rapidly, but strongly. I imagined that she would be a passionate, gentle lover, who would know just the right moment to quickly bite her partner on the shoulder.

“Howard, what’s going on?” she yelled.

I realised I had not answered her the first time – I had imagined it to be a rhetorical question, since she had all the information at my disposal, but perhaps she really did look to me as a leader. Perhaps, even though she knew I could not have known what was happening, she wanted to stress that it was my duty to find out!

“I don’t know, Arelline. It seems to be some kind of trap. We have already got past the Tree-Whelp, but the map Princess Mallda gave me bore the names of two other lieutenants of the terrible Imperator Zuvanos that we would be likely to encounter before we reached the Blank Tower – the Master of Mongoose, whose name was hand-written across the desert, and the Denizen of the Deep Blood Sea, and you can probably guess where his or her name was written. Unless the Denizen has seriously gone off water, I think we can assume that we are in the hands of the Master of Mongoose.”

Johnny Quondam’s voice came from the darkness. “Just to let you know, I’ve got the camera, Howard, and strapped it to my back.”

“Good man,” I said. “It would be awful for you to go through all this and return to Earth with nothing but memories at the end of it.”

“There is one other possibility,” he suggested, with a touch of bitterness in his voice. “Someone else might have caught us. We might still have the Master of Mongoose to come.”

“There’s always that...”

My voice trailed off. What was happening now? The ground beneath our feet was beginning to move – instinctively we sat down, upon the wreck of our cart, to save ourselves from falling over.

“Everything... Everything’s moving!”

shouted Arelline, even as a gigantic creak began, one that threatened to rupture our eardrums at its peak.

“We’re falling again!” yelled Johnny, as our stomachs leapt up into our throats.

We felt the giddiness you would get in a quickly descending lift as gravity temporarily lost its direct hold upon us, our feet seeming to fall at a different rate to our heads – we could not keep up with ourselves. But then, as we screamed, the ground regained its weight, and began to push up against us – there was another mighty creak, and then again the giddiness of the drop.

“We are not falling,” I said with great seriousness. “We are swinging back and forth. We have fallen into a trap, but the trap is some kind of great underground swing, or pendulum. I have never heard of the like.”

Suddenly the lights came on – our pupils contracted with the haste of discovered lovers, and we pressed our hands to our faces to protect them.

Once my eyes had adjusted to the brightness, I moved my hands away, first to see if the horse-things had survived the fall – they seemed to be all right, breathing, but unconscious, with no obviously broken bones, and secondly to be astonished once more by this incredible planet. We were in a gargantuan cavern, at least a thousand metres wide and three hundred high, apparently hewn by men from the rock. We stood within a pit at the base of a huge and transparent pendulum, a hundred metres long, and a dozen thick, that swung from side to side across the width of the cavern. Our view of the cavern’s contents was perfect, doubtless as its creators intended. Beneath us ranged a huge army, men just like those we had fought on the ferry and at the outpost, thousands of them, guns unslung and pointed in our direction. Ships like the one we had arrived in were dotted all around, and field weapons of kinds only Jack Kirby could have imagined were being loaded into them.

“Howard Phillips!” came a shout. “Do you hear me? Speak to your captor!”

I looked around, baffled, then turned around, to see an observation point carved into the rock

at our backs. Standing there, two metres tall, but thin as a rake, was a wild-looking man-thing with long, thin teeth, a thick tail that reached down to the ground, and hairy ears that reached to the top of his head. His eyes were wide, his nostrils flared, and his mouth ready to snap a snake in two.

“Hello,” I called to him. “You, I take it, must be the Master of Mongoose. Do you have any particular reason for trapping us in a giant pendulum?”

“Yes!” he shouted back after a moment. There were maybe a dozen metres between us when we swung close by, but we had to time our utterances well to be heard. “Yes, Howard Phillips! You are in a giant pendulum! And that pendulum swings on a clock! A clock that measures the days left till the enslavement of every man, woman, and child of your measly planet!”

It was clear to the three of us that he was totally insane, but there was no way of arguing that he did not have the upper hand, for the time being at least.

Captives of the Mongoose-Men

“Shall we shoot, men? Ha, ha! Shall we shoot? Should we shoot them, men, should we shoot? Ha ha!”

When he was finally done, a thunderous response came back from the men in the cavern. “Yes! Let us shoot! Yes! Let us shoot!”

“No, men!” he rejoined. “We will not shoot! We will not shoot! Ha ha!”

“No, sir!” they shouted back. “We will not shoot! We will not shoot!”

“Oh, Howard, Howard,” he laughed, when we swung past him again. “What fun we can have here, the two of us, with all my friends!”

I felt like shaking a fist at the dastard, but restrained myself. Coolness would be my best friend in this situation. He would expect me to

bluster, and threaten, and cajole, but I would refuse to play those games.

“I would rather like a cup of tea, Mr Mongoose,” I said as sweetly as I could as we swung by in the other direction.”

Swing, swing.

“You would, eh? Well, I am nothing if not a gracious host. When the baktans come to feast on your rotting corpse I cannot have you telling them that I deprived an Englishman of his tea.” It took about six swings of the pendulum for him to get the whole of that lot out, and he clearly began to lose patience with his own trap. “Get them out of there at once,” he ordered the soldiers at his side. “If we are to be killers, let us be civilised killers, at least!”

The soldiers looked at each other behind his back, and then followed the instruction. The pendulum ceased swinging, and then began to lean backwards, so that the floor beneath our feet slowly shifted orientation to become a window into the Master’s observation point. At a click of his fingers, the bottom of the pendulum dropped away, and we were free to step out to meet our new captor, as long as we could manage to clamber over the ruins of our cart. I tried not to think about what would have happened if he had seen fit to click his fingers ten minutes sooner.

We climbed out, and as each of us acquired a pair of guards, six others began the work of digging the horse-things out from the wreckage of the cart. I tried not to think about the fate of the poor animals, and put from my mind what it must have cost the village to loan us two such fine and strong beasts, and looked to the Master of Mongoose.

“I believe you were going to offer us tea?” I raised an eyebrow. I do supercilious well, being not only English and a poet, but also a rock star. “Or are we too far out in the sticks for that kind of thing? Do you want to boil some nettles for us or something?”

Arelline elbowed me in the side. “Howard, don’t antagonise him!” she hissed. “Our lives are in his hands.”

“Oh, they are indeed, sweet Arelline,” said the Master of Mongoose. “Yes, I heard you – these

ears are not just for show – and, yes, I know your name. I have heard how you escaped from the Tree-Whelp – that fool pays for his incompetence as we speak, his forest being burned to the ground while his people scurry for their lives! Do not think I will make the same mistake. Whether you are nice to me, or nasty, makes not the slightest difference. It is both my pleasure, and my duty, to kill the three of you. Howard, Arelline, Johnny. Three brave Earthlings, come all this way to meet their deaths!”

“How do you know who I am?” asked Johnny. “I’m not sure my own mum knows who I am, half the time.”

“Ah yes,” said the Master. “The drinking? You were making a slight reference to it that you did not think anyone else would understand, were you not? But you fail to realise that your absence from your home world has been noted. The return of Howard’s little harem did not go unnoticed, and every newspaper on your silly little planet has reported as much as they can deduce of your adventure on this world. Every television programme you can imagine has run in-depth features on your lives, your hopes, your dreams. Your families – well, not Howard’s, but Arelline’s and Johnny’s – have been doorstepped, profiled, feted, vilified, and generally made to feel like they are the parents and siblings of the most important people ever to have been born! We know everything about you.”

“Then you know you will never win,” said Arelline. “You can never beat our spirit. Where we fall another hundred will come to take our place! They know about you now!”

He laughed, a high wittering laugh that curdled the contents of my stomach. “Oh my dear Arelline, don’t you know that I have already won? Foolish girl. You might look pretty to those men of Earth, but don’t you know that it counts for nothing on Envia? Beauty on this world is but an invitation to violence – the entire planet revolts against it. Were you to stay here long, that pretty face of yours would soon be so revoltingly scarred that you would never, ever gain a new fiance.”

“A new fiance? I don’t need a new one, I have one already.”

“You did, my dear, you did. But no longer. Hmm. What happened, let me remember? Ah yes, he appeared in the newspapers, and told your story, and then within the week was seen out on the town with some young lady famous for revealing her bottom in FHM. Is that what you wanted to hear? Hmm? I didn’t want to say anything, but you pushed me into it. You see, I am winning already! Your own world, your own loves, your very lives, are turning against you! You have fought for them, they care naught for you! Delicious irony! Ha ha! And you will have no tea. There is no tea on this planet! As if we would import that disgusting beverage! We will quarantine your world to prevent its escape into the rest of the universe!”

“What a buffoon,” I said to Johnny.

The Mongoose-Master snarled, his urbane veneer disappearing utterly. His eyes narrowed, and I could see his claws quivering as he struggled not to give in to his feral urges. “You push me too far, Howard Phillips. I have no reason to let you live a second longer, other than out of politeness.”

“And I have no reason to be polite, as you so well demonstrated to Earth’s most fragrant flower but a moment ago. I pity you, Master of Mongoose. I see you here, surrounded by the men of the Emperor, powerless to prevent them from overrunning your home like the snakes that they are, powerless, in fact, to do anything but snarl, and sneer, threaten, and irritate. I have not seen a single mongoose-man other than you since you turned the lights on! It would not surprise me,” I continued, adding fuel to the fire, “if this talk of killing us were nothing but a bluff, and that you are actually under orders to hand us over to the Emperor, like the good little lackey that you are.”

That broke him, and he sprang at me. Luckily for my throat, he startled my guards as much as me, and I was able to reach down to grab my wooden knife from where it was concealed within my trousers. Bringing it up to defend myself, it somehow found its way to the Master of Mongoose’s neck, and he fell to the ground,

bleeding from a wound that gaped from ear to ear.

“Now you will die,” I said, as his body hit the ground, “like the highly unpleasant creature that you are. You should not have forgotten the first Theaker rule – if you offer a cup of tea you have to make it – or pay the price.” I turned to my friends. “Arelline and Johnny, you should probably remember that. I should hate to have to exact a similar vengeance upon one of you.”

They both smiled, though rather nervously, I thought. Surely they understood that I was joking. I recognised the wisdom of the rule, of course – it was the very first line on the code of conduct at Silver Age Books, my sometime employer, sometime publisher – but one could not kill everyone who failed to appreciate its importance.

I turned to my guards. “Well,” I said, tucking my knife back into my trousers and holding up my hands, “this leaves us in a slightly awkward situation. If I stick around, you are going to have to explain to your boss how I managed to kill one of his most deadly lieutenants while I was in your custody. That could be a bit embarrassing.” I looked around at the other half dozen soldiers in the room. “I do hope that one of you speaks some English. I doubt the Emperor would have left the Master of Mongoose to have a little private chat with us.”

One of them stepped forward. “My name is Sangstor. I speak this revolting language that makes my mouth feel as if it is full of worms and maggots. What is your point? Why shouldn’t I just kill you now?”

I stepped towards him. “Good question, Sangstor, but one I think I can answer. You and I both know that the Emperor will not be too bothered about the Master of Mongoose having come to a sticky end. But for the sake of appearances, he is going to have to make an example of you all. If he does not, his other lieutenants will see the writing on the wall well before it is time for them to start reading.”

“I cannot disagree.”

“Well, then, how about this? The silly old Master of Mongoose decided he would have a civilised little dinner with the three of us.

Perhaps he wanted to find out more about Earth, to strengthen his hand against the Emperor. Perhaps he just wanted to play at being the gentleman, regardless of his duty to eliminate us upon sight. And he kicked you all out of the room, not least because he suspected at least one of you of being the Emperor’s man.”

“And then you killed him and escaped, and had reached the desert before anyone knew.” He gave it some thought.

“It’s a win-win situation,” I said. “Good for you, good for us. We go on to meet and maybe beat the Denizen of the Deep Red Sea, and you have a good excuse for taking permanent control of the seditious Mongoose-men.”

He nodded. “It all happened as you say.”

He quietly had us put into a flitter. We were dropped off within walking distance of Orktaido.

Deep Red Sea

We approached Orktaido from the north-west, creeping up to get a good look at it before it got a good look at us. There was no town wall, so far as we could see, which was probably a blessing for us. Being of entirely different colours to any of the people of Envia, we would have had great difficulty in disguising ourselves and passing through any guarded gates. Still, the town was packed tightly together, and we were in no doubt that we would have to wait till nightfall before approaching any further, if we hoped to slip in unseen.

We lit no fire, of course, but it was not very cold, except for the occasional salty breeze that blew in from the sea. We sat, and chatted, but kept our voices low. The wind was against us, but there was always the chance it might turn and carry our voices over to the port. It was unlikely in the extreme that if it did we would even be heard, but I could not think of a worse scenario than being discovered skulking out here on the clifftop by a gang of drunken sailors.

“Well done,” said Arelline. “I can’t believe

how well you did back there with the Master of Mongoose. Are you a trained fighter or something? I didn't know."

I smiled. "We poets are by life forced to be a hardy breed, but I have to confess that luck played a huge part in our victory back there. My knife was out very quickly, that much is down to my small allocation of skill, but I only barely had enough time to stick in out in front of me. It met his neck, and he was gone."

Johnny decided to take a nap. It would probably be an hour or two before the darkness would be complete enough to cover our approach, so I nodded my approval.

"Are you sure you don't want to sleep, too?" I asked Arelline. I fervently hoped she would not. I had real need of female company, having killed a man (or something very like a man) that day. Still, it would make good sense for her to get some rest. We did not know what awaited us in the town.

"Nah, it's okay. If we get onboard a ship, we'll just be curled up in a crate or something, won't we? I can get some sleep then."

"It's lucky you don't snore. That might have put a spanner in the wheels of your plan."

She wrinkled her nose. "So I take it you won't be sleeping on the boat, then?"

"I don't see why not – I do not snore."

"Sorry, Howard, but you do, at least sometimes. It used to make the palanquin rattle sometimes as we carried you around."

I struggled not to answer in anger, and thought for a moment. "Well, better to be safe than sorry – I will take a nap after all. Wake me when it is dark."

As I closed my eyes, I saw her smile. Perhaps I did snore, perhaps she just needed some time to herself, but the rest would not do me any harm. My reflexes had been good back at the cavern of the mongoose-men – if I were to need their assistance again in the near future I would not want them dulled by tiredness. Talking to Arelline was nice, I told myself, but despite the odd kiss I had received in sympathy or excitement, I did not really feel I was making a great deal of progress with her.

The Princess of Envia, though, Mallda herself

– now there was a woman who seemed to relish the old Howard Phillips charm! As fiery as the sun, and as fierce as a tiger! I had felt her heart beating even as our shoulders touched! Should she wish to visit me again once her father had fallen victim to my hand, I would make her most welcome – after checking her person – very, very carefully, thoroughly and tenderly – for any concealed weapons, of course. Sometimes a man just gets to the point where he wants to be kissed, and maybe the personality of the woman does not matter that much, as long as her face does not revolt in close-up, and that personality, whatever it may be like, will tend to lead to more kisses. I knew that Princess Mallda was trouble of the worst kind – the daughter of a would-be interplanetary dictator could hardly be anything else! – but still I pondered on her as I drifted off to sleep.

I had an awful dream that evening. A man came to me in the sky – I flew there, I was a star – Orion, I think. He came to me, and told me that I had to shine brighter. I told him I was doing my best. What did he expect? If I shone any brighter I would risk exhausting my fuel too quickly, and possibly start the long but inexorable process towards supernova. He said that he did not care, and that he expected to see a significant improvement in the level of my brightness over the next few nights, or there would be hell to pay. Then I got home, but I had left the key in the door on the way out. I had been out for centuries, my time taken up by the business of being a star! Anyone could have been in and out of the house, taking whatever they liked. I stepped in through the door cautiously, looking here and there, desperately hoping to see no signs of any change. There – that waterproof Muji coat in a bag – had that been on the floor when I left? I did not think so, but I could not be sure. I continued on into the corridor, then dashed into my home office and studio – nothing was gone, thank goodness. Then the living room – my television was there, and everything else. It seemed nobody had noticed the key in the door.

Then I heard a footstep. Somebody was upstairs...

I awoke, ready to scream, but clamping a hand

over my mouth even as I sat bolt upright, my conscious mind letting my subconscious know who was in charge.

By then it was dark, and Arelline had been preparing to wake me. Though subjectively the dream had seemed to last for centuries, I was unsurprised to learn that only two hours had passed while I slept.

It was time for us to make our move.

We stealthily walked towards the town, running whenever the clouds covered the moons for a moment, but more usually tiptoeing along, crouched in a way that made our bags seem to triple in weight. At last we reached the outermost building, and flattened ourselves against the stone-built wall, waiting for any sign that our presence had been detected. There was no such sign, and so, emboldened, we continued on our way.

Luck seemed to be on our side – there was some kind of party going on at the far end of town – only a few minutes from the edge we could hear the shouts and music of people enjoying themselves, having drunk too much alcohol. The town was not precisely deserted, and the Emperor’s men crossed our path more than once, though we escaped their detection by sticking to the shadows, but it was much quieter (in this area) than I had dared hope. For it to draw everyone else away from their homes, the party must have been some real event, perhaps a local tradition, a gala, or a daughter or son of the mayor getting married. Whatever it was, it served our purposes precisely. My main concern was that the guards were probably out in force to keep an eye out for burglars and the like while people had left their homes to join the celebration, and hiding away as we were we would be bound to attract intense suspicion if noticed. But luck went our way, and we made it to the docks in one piece. Six small to medium boats floated in the dark red waves.

“Which boat do you think we should go for?” I asked them.

Arelline shrugged. “Boats mean nothing to me. We should just pick one that has somewhere to hide.”

Johnny looked for a moment before

answering. “That one, guys.” He pointed to one of the smaller boats. It had two sails, and in different circumstances I might have said it was rather quaint. “Look – all the others have fishing nets on board. That means there’s a good chance they’ll be coming back here with the fish. If they were going to take it to the Blank Tower, they would be based on the other side of the channel – it would only make sense. If we stow away on any of those, we’ll ride out into the channel, hang around for a few days, and then end up back here, if we haven’t already been discovered and chucked into the ocean.”

“You make a good point,” I said. “And those few wasted days might be the difference between life and death for the people of Earth! Let’s take the boat you suggest, Johnny.”

We went down to the quay. One Imperial guard stood there, idly looking out to sea, and Arelline knocked him on the head with the butt of her gun. We bound and gagged him with his own uniform, and hid him away in the little hut that was provided for his shelter during bad weather.

“He will be found in the morning,” said Johnny, as we walked back to the boat we had chosen. “This changes everything.”

I shrugged. “I know. But if we killed him, what difference would it make? They would still know something was up. And I have no reason to want to make the people of this world fear me. I should be no monster to them, but a friend, cruelly treated by an obnoxious host. Anyway, stowing away in this boat isn’t an option. It’s too small, and there’s nowhere decent to hide.”

“I suppose we could hide until we were out on the water, then take the captain hostage, make him take us across the channel,” suggested Arelline, though I could tell her heart was not in it. I silently thanked her for her practicality, but berated myself for having forced it upon her.

“I’d rather not,” I replied.

Johnny had climbed into the boat, and was having a look at the rigging, the rudder control, and so on. “I’ve done a bit of sailing,” he said, turning back to look at us. “I think I might be able to get this rig going.”

“It’s going to be a day’s sailing, at least,” I

replied. "Do you think you'll be able to manage it?"

He tipped his head to the left. "The two of you are quick learners – I'll soon have you helping me out. We'll do our best. In the end, what other option do we have? None of the other boats are going where we want, we wouldn't be able to sail them on our own, and this is probably our best chance to get any kind of boat at all."

"I had hoped perhaps to find a sympathetic captain," I said, putting my hands in my pockets while I thought it over. "Someone who would help us out, for love of freedom, for hatred of tyranny..."

"I think we would be better with our fate in our own hands," said Arelline. "I would rather die out there on the sea, having made the attempt, than be caught here by guards in the morning."

"Yes," I agreed. "What a humiliating end to our counter-invasion of this world that would be! Discovered hiding like rats in the bowels of a fisherman's ship! Right then, all aboard, and let's cast off!"

So, by the light of the moons, we sailed out onto the Deep Blood Sea, our faces red in the blood-tinged light reflected in the water, but hard, with a determination that reflected what was in our hearts.

The Denizen

Once we were out of sight of the coast, Johnny called Arelline over to the wheel and talked her through its use.

"It isn't hard," he told her. "Just keep heading for that star" – he pointed to one which he must have identified when we were back on the cliffs – "and we will get there in the end."

With that in hand, he took to fine-tuning the rigging.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked, eager to learn a new skill.

He shook his head. "For the time being, we have a good stiff breeze going in more or less the

right direction, and there are few clouds in the sky. I don't think we are heading for any bad weather. So I want to get the rigging sorted while I can, and pass as much water beneath our bow as possible. Once that's all sorted, I want to sit down with you and teach you a few knots – enough to cover a few basic jobs you might be able to help with in a storm."

"No problem, captain," I replied. I understood the importance of a chain of command in a situation like this. One person had to be in charge – one person had to give the orders. If two people were following their heads when a crisis came up, they would only end up butting them. "If it's okay, I'll have a look in the cabin, see if there's anything to eat or drink, or any information."

"That's fine," he said.

I went below, for the purposes I had stated, but also to pursue one that had been unstated – I really could have done with going to the toilet. I was lucky in that regard, at least – there was a very pokey privy, and I crammed myself onto it, pulling a dirty curtain across to spare my blushes. From the draught that greeted my rear it seemed as if the toilet opened out directly to the ocean surface. I shuddered at the thought of some narwhal-like seacreature, a flying fish, or the river-squid's saltwater equivalent leaping up to surprise me in the act of befouling their home.

I have always found the toilet a good place to think – too much so at times. In a busy world, it is often the easiest place to establish some breathing space, and of course the polite interdiction on disturbing a toilet's occupant plays a part in that. I would often drift off into reverie while evacuating some part or another of my body, and would often forget where I was entirely. Some of the best poetry of my life has been written in such a situation. One wonders at times if Coleridge was not interrupted by the postman while composing his poem of Xanadu – perhaps he just ran out of toilet paper and had to make the unwelcome journey to the hallway, pants around his ankles, bottom all dirty, and the worry of being discovered in such a state – it might have been a postman upon whom he focused that fear, I will grant you that – plain put the rest of the poem out of his mind.

Due to speculative dangers of that kind, I always keep a moleskine notebook about my person. If the toilet paper runs out, I write my poem down and posterity breathes a sigh of relief. And if, for example, I have not in fact composed a poem that time, I have in my possession the toughest and smoothest paper known to man, and so no humiliating journey to the hallway is necessary.

My business complete, I pushed aside the curtain, and pumped some water into a bowl to wash my hands, looking around me all the while. Previously, the urgent business I had had with the lavatory had precluded much curiosity about my surroundings.

The cabin was very small – I suspected that not more than three men would have manned this boat at a time, with only one of them being below at any given hour. There was a minuscule bunk, nailed to the wall, that could be swung down if anyone was brave enough to trust their weight to it. The privy sat right next to the wash-bowl at the bow end of the cabin, with a small cracked mirror on the wall above them. Every spare spot of wall had a cupboard of some description screwed to it, and I worked my way through them methodically, looking for any of the three things Johnny might expect me to return with. Food and drink, unfortunately, were a bust. There was nothing but a pair of empty cupboards where the food should have been, and an empty space on the floor in one corner where a pale ring marked the absence of a water barrel. The fishermen must not have been planning to sail in the morning. Disappointing as that was with regard to our rations – we had some food and drink in our packs, enough without doubt to last us a day or two's crossing, but if we went off course we would be finished – it confirmed that we had made the right decision making off with the boat. If we had secreted ourselves on board as originally planned we would literally have been on a hiding to nothing.

I should stop the novel there – I will write no words more perfect in this lifetime!

There was no information to be found, either. It was not as if I had expected to see the Emperor's battle plans laid out in a fisherman's

cabin, but I had hoped at least to find a more detailed map of the channel and the coast on either side than the one we currently had. We knew to avoid the area north of Orktaido, for fear of getting caught up in the great north current, but as to the route between the port and the Blank Tower we were rather at a loss. If we headed north-east we would get there in time, but further information would have been more than useful.

At that point there began a mighty racket, as if Popeye and Bluto were fighting it out over Olive Oyl on the deck. I dashed out of the cabin to see what was happening – my eyes went wide, and I dropped to my knees.

I do not know what I had been expecting of the Denizen of the Deep Blood Sea, but it had not been this. Could Princess Mallda not have tipped me the wink? Why had she given me the names on the map but not the slightest bit of information as to their nature? I could only think it was that if she had, and we had taken appropriate precautions, the Emperor's lieutenants would have been suspicious of our foresight, and if, as had probably seemed quite likely to the Princess at the outset of my adventure, one of the lieutenants had been the one to survive our encounter, they would have demanded that the Emperor search out the source of our intelligence.

But this – this defied all reason!

Even if we had known, what could we have done?

From one horizon to the other a single being had risen to the surface. I might have said it was twenty kilometres wide, but for all I know it might have gone on another twenty kilometres beyond the horizon!

Was it octopus-like? I cannot say – at that scale you could have said it was a colossal sponge, and I would not have known the difference, save that it had a pair of eyes – huge eyes, outshining the moon, staring at our boat as if we were dewdrops beneath a microscope! And I have yet to mention the head – a mound a thousand metres wide, rising from the sea, dripping the blood red water, like a thing from nightmare – and not our, pitiful, weak human nightmares,

but the ones we had as tiny mammals, scurrying around the feet of the ferocious dinosaurs, where we slept knowing full well the chances of ever waking were infinitesimal. It had no visible mouth – perhaps like so many sea creatures the mouth was on its underside – but the mound shivered, wrinkled, and twisted like slow motion avalanches going in all the wrong directions.

Our boat was no longer in the water, but raised above it by some unguessable part of the Denizen's alien body. There was no action we could take – what effect could firing a laser or blaster at such a beast have? – no obvious way to communicate, no apparent hope of survival. If it chose death for us, a swiftly drawn knife would be meaningless. Arelline's beauty would be meaningless. Even my poetry – meaningless.

Then it spoke.

No, it did not speak.

My bones rattled, and in the rattling I could discern speech.

"Tiny things, you are on my ocean."

I ran to the edge of the port side of the boat, facing its eyes, and tried to shout words of my own in response, gesticulating wildly, but evidently to no effect.

"Do not try to speak, little things. I cannot hear you. If you had a sonic emitter, you could dip it into the ocean, and talk to me that way, in the way of the Emperor, but you do not, so you should be silent, so that you can hear me all the better."

I ceased my shouting, and rested my hands on the rail. I stared up at those colossal eyes, wondering what kind of life they had seen. How small I was in their regard – and yet, it had chosen to speak with us. This mighty lord of the ocean thought it worth its while to dilly-dally with us. The privilege weighed heavier than any burden Envia had yet placed upon me.

"The Emperor has asked me to kill such as you. That is my reason for living, he tells me. I have fulfilled this purpose for a long, long time, but I tire of it. I have come to believe that he actually owes much of his power to me – that by ensuring the safety, and isolation, when needed, of his little island I have done much to support that which I hate the most."

I began to weep, and not just because the vibrations with which he communicated were making my teeth mash my tongue into a bloody pulp.

"There is not long for us to speak. The Emperor hears all upon this planet, he knows all that happens. I believe he hoped you would kill the others, but that I would be your undoing. I will not be. Soon I will die – his trap for me is a good one – but not before telling you that which you need to know. He controls this planet through the extruded one. The extruded one – you must find him. From the depths of the sea, to the dark of the forest, the eyes and ears of the extruded one take word back to the Emperor. You must find him, and either free him or kill him. If not, the Emperor will continue to rule supreme, whatever threats face him, and your world will never be free from his evil imaginings."

There were so many questions I ached to ask. How had the denizen grown so large – had that been the work of Zuvanos? How was he prevented from escaping to the open sea? How would the Emperor kill him? How did he know so much about life beyond the ocean – did he speak with the extruded one – was the communication two-way? But there was no means, and there was no time.

"I can feel it," came the rattling again. "My death, or something very like it, comes for me. I will descend to await my doom in dark, cold comfort, but you must go on, Howard Phillips, and save two worlds!"

Our boat was slowly lowered back into the ocean, and the great creature allowed the water to wash over itself, falling to the bottom with such gentleness that not a single wave crashed over my rail.

The Blank Tower

We sailed sadly on our way, none of us eager to discuss the awe-inspiring sight to which we had just been witness. What had once been stark

terror now turned to regret, regret that we had not had more time to spend with the great denizen. What might he have told us? What insights could a creature of an entirely different biology have offered on the meaning of life? What a perspective it would have had on the lives of we tiny Earthlings! It might have written books, plays, music, songs, poetry – it might have been the poorest poetry ever written, but it would have been so utterly unlike *any* other poetry ever written that it would have been worth reading anyway.

As Johnny had promised, he taught me the basic seagoing knots, and I went on to learn the ropes. The rest of the sea voyage, though, was uneventful, especially in comparison with that I had recently taken on Earth! What a surprise that the channel of the Deep Blood Sea should be so much less dangerous than the English one.

We reached the coast of Zuvanos' island at about lunchtime of our second day upon the sea, so our trip had taken in total about 36 hours – assuming that the rotations of that planet were akin to those of Earth. We had been there for quite a while, and although I had spent a substantial part of that time unconscious we had adjusted quite well to the planet's rhythms. So it might have been 36 hours, or perhaps a little longer, or a little less, and I would not really have known.

All was dark, save for the occasional glint of moons-light on a rock or the leaves of a tree-like thing, but there were no cliffs marked on our map, so we did not worry about finding a place to berth the boat. We did not care if we ran it aground, so long as we could get out safely, preferably keeping our clothes and guns dry! I felt bad for the man whose livelihood we had stolen, but there were bigger fish to fry (I winced, thinking of one of the potential fates of our friendly behemoth). No, I could not hold that fisherman responsible for the misdeeds of his government, but I made myself feel better by considering that the dictator Zuvanos, his power cemented, would in all likelihood not have done much to make the fisherman's life easier. I was not exactly doing him a favour, but indirectly it would be to his ultimate benefit. A year or two

down the line, assuming he had not accidentally strayed into the domain protected by the denizen of the Deep Blood Sea, or the denizen's successor, and met his doom that way, he might have been recruited, or more likely forcibly drafted, into an invasion force destined for Earth. So he might have to go a little while without a fishing boat, but that was nothing in comparison to what might have befallen him if we had stayed in Orktaido to be captured.

We strapped on our bags and charged at the coast – the boat flew into the shale and out of the water with a spatter of gravel fit to pebbledash a dozen suburban domiciles. If we were lucky there would be no guards nearby to hear the racket we made. I held out little hope of that – Zuvanos had ordered the execution of the denizen, and so of course he would now know that the coast was unguarded. I hoped that we had enough luck left to arrange that the guards sent to patrol the coast in the denizen's absence would as yet not be fully organised. We might have found a gap in their defences, a place to sneak through. The next few minutes would tell.

We clambered out of the scuttled boat and began to work our way up the beach.

Then, a shout!

Then, a gunshot!

It flew over our heads and hit the boat, making it shine as yellow as the sun of Earth for a single brief moment which, I'm sorry to say, despite the situation, I relished. I missed home very, very much.

Another shot landed at my feet, and I threw up my hands. Orders came, in a language I could not understand, and I called back, as loudly as I dared (for fear of them thinking me difficult), "Hello, who's there? We're English, my friends. I cannot understand a word you are saying. Is there a commanding officer I could speak to, perhaps? One who speaks English?"

"Indeed, there is," came the answer. "Men, subdue these fools." Nothing happened, so he repeated his orders in the language of Envia, and a dozen men rushed us at once.

Johnny Quondam caught my eye, but I shook my head. We did not know our way to the Blank Tower, and these men did. Luck and poetry had

carried us this far, and I was willing to put my trust in them a little longer. If these men would only carry us to their master, we would find a way to do for him. So there was no point in fighting them – we had to take our licks – and they did not hesitate in giving us a few. I took more than one punch to the head – a tooth came loose and fell onto my tongue, but it felt like one of my three remaining milk teeth, so I just spat it out. Just in time, as a barrage of blows to my back and stomach soon knocked me unconscious, and choking on a milk tooth played no part in my plan. Johnny and Arelline fared no better, as I later found out, with each of them being battered once again into unconsciousness. Neither of them incurred any permanent damage to the face – that would have been a tragedy in Arelline's case, and a matter of some regret even with regard to the reasonably handsome Johnny Quondam – but Arelline would awake with a pair of broken fingers on her left hand, Johnny with – somehow – a single broken toe on each foot.

Unconsciousness took me without rancour, but when consciousness returned it seemed angry. Pain lashed at me from every extremity, making me afraid to open my eyes. Surely I was in some kind of torture machine? But no, when I forced my eyes open it was to find myself lying on a beautifully soft bed, bathed in soft red light, and being tortured only by my own bruises. I closed my eyes again, forced the pain down, and tried to sit up. My body shrieked in anger at this new assault, but I persisted, gritting my teeth to draw up extra strength. The clot of blood that covered the hole where my tooth had been came away, unleashing a new flood of metallic fluid into my mouth, and I looked around for somewhere to spit it all out.

I was in a small but tasteful room, prettily decorated, with tapestries on the walls and a huge animal-skin rug on the floor. I could not have said which animal it was – certainly it was none I had met on Envia so far – but I would not have liked to have fought it without a machine gun in my hand. Its teeth had been drawn, but I could have placed my head and shoulders comfortably within its maw. Did I say the room

was prettily decorated? Well, the animal had scarlet fur, so it was quite pleasant to look at! I dragged my attention away from the floor and pushed the blanket away to reveal my body. My torso was purple, and not just because the sunlight made everything that colour. I touched the flesh around my ribs, gingerly, probing for any breaks before I made any more movements, but the pain was too much, and I settled for simply tracing the outlines of my ribcage with fingertips. No obvious breaks presented themselves.

I got to my feet, ignoring the screaming of my every muscle, and staggered over to the window. It opened out onto a sheer drop, the shutters and window thrown wide open to give me plenty of air. Looking down, I could see we were high up in a featureless tower – entirely featureless, that is. I could see no windows, doors, decorations, arrow slits, bricks, wood – no features whatsoever. It was as if it wasn't there, even though you were looking at it. Your eyes turned away, as if repelled by a magnetic opposite.

I spat out the blood and clot, watching it sail down through the air. Eventually I lost sight of it, as my vision blurred beyond focus, and I realised my spectacles were missing. I could have coped with almost any calamity, but to find my glasses absent threw me into a panic. With a single action my enemies had rendered me impotent. If I could not see my foe's position, how could I strike him? If I could not see his expression, how could I know him? If I could not see his feet, how could I dodge him? I gulped down a cry of despair, and turned back to the room.

In one corner there was a handsome wardrobe, and I opened it in search of clothes. Mine were not there – it seemed unlikely I would ever see them again, which was a shame, as they had been very well made, and had served me well during this adventure. However, for the moment I stood naked, and so was glad of any clothes that I could find. The wardrobe did contain a tough-looking shirt and a pair of thick leather trousers, so I prepared to pull them on.

At that moment Princess Mallda walked into

the room, flanked by two toughs. She looked me up and down.

“Guards,” she ordered, “leave the room. I won’t be needing you here.”

I wasn’t sure how I should take that, right up until the point that her lips, and her hips, pressed against mine.

Love’s Last Laugh

It did not take a great deal of kissing to persuade my body to respond, and so despite the potential for great pain I allowed myself to be led back to the bed. She pushed me down, and I prepared to lie back and think of England, only to be disappointed when she remained upon her feet.

She admonished me with a wagging finger. “Howard, you should be in bed for another day at least. You took quite a beating on the beach.”

“True,” I said with a wink. “But I’m ready for another right now.”

“What has got into you?” she asked. “Last time we met you would not allow me to seduce you. Now you are being positively louche. And in your condition, too!”

I smiled. “Princess, the flesh is always willing. Sometimes the brain says no, but when I’m staring death in the face, the survival of the species takes over and I need to propagate.”

She spun on her heel, angry. “Is that all it is? Your body wants me, not your brain?”

I would have shrugged if I had not known just how painful it would have been. “It’s a key difference between men and women, I believe. When men grow ill, they want to have sex more – they still have a chance of getting the job done before dying. If a woman gets ill, she goes off sex – what’s the point? Trying to get with child is a waste of resources for an ill woman – she’s better off waiting a bit and gathering her strength.”

“What arrant nonsense,” she replied, turning to stare me in the eye. “You do not know if our species can even have intercourse, never mind have children together.”

“You tell that to Howard Jr. Practicalities aside, he is ready for action and is just waiting for you to disrobe.”

“Foolish Earthman,” she sighed, and let her gossamer dress fall to the ground.

We passed the next hour most pleasantly, but when it was over I hurt more than ever, and in a dozen new places.

“Happy?” she said, squeezed into what little space there was between me and the edge of the bed. It was a single bed pushed up against a wall, so if someone had tugged the bed away she would have dropped right into the gap. “Was that what you wanted?”

“I’m not going to pretend I’m proud of it.” I don’t know why I was being honest with her, the daughter of a dictator, sent here doubtless to confuse and beguile me, but I had no reason not to be. What information could I give them about Earth that they could not glean from Google? “But I enjoyed it very much. You are probably the most wonderful lover I have ever lain with, and despite my injuries I felt as if I were floating in heaven from about thirty seconds in till about three minutes after we finished. I am truly sorry if you only did it upon your father’s orders – you know I have scruples upon that account. But as I looked at your map every night, and studied the notes in your hand, I found myself thinking of you more and more.”

“You fell in love with my handwriting?” She rolled a finger around on my belly, letting it finally fall into the button. Normally that would have provoked a shriek of horror on my part – it is one of my most sensitive areas – but the touch of her finger was like a balm upon my body. My pain flew from her touch.

“Not exactly, but it made me think of you, and the way you smelt, and the way your clothes seemed to be hardly there, except that they were, the hardness of your smile, and the softness of your kiss, your black hair, and your scarlet skin. There was something about you that made my thoughts return to you, again and again. You are unique among the women I have met. All women are unique, of course, no two are alike, but you are more unique than all the rest.”

“Have there been many women, Howard

Phillips?" She placed her teeth around my earlobe, and prepared to bite down.

"Only as many as I needed. Having met you, I think I will need no more. I have found what I have been searching for."

She parted her teeth, and let her lips close upon my lobe instead. For a moment she held it there, and let her tongue dart over it, then she let go and sat up. Her body was magnificent – a perfection of the kind that reminded me of Gerry Sadowitz, who I had once heard talk about his experience with a prostitute. Her body had seemed so perfect to him, so impossibly beautiful, so beyond anything he had any right to be touching, that he had not known where to begin, and had had to ask her to take the lead. Princess Mallda was all that, and more. If my body had not been crying out for her attention, louder than any hesitatory shouts my brain might have made, I might well have found myself at a loss for action upon seeing her naked.

She looked towards the window and began to talk. "I suppose that now you want me to tell you about the extruded one, and where you can find him."

"Do you want to tell me?"

"It will mean certain death if my father finds out."

"So you *do* want to tell me."

"If I want to risk certain death." She tossed her raven hair over her shoulder and looked at me again. "Do you want me to risk certain death?"

I shook my head. "Of course not. Do you want me to kill your father?"

"You know I cannot answer. I do not want him killed. I do not want him to live. I want him to have never lived. I want to have never been born in this tower, to one of his annual brides. I want to be no Princess of Envia."

"Then I shall see what we can do. First, tell me of the extruded one. Where can I find him, and what is his nature?"

Maybe you think I am thoughtless, that I apparently gave no thought whatsoever to my missing friends, but that was not the case. If they were dead, knowing so for sure would only weaken my arm, potentially bringing on one of

my increasingly frequent and debilitating bouts of despair. If they lived, I would not be able to put their rescue ahead of my quest to gain the presence of the extruded one. I had to take him out of commission, in order to impede the Emperor's power over this world. If I could kill the extruded one, it might set preparations for the invasion of Earth back ten years or more, even if I should die after managing the assassination. I did not think they would be able to help me all that much, either – their beatings had been as bad as mine, and there was no point dragging them around the tower. They were best off wherever they were.

So I had to put my friends out of my head, and get on with the mission. That was about to take another pleasant turn.

"I will tell you everything you want to know, Howard," she said. "But first, you will attempt your propagation once again. It could be important – should you fail, our progeny could be the last free-born child of an Earthman the universe will ever see!"

I put my scruples to the side, and did my duty for Earth, England, and Howard Jr, that last being the most important of all.

The Extruded One

Taking my leave of the lovely Princess Mallda, I forced my agonised body down the corridor, hunting the staircase for which she had told me to look. The two guards that had accompanied her to my room had long since departed, but I was weaponless, so my safety was not assured. The colour of my skin would mark me out as a target to any soldiers I ran into, and to win out I would have to move quickly.

I had expected the interior of the tower to be murky and ill-lit, given how I had seen no other windows when looking out of my own, but I soon realised that I had been fooled by an illusion. If my glasses had not been missing perhaps I would have noticed the tiny discrepancies that reveal any deception to the careful eye, but the

blurriness of my vision had been complicit in the trick. Every room I passed had a window just like my own. Though of course most of the windows themselves were not flung open, the shutters on all of them were – a long job for some poor servant! – letting lots of light into the building. How could this be? I surmised that from this came the name, The Blank Tower – some strange alien technology must render it blank to all eyes, so that any attacker would not know where to aim, or from where a defender's blasts might fall. I could not at first imagine how it was done, but as I continued my search for the stairwell my mind turned the question idly over, and suggested to me that it might be accomplished with some kind of hot air blown over the outer wall, perhaps combined with a projection system of some kind.

I found the stairs, but there was a man coming up towards me – a soldier! His gun was holstered, and he was staring at his feet as he trudged up the flight, so I took the opportunity with both hands – or rather both feet! Thinking of Batroc the Leaper, I cried out, “You will die zees night!” He looked up, startled by my words, just in time to receive my feet in this face, as I let my full weight fall through the air upon him.

Knocked senseless by the blow, he crumpled, and I fell to the stairs. Normally, it would have bruised me terribly, but I had no virgin flesh left, so I hardly noticed the impact – it added nothing to the pain that already wracked my person.

He was out cold, and I dragged him back up the stairs to the nearest room. It was remarkable how every room on this floor had been empty save mine – if the Emperor had any other guests visiting the tower, they must have been in attendance of him. The one into which I took the guard had obviously been occupied – there were dirty clothes in a basket, and empty baggage under the bed.

I stripped him of his clothes and put them on over mine – I did not want to have to run around naked once I disposed of the disguise. I considered throwing him out of the window to delay my discovery, but only briefly. In all likelihood he would attract more attention, more quickly, while plummeting to the ground than he would

do here, tied up and gagged. I checked his nose, to make sure it wasn't blocked up by a cold or anything – I did not want him to die by accident, once I had decided to spare his life – and then did the binding and gagging, and pushed him under the bed. I pushed the baggage back into place to create a concealment that would last for less than thirty seconds after someone entered the room, but it might prevent him being found by someone casually passing by in the corridor.

Now, off I went! Disguised as the enemy, his gun in my hand, ready to deal death to all those that sought to harm my home-world! Back down the stairwell! Running down the stairs! I met a man – he died! I met another man – he died! And a third – he died too! I left their bodies, uncaring now as to discovery – there were clearly too many of them, and the way too narrow, for sneaking around. My only hope was to move fast, and move deadly, like a blaster-wielding rattlesnake! I had to strike, sting, and move on to my next prey! Maybe I was more like a shark than a rattlesnake – I had to keep moving forward, or die! Another five men fell to my appetite for killing before I reached the third floor from the bottom, and I emerged from the stairwell, ignoring the shouts at my back, as men chased down after me, converging upon this soulless killer of comrades, this rampaging Earthman, this embodiment of nemesis!

I ran down the corridor, looking for a door which I knew must be there, one which would be guarded by at least two stout defenders, a door which would contain my quarry, the extruded one. As yet I had no idea what that name signified, but it sounded unpleasant. Whatever it or he was, he would fall at my hand! His death would prevent the deaths of millions on Earth.

It is curious that when I was actually on Earth I cared so little for my fellow men, but once I was removed to Envia, I found in myself a love and regard for those of my planet that awakened the determination to do anything necessary to protect them. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, you might say. That might have been it, but maybe I just did not want to see the audience for my music diminished! Slaves of interplane-

tary dictators do not often buy albums, never mind going to live concerts!

There was the doorway – a double door in an ornate frame – three guards stood beside it – let's call them Larry, Moe and Curly, because I have never liked the Three Stooges, and if you have read elsewhere that I do, I must have been under some chemical influence when I said as much.

Larry saw me first, to his misfortune – I shot him between the eyes. As he began to fall I ran up to Moe and Curly, keeping his falling body between them and me. There was a moment where their concentration was upon Larry, and not yet upon their attacker, and I took advantage of that moment to bury my blaster's butt in Curly's face. He shook, but did not immediately fall, taking hold of my belt, and dragging me down to the ground with him. Luckily I still had a line on Moe, and I let him have it in the belly. As he crumpled, I returned my attention to Curly, who had somehow summoned the strength, and consciousness, to reach for his weapon. "Oh no you don't," I said, and shot him in the head. The range had been too small, and the heat scalded my face, singeing away my eyebrows, and what little hair had accumulated on my face towards a beard and moustache since my last unconsciousness.

I pushed his body off me, and threw the double doors open, to reveal the piteously extruded one. My exophalamic stare clearly made him uncomfortable, since he winced, but he bade me shut the door behind myself, and bolt it against the imminent arrival of reinforcements.

"Who are you?" I asked, after following his instructions.

"You don't know?"

"They called you the extruded one. But who were you, before they did this to you?"

The poor man lay at the centre of a network of

cables, wires, flashing lights and tubes that filled the entire room, which curved for ten metres in each direction – virtually the whole floor must have been devoted to housing this atrocity. Straps held him down, his muscles were wasted and feeble, and his skin was pallid, a hollow puce where it should have been scarlet. A hundred thousand silver threads penetrated his body, and shimmered as he spoke. How long had he been held here? Who had done this to him? Actually, that question did not need to be asked. I could work the answer out for myself.

"I was a prince once. Can you believe that? A Prince of Envia."

I shook my head. If I had been surprised before, by his appearance, I was now forced to recalibrate my settings. "You are the son of Emperor Zuvanos?"

"I suppose I once was. Do I look like a son to you now? Could anyone do this to a son? Am I even a person? I ceased to be anything of significance twenty years ago."

I walked up to look him in the eye – his face had been blurry from where I was standing. "Good Lord, man. He did this to his own son? No wonder Mallda has no scruples about helping his enemies."

He looked pained. "Oh, Mallda. I try to hide what she does from father, but I will not be able to forever. He sent her to you that first time, but he knows nothing as yet about her taking you from your cell, and nursing you to health in one the guest rooms. He will have her executed without giving it a moment's thought the instant he discovers her treachery. Once he reads the reports I'm sending him of all these dead soldiers, he will know what is happening, and she will die."

"Then I will have to move quickly," I said, though I did not.



“Are you here to kill me, Howard? I’ve tried to make it easy for you. I recommended your ferry as a target of our training raid, knowing your sense of adventure would bring you back here. I waited till Mallda was with the Imperator before reporting that you were in the village, so that he would consider sending her to seduce you. I told the Denizen to let you go before I had to follow my orders and kill it. I sent well-fed, well-rested, recently brothelled soldiers to meet your wrecked boat at the coast, knowing they would be less likely to kill you in cold blood. I have seen all you did, all you killed, and listened to so much of your poetry – all under the blood-flecked eye of the Imperator – all to bring you here, to this moment, so that you can end this torture for me, and end his dark reign.”

My arms fell to my sides. “I can hardly kill you in those circumstances, can I? We will have to see what we can do.”

The Weaponers

I could not bring myself to hurt this man – he was as much a victim of the Imperator’s cruelty as anyone I had met upon this planet. Though he wanted to die, and had played an integral part in supporting his father’s rule, I could not do it. Without his subtle assistance I would have been dead long ago, and Earth none the wiser as to the imminent invasion. Soldiers were battering at the door, but I would find a way. I had nothing better to do, anyway, nowhere else to go!

“Let’s get you out of all this,” I said to him. “Where should I start?”

“Remove the straps, at least. If I am to die, let me die in freedom.”

“No one is going to be dying,” I replied with a loud laugh. “You should leave the pessimism to the professionals! If despondency is required, I will deliver all that is needed!” In a moment he was free of the straps. I looked closer at the filaments that pierced his entire body. “Should I pull these out or something?”

He shuddered, so violently that I thought he

might be about to die without my assistance, but after a few seconds he calmed again. “Earthling, if I suggested removing ten thousand of your toenails, how would you react? These are not wires that go into my body – they are my nerves, dragged out of my body, coated in flexible steel and nylon, according to whether they need to conduct or not, and plugged into these systems.”

“My word, so the extrusion was literal – your actual nervous system was pulled out so that you could be plugged into this, whatever it is.”

He smiled through gritted teeth. “Exactly. My father chose me for the experiment because he wanted someone loyal to him at the hub of all this information. From here I am directly wired into a hundred thousand eyes and ears across the world. I report to my father, pass on his orders, provide access to your Earth internet to those deemed worthy, and make sure no one else gets talking to one another.”

“So what can I do to get you out of there?”

“Nothing. If you sever my nerves the shock will be so intense that I will die instantly. You might as well do the job with a gun before the option is taken out of your hands, and I am returned to the control of my father. At the moment I am willing to go against him, knowing that I face death, but if I am not to die, his vengeance will be more terrible than anything you could ever imagine. Did I mention the pulling of ten thousand fingernails earlier? Imagine that, ten thousand times a second, imagine the pain, poured into every nerve in your body all at once, and being unable to fall unconscious, because that reflex – and even the need to sleep! – was permanently disabled when they turned you into a creature of nightmares. They could not risk my passing out – it would have corrupted the data passing through my body.”

I sat down, and thought for a minute or two, ignoring the insistent noises from the door. This room was built to be strong, designed to keep people out, rather than to keep them in, so we had some time yet.

“What if I could transfer the nerve endings from the machine to something else, one at a time? Something non-conductive, that would

stop them flapping around and causing you trouble. Could you take it, if I did it carefully?"

"The pain would be excruciating," he replied. "But I will face worse if I stay strapped here."

I needed no further encouragement – I broke down a chair, kicking at it till it came apart, and took the main spine of it – a piece of wood about a metre long – over to the prince. I followed one of the threads out of his skin and over to the machines. It took a few tugs, but it actually came out a little more easily than I had expected, and after that I made quick progress, even pulling out handfuls at a time when I thought the prince could take it. He screamed as if the gods were flaying his soul with every nerve I disconnected, but plugging them back into the wood seemed to soothe him.

Within fifteen minutes I was done, and I helped him struggle to his feet. I took off my guard's outfit, and helped him to put it on. Pulling the trousers over his legs and putting the shirt on helped to keep the nerves tidy – we looped them around his waist once over, and then tied another loop around the base of the piece of wood. That would make it possible for him to move around without tripping over them every other step, and provide some protection against them being inadvertently tugged from his flesh.

He tried walking now, staggering forward a single step. I was amazed he could manage so much after so many years of immobile incarceration, but he only smiled.

"They make princelings tough on this planet. We have to be, to survive our fathers."

I unbolted the door and he led the way, thumping the guards with his block of wood, his steel and nylon nerves slicing into heads as if they were boiled eggs. (Oddly, the sound each impact made was very pleasant to the ear.) I took down one or two men with my appropriated blaster, but the prince was a man with a mission. Within seconds the floor was littered with bodies, both unconscious and dead.

"Less than an hour ago you were ready to die. Now look at you!"

"Mr Phillips, I'm fighting to get you off my planet. If I have to hear another word of your

poetry I think I will die spontaneously, no other intervention necessary!" He began to run for the stairs.

"Well, I never..." Still, I ran after the cheeky fellow. I would be sure to teach him a lesson, once the despot was humbled and my friends restored to me, but for now his backward views on literature would have to stand!

As we dashed up the stairs, I called up ahead to him. "My friends, we should get to them first."

"They are with my father already," he called back. "We are heading in that direction. Keep your gun handy and prepare to fight!"

The Zuvanos Gambit

The throne room was magnificent. It was on the very top floor of the Blank Tower – we had had to fight dozens of men to reach it, leaving us soaked in blood, and bearing a score of wounds between us – and each wall of the room was a great window, allowing the Emperor Zuvanos to see his whole island without moving from his golden-red throne. He gazed on us with laughing eyes as we emerged from the stairwell, the screams of his last few guards dying away as they fell to our arms.

"Howard Phillips. Prince Zann. How nice to see you both. Can I help you with something? I was about to get myself a new bride. Last year's model had been so dull, so I was quite pleased to find myself with something so exotic at my disposal."

He waved to his right, and we turned to see Arelline chained to the wall, clad in a blood-red gown that came close to revealing many of her most intriguing qualities. Chained up beside her were Johnny, fiercely straining to get between his fellow Earthling and the Envian dictator, and Princess Mallda, her treachery already discovered, it seemed. Then I looked down, and saw at their feet the body of a woman, her blood pooling at their feet. She must have been the Emperor's previous wife. What a way to moti-

vate the new partner – including her predecessor’s murder in the marriage ceremony itself! With rising horror I realised that the scarlet of Arelline’s dress was the blood of the body at her feet, smeared over her in some horribly symbolic torture.

I went over to them, and used my blaster to break the chains of Johnny, so that he could help us in any battle. At first Prince Zann had eyes only for his father, eyes that blazed with the spirit of vengeance, eyes that burned to kill his own father! Then he turned to see what I was doing.

“No!” he yelled. “I should have told you – don’t free Johnny Quondam!”

But it was too late, and now I realised why the Emperor had greeted us so happily – he had still had one valuable card left to play. Johnny’s eyes were glazed, but he moved with a lightning speed, twisting the gun from my hands before I even realised his intentions. He kicked me in the ribs, sending me howling to the floor in excruciating pain, and turned the gun to cover the prince.

“On the floor,” ordered Zuvanos. “Join the Earthling scum, grovelling in the dirt at my feet. I would have your sister brought over to join you, but I want to leave someone alive to see the wedding. Having said that, it may be that I will now need a new heir, and if this Earth-woman cannot produce, it would make sense to keep it within the family...”

“You scum,” I screamed, crawling over to lie beside the prince. Subdued we might be, but the closer I could get to Zuvanos the better my chance would be. Once I was within range he gave me an almost fond kick to the head.

“It’s my world, and my daughter, Howard Phillips,” he sneered. “I will do with them as I will. And a few short years from now, I will do the same with your pitiful planet!”

“What did you do to Johnny? How did you turn him against us?”

“Trusting fool! It was so easy to play these games with you – it would hardly have been worth the effort, but you did do an excellent job of disposing of my most troublesome lieutenants. If only I could have set the Malt of

Moseby and the Dalon of Great Wiseton in your way, my month would have been perfect!” He strolled around us, all the while delighting in revealing my utter ignorance of his calculation. “But you knew all that – I have no doubt now that my daughter told you of my plans. No matter – knowing less would not have changed your actions. You wanted to know about your friend, Johnny, didn’t you? What a delicious trick I played upon your feeble minds!”

“What does he mean?” I wheezed to Prince Zann. “He’s taking way too long to get to the point.”

“Howard, do you remember Johnny being with you on the ferry? Do you remember him coming with you through space? Or fighting the guards when you arrived on Envia?”

I struggled to remember – it all seemed so hazy. “He must have been. He’s been with us all the time, hasn’t he? How did he get here, otherwise?”

The Emperor laughed and laughed, and laid his foot in the small of my back. “You should have asked yourself these questions long ago, Howard Phillips, long ago! Now it is too late!” He pushed his foot down, grinding his heel into my spine, and I writhed in untellable pain, like a moth held by a pin, but not yet dead.

He reached down with his other hand and began to tug at the Prince’s nerves, grabbing a handful here, and a handful there.

Prince Zann turned to speak to me, and gasped through the pain, “Two ships flew to Earth... the first brought Johnny and a few others straight back here... the others died the same day, at the whim of... the Emperor... when you turned up at the outpost... you were gassed... hypnotised... and Johnny was placed among you... having already been reprogrammed... You had so much else to think about... You did not give it any thought...”

“Beautifully told, my son,” said Zuvanos, grabbing his largest handful yet. “I am glad the pain has not rendered you forgetful! Your only error was in allying yourself with these idiots! They have been under my thumb from the beginning, serving my whims, and you thought to subvert my will? Error, indeed.”

"Father?" said Prince Zann. "You have made an error far greater."

"And what is that?" laughed the dictator, pulling the extruded nerves in his fist so hard that half a dozen of them were drawn too thin and snapped.

Prince Zann tensed, and his nerves drew taut, slicing off every finger of his father's hand. The dictator stepped off my back, silently mouthing his horror, bumping into Johnny as he went, and I saw my opportunity. I leapt to my feet and punched Zuvanos in the throat, wrestled my gun back from Johnny – who seemed to have been struck by a fortuitous spell of dizziness – and turned the gun on my world's worst enemy. I blew a hole in his chest that threw him back against his throne.

"Howard Phillips, you fool," he gasped, as the life slowly left his body. "You think you have won, but you will never win, you never can. The Chaste will win out, now and forever. You are simply their puppet."

The Chaste – I had hoped never to hear that name again, and had not expected to hear it on a far-off world, but I should not have been surprised. Wherever are the enemies of humankind, there are the Chaste.

"That's as may be," I said with a smile, finishing him with a blaster shot to the head. "But I can still enjoy this moment."

I turned to check on my friends. Johnny had passed out, and Prince Zann was just getting to his feet. Arelline and Princess Mallda were sagging against their chains with relief, but I still made haste to release them, searching the Emperor's robes to find the keys. Each hugged me as she was released, and then Mallda ran over to squeeze the breath from her brother, while Arelline ran off, to my surprise, to Johnny, where she awoke him with a strong, passionate kiss. I had not seen that coming!

I turned to look at the prince, just about managing to make out his face through the tumbles of his sister's hair. "Now, I think there's a small matter of your views of my poetry? Do we need to duel?"

He laughed. "No, forget everything I said, Howard Phillips. You are easily the equal of any

poet ever to poesise on this planet! I needed you angry and ready to do away with someone, and that seemed a good way to get you riled. I could not risk you deciding to have mercy on my father, because I could not be sure that I would have it in me to do the deed, just as my sister had never been able to follow through on her schemes to kill him and free me. He had a hold over us that could only be broken by death. I believe the same applied to your young friend."

Johnny was now getting to his feet, clearly upset and disorientated, but the pain must have been eased by the solicitations of Arelline. She might have been battered and bruised from head to toe, with broken fingers bandaged and a dress soaked in blood, but she was still the most beautiful girl in the room.

The prince's plan had certainly worked, so I could not really take issue. Still, my feelings had been slightly hurt. I think he could tell that I was a bit upset about it, so he disengaged his sister, and strummed his nerves with a single finger, producing a lovely rich tone. Somehow, despite the trials he had been through, he found a voice to sing with.

"Grimmett was a man, apart from other men..." he sang, and I came close to weeping, forcing him to stop the song through embarrassment.

"You know my songs?" I asked, clapping him on the back.

"There are a hundred sources from which I was able to download them – I know them all. The muscular rhythms, the pulsing guitars, the amazing vocal styles – they would appeal to men of any planet."

"That's enough about that," said Princess Mallda – who, if she was not the most beautiful girl there, was certainly the most desirable to my eyes. "Let's leave my brother to arrange the clean-up around here, and discuss things with Johnny and Arelline, while we have a little break."

I acquiesced and, as she led me out of the throne room, said, "I believe you wanted to find out if I would still show an interest in you once my father was gone and I was no longer

following orders. Shall we search out a quiet room and look for the answer together?"

I agreed with pleasure. "This has been one of the most trying times of my life," I said to her as she curled her arm around my back. "But some parts of it have been wondrous. There have been troughs, but such delightful peaks, and you can take that however you please. I have fallen in love with a scarlet woman, and..."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"What is it, Howard?"

"I think I might have got one hell of a guitarist out of this little jaunt!"

Back to Sadness, Back to Music

Johnny Quondum and Arelline elected to stay on Envia, to help rebuild that world in a fairer style. I was surprised, of course, having seen nothing save that passionate kiss to suggest a romance between the two of them up till that point, but perhaps my surprise was only due to a lack of self-knowledge. I had no doubt that Arelline had begun to harbour feelings for me, despite her supposed engagement back on Earth. I should have known that my magnetism, charisma and charm would have made it almost unbearable for her to return with me to Earth, where her own feelings would have forced her into betraying her promise to another. As it was, that unnamed Londoner's heart would be broken, assuming that he had repented of the silliness Mallda had told us about back by the river, but she could at least persuade herself that she had not betrayed her partner for me, as has been the fate of so many women I have known. Johnny might have been a lesser man, but somehow that made it all right by me. They would have much to do together – removing the extruded man had demolished the continent's infrastructure, and they would have to make war on the Malt of Moseby and the Dalon of Great Wiseton – but I had confidence that they were up to the task.

Johnny apologised for having apparently almost betrayed us, though he remembered nothing since being chained to the wall, and his memory was as foggy as mine about the journey to Envia. He could have sworn that he had travelled with the palanquinettes and I. He gave me his camera footage, once our possessions were located, and asked me to have it exhibited back on Earth. I promised.

A ship was requisitioned for me, and with Prince Vann and Princess Mallda I flew home.

Upon our return to Earth, I was astonished to discover that the BBC had seen fit to remove several of its best Ceefax pages – gone, Chatterbox, gone, The Vibe, gone, Backchat – where now would I go to keep my finger on the pulse between five o'clock and ten past five? There was a single entertainment comments page to replace them, but it was not the same, even if it did have an extra sub-page from time to time. To make matters worse, they had also abolished the Blue Peter pages, the singles reviews, and the film choice of the day! I stopped what I was doing, making the military wait to debrief me, and wrote a letter to the BBC on the spot. One does not expect to save the planet only to return home to find the pleasures that made it worth saving gone, destroyed for ever! I understood that they were preparing for the analogue switch-off, when teletext, bless its cotton socks, would disappear in its entirety, but life would never be the same. My letter finished, I thought that at least I could turn to Channel 4, and although the page numbers had changed, I eventually found the computer game news of Game Central (306), and read them with intense pleasure. Planet Sound had not moved from 351, so at least some part of this planet was as I had remembered it. But wait, where was the Angst problem page? Gone it was, gone forever. Where now would I go for mildly titillating stories of teenage girls who could not stop looking at themselves naked in the mirror? I sighed, turned the television off, and returned to the debriefing.

I was happy to find out that there had been a large number of survivors of the attack upon the ferry that had begun this whole adventure. Apparently the distraction caused by the palan-

quinettes and I charging for the roof and taking the ship had given everyone else more than enough time to get down to the lower deck and hide in and amongst the cars. Shortly thereafter the Royal Navy had arrived to take the surviving attackers into custody, where they remain to this day.

Princess Mallda adapted with ease to the life of a celebrity, and though our fling was intense, wild and mutually rewarding, she had soon disappeared into the stratosphere of fame. Mere Earthly women had nothing on her, and, sad to say, the fifteen minutes of the palanquines were called to an abrupt halt by her arrival, though many of them later parlayed their fame into more substantial careers, which was nice to watch – at a distance.

Prince Vann elected to stay with me. I had had an idea or two about his nerves, and how they could be handled. I had an special guitar constructed, and had his nerves strung through it, creating the first hundred thousand string guitar. The sound it made was magnificent, and I wasted no time in asking him to join the band. Best of all, it was entirely collapsible, and he

was able to keep it in a pocket when not playing. Later he would have surgery to reduce the extrusion to a more manageable level, but he would always keep enough nerves out to string a guitar.

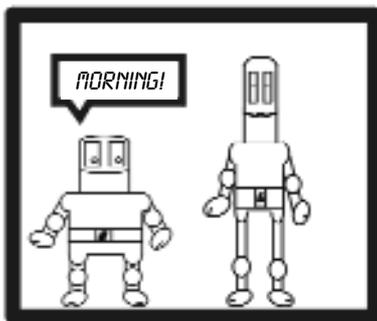
As soon as possible, we had the first jam session with our new member, and it was incredible. The mountain drummer created beats on the fly that made our feet dance without our brains having a say in the matter, while Prince Vann's playing was extraordinary – imagine a guitarist who had intimate control not only of his fingers, but also of the very strings themselves, and you might be halfway to imagining the sounds he could make. Arelline tried out on tambourine once or twice, and even had a crack at vocals, just to hang out with us, but music was not her talent, and as I said she was soon on her way, with no hard feelings on either side.

We sounded magnificent, but as we played, I realised that it was not enough. I had my drummer, and I had my guitarist, but, good as they were – phenomenal as they were! – more was needed.

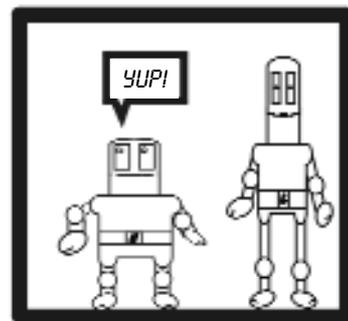
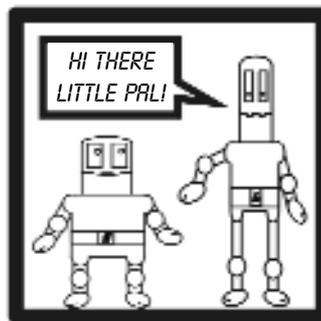
I had to find the perfect bassist.

But that is a story for another time.

ROBOTS, IN A SPACESHIP



SAYING HELLO



BY
WALT BRUNSTON

Klothe and Melenkius Take Centre Stage: a One-Act Play

Stephen William Theaker

Scene One

THE SCENE: KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS ARE STROLLING THROUGH THEIR EXTENSIVE GROUNDS. THEIR ROBOTIC SERVANTS ARE IN ATTENDANCE BUT OUT OF SIGHT. BOTH ARE RATHER FAT, AND WEAR GARMENTS WHICH MIGHT BE DESCRIBED AS MONKISH WERE THEY NOT MADE OF THE FINEST SILK (BRIGHTLY COLOURED, BUT EACH GARMENT IS OF A SINGLE COLOUR). THEY WALK ONTO THE STAGE, KLOTHE SLIGHTLY AHEAD OF HIS FRIEND. HE LOOKS AROUND, SMILES, COMES TO A STOP AND TURNS TO MELENKIUS.

KLOTHE

Shall we stop here for a moment? It's so beautiful, is it not?

MELENKIUS

It should be. I spent a week designing it.

(HE SITS DOWN ON A GRASSY BUMP)

Why did we have to come out here? I was perfectly happy back at the manse.

KLOTHE

This could be it, Melenkius! You know that as well as I.

MELENKIUS

Maybe so, but did we have to come for it today?

KLOTHE

I don't know what you mean. In my opinion, there couldn't be a nicer day for it.

MELENKIUS

It would have been a nicer day for doing other things. We could have used a second-rate day for this.

KLOTHE

(BECOMING ANGRY AND PULLING MELENKIUS TO HIS FEET)

That's enough, Melenkius. You know it must be done today! Please discontinue your efforts to focus your resentment upon me. I am not to blame for this, as you know perfectly well.

MELENKIUS

I suppose that you're right. But then again...

(HE BRUSHES THE GRASS FROM HIS BACKSIDE)

KLOTHE

Yes?

MELENKIUS

Why should I be fair? Is all this fair?

KLOTHE

That, my dear Melenkius, is not the point. We are on a quest!

(RAISES ONE ARM AND POINTS TO THE SKY)

We must do what must be done!

MELENKIUS

I know! But does it have to be today? That's my point.

KLOTHE

It does have to be today. Let's get on with it.

(HE TAKES A COMPASS-SHAPED OBJECT FROM WITHIN THE FOLDS OF HIS GARMENT)

I shall just take our bearings.

(HE LOOKS AT THE OBJECT, THEN AT THE SUN, TURNS NINETY DEGREES AND REPEATS THIS PROCESS THREE TIMES)

MELENKIUS

Well?

KLOTHE

We seem to have arrived.

MELENKIUS

Are you sure?

(HE LOOKS AROUND)

It doesn't seem too promising.

KLOTHE

I suppose I am.

(HE SEEMS DOUBTFUL)

There's no telling where he'll turn up you know. Think of last time!

MELENKIUS

Oh, of course...

(HE SMILES AND SHAKES HIS HEAD)

How could I ever forget? That old scoundrel! Who can ever say what he's going to do next!

KLOTHE

So you remember last time?

MELENKIUS

Of course, of course! Of course it's all a bit of a blur... it was a long time ago, after all, I remember something, anyway...

KLOTHE

Do you remember anything about him?

MELENKIUS

Well, not about him in particular...

KLOTHE

That's my point. I'm no longer convinced that there was a last time. That's why this time is so very important.

MELENKIUS

Come now, Klothe! Do you really expect me to believe that this has not happened before?

KLOTHE

It may well have done, I'm not disputing that, but I don't think that it has ever happened to us before.

MELENKIUS

But all the evidence points to it!

KLOTHE

What evidence, Melenkius? There isn't any. Think about it.

MELENKIUS

I'm sure that there was something in my pockets...

(HE BEGINS TO SEARCH WITH A NOTICEABLE LACK OF CONVICTION THROUGH THE POCKETS OF HIS GARMENT, OF WHICH THERE ARE SEVERAL. FOR THE REST OF THE SCENE HE TAKES OUT AND PLACES ON THE GROUND THE FOLLOWING OBJECTS: A COMPASS-LIKE OBJECT IDENTICAL TO THE ONE HELD BY KLOTHE, A SMALL METAL MODEL OF A FOUR-LEGGED ANIMAL, A TINY SCARF, AN EGG-TIMER, A SALT-SHAKER, AN UMBRELLA AND THREE ORANGES, WHICH HE ATTEMPTS TO BALANCE UPON HIS STOMACH)

A map, some documents, I'm sure there was something...

KLOTHE

You're mistaken, Melenkius. This morning, I woke you. You stood. You dusted off your behind. Then we began to walk.

MELENKIUS

And you didn't tell me why?

KLOTHE

No.

MELENKIUS

I'm sure that you did. I remember it distinctly.

KLOTHE

Really?

MELENKIUS

Yes. I'm amazed that you don't remember it. I woke up this morning. I stood up. You were there. I dusted off my behind. You said, "Melenkius, it's that time again. We must go to meet him, just as we did last time."

KLOTHE

This is pure fantasy, Melenkius.

(HE LOOKS UP INTO THE AIR)

He'll be here soon, and I don't want you to give a bad impression of yourself. It might spoil our chances.

(HE MOVES CLOSER TO MELENKIUS AND BEGINS TO FEEL HIS HEAD)

MELENKIUS

What are you doing?

KLOTHE (STEPPING BACK)

Just checking.

MELENKIUS

You seemed so sure a few minutes ago! You said that this was the place!

KLOTHE (SITTING DOWN)

Well now I'm not. I'm not even sure that I remember this morning at all! How long have we been walking, anyway?

MELENKIUS

Since this morning.

KLOTHE

That's what I thought.

(THE ORANGES ROLL OFF MELENKIUS' STOMACH)

We need some help.

MELENKIUS

What about the robots?

KLOTHE

Of course! Why didn't I think of it?

MELENKIUS

Isn't it enough that one of us did?

KLOTHE

Please accept my apologies, my dear old Melenkius, of course it is!

(HE STANDS UP)

Please summon one of them!

(MELENKIUS WAVES EXPANSIVELY. ENTER ROBOT.)

Scene Two

KLOTHE, MELENKIUS, ROBOT

MELENKIUS

Good afternoon, Henrius Biscus.

ROBOT

Good afternoon, sir. Would sir care for a drink?

MELENKIUS

Not right now, Henrius. It's about...

ROBOT

Then would sir care for something to eat?

MELENKIUS

No, no, listen...

ROBOT

Is sir feeling well? Sir usually enjoys his food so much. If I may?

(THE ROBOT MOVES CLOSE TO MELENKIUS AND PLACES A HAND ON THE SIDE OF HIS THROAT)

MELENKIUS

Well?

ROBOT

Sir is quite well...

KLOTHE

So he should stop complaining about our little walk! It is just plain laziness, is it not, Biscus?

ROBOT

Well, of course natural respect would normally cause me to concur with the master in anything he said...

MELENKIUS

Harrumph!

ROBOT

But I'm afraid that in this instance he is quite incorrect.

MELENKIUS

Ha!

ROBOT

The corpulence of Master Melenkius means that if he continues to exert himself in this way he shall undoubtedly cause damage to his feet. Perhaps he should sit down for a moment?

(BOTH MEN ARE SILENT AND PUT OUT. AFTER A PAUSE MELENKIUS SITS BACK DOWN.)

KLOTHE (TO MELENKIUS)

Well?

MELENKIUS

What?

KLOTHE

You were going to ask the robot about this morning.

MELENKIUS

Ah yes, this morning. Come over here, Henrius.

ROBOT

Yes, sir?

MELENKIUS

Tell me, Henrius, do you remember this morning?

ROBOT

Of course I do, sir. Having constructed me himself, sir will certainly be aware that nothing but a direct order can cause me to forget.

KLOTHE

(IMPATIENT)

So tell us about it! The morning.

ROBOT

(TURNING TO FACE KLOTHE)

Does sir not remember himself? He ordered me to forget everything previous to that order, before waking Master Melenkius. Master Melenkius stood, brushed the grass from his backside, and listened to Master Klothe say, "Melenkius, it's that time again. We must go to meet him, just as we did the last time, or there will be trouble." Then the party began to stroll through the grounds.

KLOTHE

(STROKING HIS CHIN)

Mmmm.

MELENKIUS

Mmmm!

ROBOT

Sirs?

KLOTHE (TO ROBOT)

Trouble, you say?

ROBOT

That is correct, sir. "Or there will be trouble."

MELENKIUS

I don't like the sound of that, friend Klothe.

KLOTHE

(RE-ANIMATING HIMSELF)

What does it change, Melenkius? We knew that there was an important reason for coming here, after all.

MELENKIUS

And it sounds like this morning you knew what it was.

KLOTHE

I don't remember any of this. Is it any surprise that I'm beginning to be rather dubious about the entire situation?

MELENKIUS

I wonder why you told Henrius to forget everything?

KLOTHE

That's puzzling me too.

(TURNS TO THE ROBOT)

I gave you no reason?

ROBOT

If sir did so, I have been ordered to forget.

MELENKIUS

Mmm.

KLOTHE

There were no clues? After you forgot?

ROBOT

Regrettably not, sir.

KLOTHE

I am at a loss.

MELENKIUS

Shall we return to the manse?

KLOTHE (ANGRILY)

Of course not! He'll be here soon!

(HE LOOKS UP INTO THE AIR)

MELENKIUS

How can you still be so sure? About that and nothing else?

KLOTHE (SITTING DOWN)

You know, you could be right. There's no way of knowing.

MELENKIUS

I suppose that there is one way of finding out.

KLOTHE (EAGER)

Yes? What is it?

MELENKIUS

We could sit here and wait.

(KLOTHE LOOKS BEHIND HIMSELF, TWISTING AROUND)

KLOTHE

I suppose it wouldn't hurt.

MELENKIUS

Let's hope not.

(HE LOOKS A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE)

(PAUSE)

ROBOT

Would sirs care for some refreshment while they wait for Mr Reggianus?

MELENKIUS

What an excellent idea, Henrius Biscus! Bring on the food and wine!

(KLOTHE (SUDDENLY LEAPING TO HIS FEET)

Wait a minute! Did you say Mr Reggianus, Biscus?

ROBOT

(SUDDENLY LOOKING RATHER CAGEY)

Mm, ah... I believe...

MELENKIUS

(GETTING TO HIS FEET)

Well? Out with it, Henrius! Who are we waiting for?

KLOTHE

I believe he mentioned one Mr Reggianus.

ROBOT

Hum. Yes, I believe I did. Though I would be grateful if sirs could kindly forget such a regrettable incident.

MELENKIUS (TO KLOTHE)

He knows something about all this!

KLOTHE

And I would like to know a little more about what he knows.

MELENKIUS

(SEARCHING IN HIS POCKETS ONCE AGAIN)

I'm sure that I've got a super-screwdriver in here somewhere.

KLOTHE

Then, dear Melenkius, please discover it quickly, and prepare to operate!

(HE CIRCLES ROUND THE ROBOT SO THAT HE IS STANDING BEHIND IT AS MELENKIUS APPROACHES IT FROM IN FRONT, BRANDISHING WITH MENACE THE SCREWDRIVER WHICH HAS TURNED UP)

ROBOT

Sirs! Sirs!

(HE RETREATS FROM MELENKIUS UNTIL HE BUMPS INTO KLOTHE'S STOMACH)

Such drastic action is unnecessary! Within the

hour Mr Reggianus will be here himself, and he will explain everything!

MELENKIUS

(LOWERING THE SCREWDRIVER)

Are you sure?

ROBOT

Oh yes, Master Melenkius!

KLOTHE

You're going to take his word for it? Are you crazy?

MELENKIUS

Dearest Klothe, are you venturing to suggest that I might have built a dishonest robot?

(THE SCREWDRIVER BEGINS TO RISE ONCE MORE)

KLOTHE

No, no, of course not, dear friend.

MELENKIUS (MOLLIFIED)

I'm glad to hear it.

(HE SITS BACK DOWN)

So, Henrius, what about that food and wine?

(KLOTHE MOVES OVER TO SIT AT THE LEFT OF THE STAGE. HE AND MELENKIUS NOW FORM TWO CORNERS OF AN ISOCELES TRIANGLE, WITH THE THIRD CORNER BEING IN THE CENTRE OF THE AUDIENCE. THE ROBOT STANDS OFF TO ONE SIDE, BEHIND AND TO THE RIGHT OF MELENKIUS.)

ROBOT

Certainly, sir. But perhaps sir would like to postpone his repast until after the interview with Mr Reggianus?

MELENKIUS

Confound it, Henrius! We could be waiting all day to eat, if we hold it up on account of your mystery man!

ROBOT

On the contrary, sir, here is Mr Reggianus now.

MELENKIUS AND KLOTHE

What?

(THEY BOTH TURN TO FACE THE SKY BEHIND THEM)

KLOTHE

Where is his ship?

(ENTER MR REGGIANUS)

Scene Three

**KLOTHE, MELENKIUS, ROBOT, MR
REGGIANUS**

MR REGGIANUS

Good evening, gentlemen!

(HE ENTERED STAGE LEFT, FURTHER FORWARD
THAN KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS. THUS THEY ARE
CAUGHT BY SURPRISE)

MELENKIUS

(LOOKS TOWARD THE SETTING SUN)

Well, it's evening, at least.

KLOTHE (NODDING)

Some things can still be counted on.

(MELENKIUS NODS SAGACIOUSLY)

Whereas others seem to be feathers blown in
the wind. Our memories, for instance.

MELENKIUS

Explain yourself, Mr Reggianus!

MR REGGIANUS

All in good time, my friends. First, let Henrius
bring us some refreshments.

KLOTHE

You are no friend of ours, Reggianus. Is it
possible that my memory could have been
tampered with to such an extent that the hate I
now feel for you is groundless?

MR REGGIANUS

Friend Klothe, I fear that you grow incoherent!
As I said, wait and I shall explain.

(REGGIANUS WAVES AT THE ROBOT, WHO EXITS
STAGE RIGHT)

KLOTHE

Melenkius, do you believe what we are
hearing! Insulted in our own grounds, told to
wait at the beck and call of this scoundrel! Well
I'll have none of it!

(HE LEAPS TO HIS FEET, PUTS UP HIS FISTS, AND
ADVANCES ON MR REGGIANUS.)

I'll teach this ruffian a lesson or two!

MELENKIUS

Teach the devil one or two from me as well!

(KLOTHE BANGS INTO AN INVISIBLE BARRIER)

MR REGGIANUS

Another time, perhaps.

(KLOTHE STALKS THE EDGE OF THE BARRIER,
WHICH IS A CIRCLE OF FIVE METRES' DIAMETER
WITH MR REGGIANUS AT ITS CENTRE)

A small precaution, for your safety as much as
mine, I assure you.

(MELENKIUS STANDS UP, AND KLOTHE MOVES
OVER TO STAND BESIDE HIM)

MELENKIUS

It's time to explain. What has been going on
today? What's happened to our memories?
Why did Klothe order Henrius to forget
everything? Why did Klothe forget everything
himself?

KLOTHE

Who are you? Why are you here? How did you
come to control our robotic servants? And what
do you plan to do next?

MR REGGIANUS

That's enough questions for now! I'll try to
explain, then, since you seem so intent on my
doing so. Where should I begin? Do you
remember your names? Yes, of course you do.
Do you remember what you do?

MELENKIUS

Of course! I designed and constructed both
these grounds and our robotic servants.

MR REGGIANUS

And you, Klothe, what do you do?

KLOTHE

Why, what a ridiculous question! I am... my
chosen profession is...

MR REGGIANUS

Yes?

KLOTHE

It seems that you are still playing tricks with
our memories.

MELENKIUS

It's obvious. He's here with me, he must be my
companion, my friend, or my assistant.

KLOTHE

I, your assistant, Melenkius? I fear that Mr
Reggianus has gone a step too far in addling
your brains! You seem to have lost your mind
entirely! Do you forget who took the initiative

this morning? Who got us to the meeting-place on time? I am quite obviously the leader of this group! You are probably one of my employees.

MELENKIUS

Why, you... secretary!

KLOTHE

Handyman!

MELENKIUS

Clerk!

KLOTHE

Hired hand!

MR REGGIANUS

Gentlemen, please calm down! Neither of you are completely wrong, and no one of you is the subordinate of the other. You are Klothe and Melenkius, the famous constructors! Known and respected throughout the galaxy! Who has not admired the Twisting Tower of Ramacolos Five? Who has not marvelled at the Gardens of Tricelope, hanging from the stars? And who could resist the lure of the Dancing Palace of the Star Lords?

MELENKIUS

They seem to ring a bell... Only the bell sounds so distantly that it may well be ringing in another's head.

KLOTHE

Nicely put, my friend, if a little overdone. I have the same feeling.

MR REGGIANUS

The most famous constructors in the universe! And while one dealt with the immense paperwork that your enterprises entailed, the other concentrated his abilities in purely technical areas. Equals, partners and friends, your always-linked names became synonymous with co-operation and harmony.

KLOTHE

Really?

MR REGGIANUS

Really. Where is that robot?

(THE ROBOT ENTERS, BRINGING A TRAY OF FOOD AND WINE FOR KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS. THEY BEGIN TO SIP THE WINE)

MR REGGIANUS

That's better.

MELENKIUS

That all sounds quite idyllic, but what went wrong?

MR REGGIANUS

It is rather difficult to explain.

KLOTHE

Please, Mr Reggianus, make the attempt.

MR REGGIANUS

An ill-advised shift of emphasis.

MELENKIUS

(GLARING AT KLOTHE)

A business error, you mean?

MR REGGIANUS

Not exactly. A change of format, if you will. You began working in one material, then switched to another.

KLOTHE

(GLARING AT MELENKIUS)

A-ha! Shoddy workmanship!

MR REGGIANUS

No, not that either. I told you that this would be difficult to explain. I was trying to use a metaphor which you would both understand. Perhaps a better way of putting it would be to say that someone began working you in one material, then switched to another.

KLOTHE

Someone has been working us?

MELENKIUS

Do you mean to say that I am some kind of marionette?

MR REGGIANUS (SMILING)

If you are, then someone is holding some very thick strings.

KLOTHE

You'll forgive us when we do not laugh.

MR REGGIANUS

Ahem, yes, I'm sorry.

KLOTHE

And the outcome of this change?

MR REGGIANUS

Oh, the usual, a certain confusion about your origins, your abilities, even your relationship. Your very appearance has even been in doubt. All these things are common in a transition of this kind.

MELENKIUS

And what happens next?

MR REGGIANUS

Oh, don't worry about that. That's really why I'm here: to allay your fears about the future. The disorientation that you have been experiencing as a result of the change in genre should disappear as your new creator becomes more sure of himself and of your new forms. I play a very important part in that process.

KLOTHE

Is that so?

MR REGGIANUS

That is so.

MELENKIUS

Have you anything to add?

MR REGGIANUS

I can think of nothing. The two of you seem to be developing remarkably rapidly. Your definition is increasing with every passing moment.

KLOTHE

When shall you be leaving?

MR REGGIANUS

Very soon, I believe.

MELENKIUS

And you shall be returning control of the robotic servants to our hands?

MR REGGIANUS

Naturally.

MELENKIUS

That all seems satisfactory to me. All very clear. Klothe?

KLOTHE

I agree completely. So with the assent of my partner...

(MELENKIUS NODS)

I'll bid you farewell, Mr Reggianus.

MR REGGIANUS

Farewell, gentlemen! Don't worry, things will get simpler from here on in!

(EXIT MR REGGIANUS STAGE LEFT)

(KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS SILENT A MOMENT)

(RE-ENTER MR REGGIANUS, HOLDING A FEW STAPLED PIECES OF PAPER.)

MELENKIUS

What, you again?

MR REGGIANUS (STRIDING OVER TO MELENKIUS)

I thought that you might like to take a look at this.

(HE PASSES THE PAPERS TO MELENKIUS)

MELENKIUS

What's this?

(READING)

"The First Sally of Klothe and Melenkius; or, How Things Came to Be". It's a story about us, Klothe! We're famous!

KLOTHE

(WALKS OVER AND TAKES THE PAPERS. HE LOOKS THROUGH THEM)

This isn't about us, Melenkius! Do you ever remember meeting a certain Lucien de Fer, who kidnapped us and took us to the furthest end of the universe?

MELENKIUS

I can't say I do.

MR REGGIANUS

You will before long, don't worry, you will...

(HE WALKS OFF-STAGE WITHOUT THEM NOTICING)

KLOTHE

(TO MR REGGIANUS, HE BELIEVES)

If you think this attempt at flattery changes anything, you're quite, quite wrong.

(TURNING)

Ah, he's gone, it seems...

Scene Four

KLOTHE, MELENKIUS, ROBOT

KLOTHE

What did you make of all that, then, my dear old Melenkius?

MELENKIUS

The same as you, I'm sure, friend Klothe. The man was obviously a lunatic.

KLOTHE

Admittedly a lunatic in possession of some rather useful hypnosis and force-shield technology...

MELENKIUS

But a lunatic none the less!

KLOTHE

Precisely!

MELENKIUS

I have heard nothing so ridiculous in all my life. Men as puppets! A creator pulling the strings? What hogwash! Men are men, the world is the world...

KLOTHE

And whatever happened to the women?

MELENKIUS (SADLY)

Hmmm.

(PAUSE)

Anyway, people can't be just changed in the manner he implied.

(MELENKIUS BEGINS TO RUMMAGE AROUND IN HIS POCKETS)

KLOTHE

Of course they can't.

(MELENKIUS BEGINS TO HEAD TOWARDS THE ROBOT)

ROBOT

Does sir need any assistance?

MELENKIUS

No thanks, I can do this without help.

(MELENKIUS TAKES THE SUPER-SCREWDRIVER OUT OF HIS POCKET)

KLOTHE

What are you doing, Melenkius?

MELENKIUS

(PUTTING THE SCREWDRIVER TO THE ROBOT'S NECK)

I'm going to reprogram this blasted robot! He's going to spend the rest of his existence clearing out the sewage tanks at the nearest baby farm. And what's more, he'll be programmed to find it extremely unpleasant.

KLOTHE

A fine joke, but a little cruel, don't you think? He couldn't help what he did.

MELENKIUS

(PUTTING THE SCREWDRIVER AWAY, WITH SOME RELUCTANCE)

I suppose that you're right.

KLOTHE

(PUTTING HIS ARM AROUND HIS FRIEND'S SHOULDERS)

Good, now let's be on our way. There's a lot to be done tomorrow. We must get back to the mansion.

MELENKIUS

Ah, that's true. The appointments and assignments are piled higher than Granulian cheese on Worldwide Cheese-Climbing Day. There is much work to be done.

KLOTHE

(THEY BEGIN TO WALK OFF STAGE)

You know that's the case. First up, I believe, is a certain Victorum Etchamosey, who wants a mechanical bear to eat his spare children.

MELENKIUS

Hmmm... the case offers certain fascinating technical problems...

(FADING AS THEY LEAVE THE STAGE)

How to keep the teeth clean, for example...

(EXIT KLOTHE AND MELENKIUS)

(THE ROBOT LOOKS AROUND. HE STARES AT THE AUDIENCE, PICKS UP THE ORANGES, WAVES FOR THE CURTAIN TO FALL AND LEAVES THE STAGE)

THE END

The Quarterly Review

World on a Plate

Rask Trandon

Dones, TPB, 410pp, \$14.99

Trandon develops a trenchant thesis in this book, relating to his belief in the decline of science fiction as a significant literary genre, and attributing this supposed decline to recent technological advances. He argues that we need not the new from our writers, because we get it every day in our Amazon delivery. Notably, though, he fails to mention what proportion of those Amazon deliveries contain science fiction novels! Delivering such a provocative theory, Trandon needed to back it up with very substantial evidence, and that is not to be found in this volume. It will do his reputation as a ritual slayer of sacred cows no harm, but will do him no favours in the academic community. – *SWT*

Black Holes and Revelations

Muse

Space rock, £8.95 (www.play.com)

Muse are probably the most science fictional group of any standing in the world at the moment. This fourth album proper features tracks concerning space travel, Cydonia, super-massive black holes and alien governments. Your enjoyment of it, however, may heavily depend upon your tolerance for the singer's voice. If it catches you at the wrong time, you might think it the sound of an elastic band as it stretched, amplified beyond human tolerance.

Heard at the right time, however, it's a fist being clenched, a crossbow bolt being drawn back, a rocket taking off! – *SWT*

Jennie Rindon's Cosmic Machine

Nighton Dood, HB, 268pp, \$19.99

Well-known for her occasional appearances in such cult tv shows as *Space University Trent* and *Man versus Mansion*, actor Jennie Rindon has decided to dabble in novel-writing – to some extent, at least. I say “to some extent” because, as the more observant among you might have noticed, there is, as is so often the case, a possessive apostrophe and an “s” between the actor's name and the title of the book.

Which makes it all the more surprising that *Cosmic Machine* is so good. The writing is professional and clear, with action described well and atmosphere created adroitly, while the idea at the core of the novel, of a cosmic machine which could potentially destroy the mind of everyone in the universe – *if they happen to be thinking about love when it is turned on* – is chilling to the extreme.

This actor has clearly, somehow, come up with one startlingly good idea for a novel, and the publisher has hired just the right ghost writer to translate that idea to the page. That should not be a crime. Many people have great ideas for novels which they could never write themselves. Let's commend all involved for producing a book with such an important message – that love is important, and needs always to be protected from those who would harm it. – *HP*