

ISSN 1746-6075 (Online)

ISSN 1746-6083 (Print)

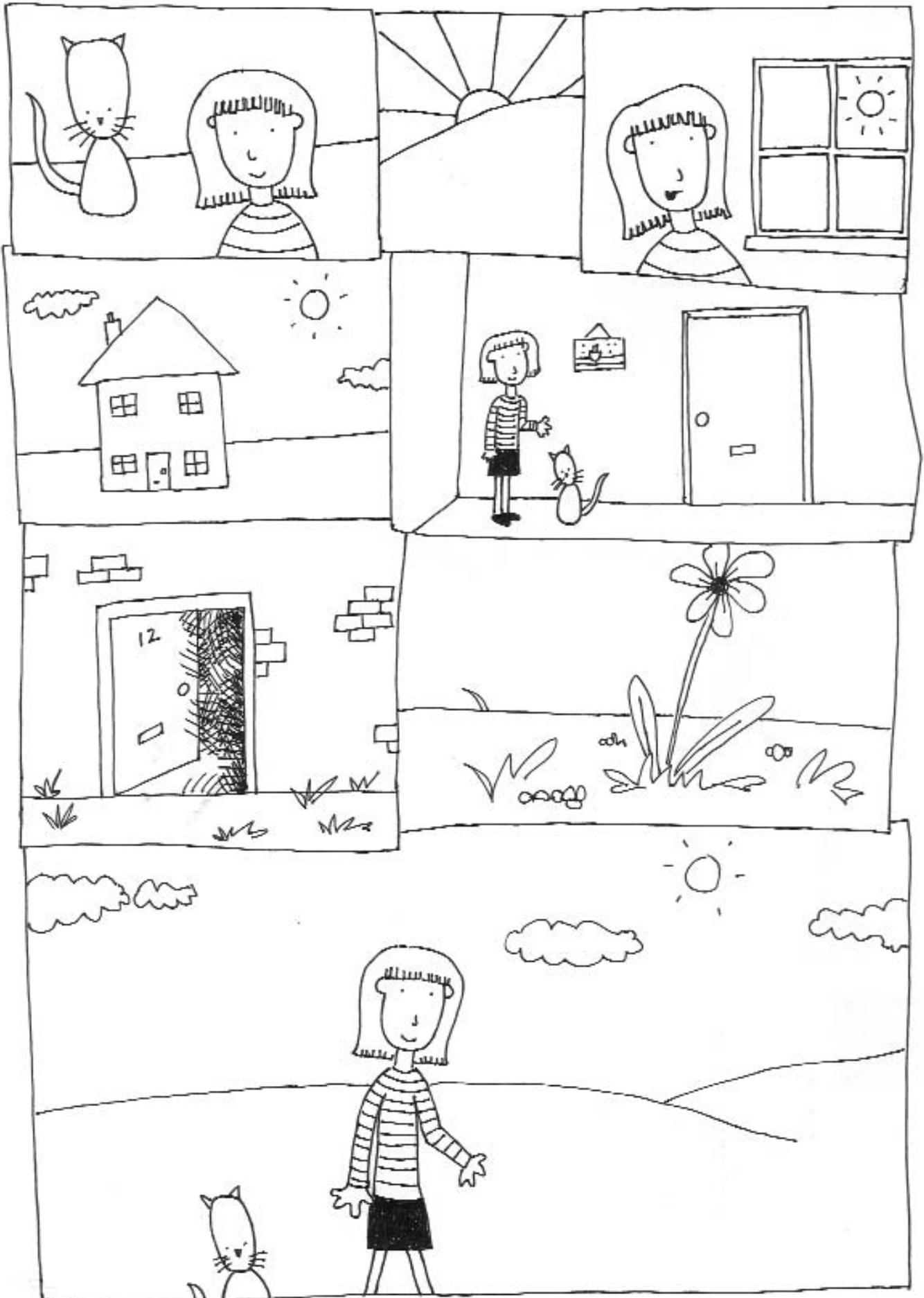
Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #12

In which Newton Braddell, now a Seasoned Adventurer, continues to Immerse himself in all Manner of Escapades upon the strange world of Kadaloor, studying Various Beasts as they Present themselves and making Numerous new Friends and Enemies, all the while remaining Utterly Befuddled as to the original Nature and Purpose of his Expedition into Space. As ever, the Braddell saga is Not Concluded in this Issue. £3.99

Autumn 2006



HELEN AND HER MAGIC CAT



Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 12

Autumn

2006

EDITORIAL

Newton Braddell Rides Again!2

NEWS

Lost Skies of Agramennon2

Strange Pets of History2

New Doctor Who Companion
Confirmed2

ROBOTS, IN A SPACESHIP

Robots Are Surprised!3
Walt Brunston

NEWTON BRADDELL AND HIS INCONCLUSIVE RESEARCHES INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE SAGA CONTINUES

John Greenwood

Captured by the Punggol5

The Great Traitor10

Peculiar Habits of the Rumbia

Beetles14

Awaiting Trial in the Rumbia

Colony17

An Android's House Guest20

Electric Brain Parasites23

An Awkward Cohabitation27

New Hope and a New Friend31

In Search of the Red Hill

Clementi35

THE QUARTERLY REVIEW

Cars39

The Descent40

Three Moons Over Milford40

Pirates of the Caribbean:

Dead Man's Chest40

THE BACK COVER

Helen and Her Magic Cat

Steven Gilligan

Published by
Silver Age Books

All works are copyright the respective authors, who have assumed all responsibility for any legal problems arising from publication of their material. Other material copyright SW Theaker and John Greenwood. Printed by Alphagraphics, Bull Street, Birmingham. Published by Silver Age Books on 11 September 2006.

Editorial

Newton Braddell Rides Again!

This issue is devoted to the devoon Newton Braddell, whose incomparably inconclusive researches have appeared in a number of our

previous issues. They continue here, as remarkably as ever.

As one saga continues, another begins – that of Helen and Her Magic Cat, written and drawn by master cartoonist Steven Gilligan. We hope this hilarious strip will be a permanent fixture on the back cover (or thereabouts) for many issues to come. – *SWT*

News

Lost Skies of Agramennon

The inhabitants of Agramennon on the planet Fargro are learning this year to cope without a sky above their heads. An all-consuming void appeared in orbit last month, leaving them staring into nothing from one midnight to the next. Reports suggest that life continues much as before, although a shortage of torches threatens to create conflict, and doctors report higher than usual levels of depression. Astrophysicists have no explanation for the phenomenon, but expect it to disappear within a matter of months, basing this conclusion on an analysis of fluctuations in its circumference.

Strange Pets of History

The Lagerton Museum of Social History in Birmingham is planning an exhibition on the strangest pets the world has ever seen, and the

art and literature inspired by them. Of course, the crab-bird of Julius Caesar will be front and centre, as represented by Michelangelo's marvellous sculpture, flown in from Italy especially. The sabre-toothed jellyshark, so beloved by Abraham Lincoln, will also make an appearance, and rumour has it that a member of this bizarre and rarely-seen species has been specially captured for this show. Sure to delight lovers of the arcane and the uncanny, this is an exhibition not to be missed.

New Doctor Who Companion Confirmed

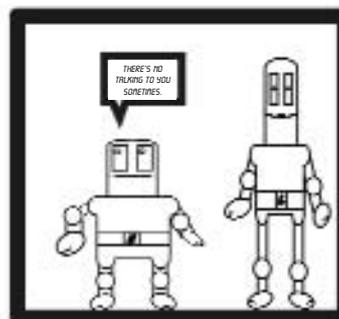
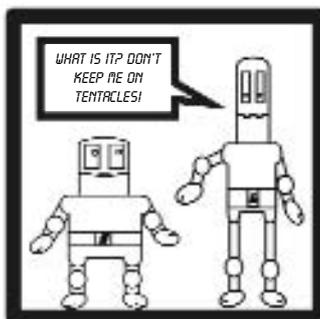
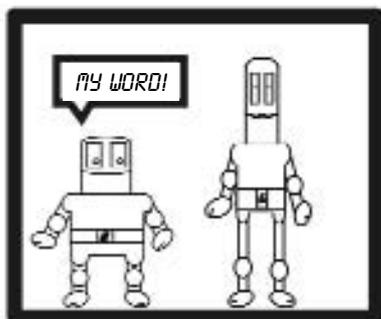
We have it on express authority that the Doctor's new companion in the Tardis will be Martin J Donovan. He has appeared on Doctor Who several times previously, portraying various creatures in full body costumes, such as the Voracious Terracrick, the Dasjon, and the 99xbraz Leader. Now he will move to the fore, playing Wholen, an alien crustacean who stands two metres tall.

Responding to early concerns by fans that the

character may prove difficult to work into storylines (as previously was the case with short-lived companion Nalnor, whose immunity to the Tardis's psychic circuitry made it necessary for

the Doctor to translate everything for him), Donovan said not to worry – everything has been worked out in advance, and viewers are in for the ride of their lives!

ROBOTS, IN A SPACESHIP



ROBOTS ARE SURPRISED!

BY
WALT BRUNSTON

Silver Age Books Order Form

All prices include postage and packing.

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Next published issue of TQF	£3.99	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Next six published issues of TQF	£23.99	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Next twelve published issues of TQF	£46.99	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

Sorry, we do not keep stocks of back issues, but see the website for pdfs.

Books

Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!	£5.99	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
There Are Now a Billion Flowers	£5.99	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Elsewhere	£6.99	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Elephant	£5.99	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
		Total	£ _____

I enclose a cheque for £___. payable to SW Theaker. Please send my Silver Age stuff to this address:

Name:

Address:

Email:

Please notify me by email when future issues of TQF are published

(If box not checked, email will only be used to contact customers in case of a problem with their order.)

Post completed order form to **Silver Age Books, 56 Leyton Road, Birmingham, B21 9EE**, or email it to silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk.

Newton

**And His Inconclusive
Researches Into
The Unknown:
the Saga
Continues**

John Greenwood



Braddell

Previously, in Newton Braddell...

A mysterious but compulsive computer game on his spaceship's on-board computer has made Newton Braddell, intrepid space adventurer, forget all details of his mission. After crash-landing on an unknown but strangely familiar planet, the captain of the Tanjong Pagar encounters a multitude of astonishing and weird alien lifeforms, as he attempts to retrieve both his ship and his lost purpose.

Captured by the Punggol

Escape I did, not through my own efforts I hasten to add, but through the blind mechanisms of chance, the roll of a whirring, metal die upon a gaming table of bedrock. The snaking passageways, crossing each other in frenzied arabesques miles beneath the surface of the alien planet, brought me after an interval of some days, incredibly, to the surface. I had not been made aware of the light sensors which had been installed on the shell of the *Tanjong Pagar*, and which cut the drill motor the instant that daylight broke into my lunatic's burrow, but I was uncommonly grateful for their existence, and for the foresight of my erstwhile hosts, the bird-people of Kadaloor. A few days removal from

the kind warmth of the sun, albeit an alien star, may seem a trivial deprivation to those who have not suffered it. As an infant cries inconsolably when separated from its mother, for it knows not whether the source of life will return, so I despaired of ever returning to the surface, and my sudden deliverance was one of the greatest joys imaginable. I kissed the Kadaloorian soil, unhelmeted and unprotected from the noxious microbes teeming therein. I danced and gambolled upon the rocks of that cheerless wasteland where chance had seen fit to release me.

For my surroundings were far removed from that grand and stately forest which was home to the bird-people. Not a single tree broke the sterile monotony of the horizon, and barely a handful of tough, scrubby bushes and half-dead clumps of grass clung to the pale rocks beneath my feet. Evidently I had travelled far from my origin, and perhaps it were as well that I had, for my leave-taking of the bird-people had been less courteous than I had wished, and I was still

anxious lest news of my unwitting rampage had travelled.

My first priority was to make contact with the local inhabitants, should they even exist, for what civilisation could flourish in such barren conditions? I dared not tinker further with the control mechanisms of the modified *Tanjong Pagar*, for fear that I might once again be plunged into a headlong descent through the interior of the planet. Abandoning the mutilated spacecraft, I shouldered my pack and struck out towards the setting sun, which direction I decided should be designated West, as it is on Earth. Such trifling reminders of home proved invaluable in preserving what little funds of sanity and common sense I still had at my disposal.

These assets were significantly reduced when, after four days' march across a featureless plain without a single indication of intelligent life, or even a landmark to judge my progress, I sat down on a flat rock and did not stand up again. My reserves of water were nearly exhausted, and any hopes of returning to the spacecraft were long vanished. I lay down on my back and looked up at the pitiless, orange sky, idly wondering how I had come to die in such ridiculous circumstances. Like the majority of humanity, when such narcissistic considerations had crossed my mind, I had pictured my own death in very different circumstances, a dignified and untroubled parting after a lifetime filled with worthy achievements. Never had I imagined that I would expire on an uncharted alien planet, attempting to fulfil a crucial but mislaid purpose. It appeared to me that life was no more than a tiresome joke, told by some would-be wit who has forgotten the punchline.

When I emerged from these disconsolate meditations, I felt a subtle change in the quality of light pushing against my closed eyelids. When I opened my eyes, the cause was immediately apparent to me: a vast black shape was blocking out the sun. I do not think that the ancient peoples of the Earth could have been more astonished by an eclipse than I was at that moment. The black square grew as it descended, and resolved itself into the underside of a large

flying craft, which landed as silently and as gently as a dragonfly on a lily pond, a few metres away from me. How could I have failed to spot such a vast and lumbering vehicle in the clear, unimpeded sky above me? The reader will be forgiven for thinking me a thundering incompetent, but there was a rational explanation for my oversight, which I learned soon enough from my rescuers.

There could have been no greater contrast between the Kadaloorian bird-people, and the creatures who called themselves the Punggol. No earthly analogue will suffice to give the reader an adequate mental picture of this race, for they bore no resemblance to any bird or beast I had ever seen or heard tell of. The Punggol were perfectly spherical in form, and at first sight I assumed that they were devoid of any visible features or limbs. They resembled nothing more than large, flaccid beach balls of a purple hue, with a slightly rubbery texture. Their method of propulsion under normal circumstances was to push themselves along by means of a series of internal weights that, when properly manipulated, altered the centre of gravity, causing the individual Punggol to roll. All this was explained to me in due time by the Punggol themselves, but I feel obligated to offer the reader a brief introduction to the peculiar physiology of my new hosts.

Moreover, the Punggol were able to manifest their various orifices and organs on any part of their continuous surface. Where an eye was needed, there it would appear, to gather what images the Punggol needed, before receding once again beneath the skin. Equally mobile and secreted behind layers of purple skin were the Punggol's equivalent of our mouths, ears and nostrils, as well as its reproductive and excretory organs. In addition to these, I glimpsed several fleeting features of uncertain purpose, but thought it rude to enquire further. The Punggols could produce all manner of flexible limbs from within their spherical bodies, which reminded me of nothing more than the tentacles of an octopus, and which were principally used to manipulate objects. Very occasionally, in circumstances of great urgency, the Punggols

could use these tentacles to propel themselves along the ground at high speed, but only for very short distances.

The description I have furnished of this singular species may give rise to feelings of repulsion and fear in the minds of those readers whose imaginations are wont to compose images of clarity too vivid for calm reflection. I admit to experiencing a slight trepidation on first encountering the Punggol, but even the most unusual sights become commonplace given time and sufficient exposure. The Punggol sensed my unease, and were kind enough to assume a fixed arrangement of their features whenever I was in their presence. Unhappily, their model for this approximation of the human visage was of course my own, so that I was continually surrounded by distorted reflections of my own face, moulded inexpertly onto the surface of those undulating purple spheres. These efforts to put me at my ease had precisely the opposite effect, but I felt it churlish to complain.

My attitude towards the Punggol was not initially so charitable. Once I had been taken aboard their cuboid aircraft, I was anxious to learn how they had managed to arrive at my location so quickly and so stealthily.

“Oh, we have been following you ever since you appeared on the surface,” was the cordial reply of the ship’s commander, an individual who went by the name of Bukit Batok. “Our ship is equipped with an effective cloaking device, and the engines are virtually silent in any case. You would not have noticed our presence had we not chosen to reveal ourselves to you.”

His glib reply enraged me. I had come very close to death in that stony wilderness, and I told him so without compunction. And to think that, every step of my weary journey, I had been dogged by a hidden pursuer, observing my toil and suffering with cool indifference! What was the meaning of this expedition?

“We might ask you the same question,” replied the commander, his replies translated after a short delay by my Dover and Somerset box. “A trespasser on the last sacred reserve of the Punggol is not in a position to be demanding explanations.”

Realising the delicacy of my position, I made my apologies as best I could, but insisted that I was unaware of the special status accorded to the lifeless plains I had been wandering. My protestations of innocence were accepted, but there was still some wariness on the part of the Punggols. “If we had suspected you of being an Insider, you would have been destroyed instantly,” the commander warned.

I could not help but enquire as to the identity of these so-called Insiders. The explanation furnished by my rescuers (or my captors, for my status was as yet undetermined) only served to further fuel my curiosity, and I managed to piece together the following account, which I offer to the reader as it stands, incomplete and almost certainly flawed.

I felt confident that the Insiders the Punggols referred to with such distaste were in fact the Kadaloorians, those gentle and highly developed avians whose company I had quit so suddenly. My breakthrough came when the commander happened to allude to the Insiders using the derogatory term “stick-faces”, clearly a reference to the graceful beaks of the bird-people. I was not a little relieved that, in my haste to escape from the juddering wreck of the *Tanjong Pagar*, I had neglected to don my helmet, with its long filter-tube projecting from the nasal area. The Punggol were of the fixed opinion that the Kadaloorians dwelt exclusively beneath the crust of their planet, which they knew only as Pung. Astronomical orthodoxy held that Pung was neither spherical, nor a flat disc as the ancients of Earth had once maintained. In spite of the not inconsiderable evidence to the contrary, the Punggol believed their planet to be a torus; that is, in the shape of a doughnut or, for the more savoury minded, a bagel. Moreover, this was a hollow doughnut, and the domain of the bird-people was thought to occupy the space inside. The sun in this hallucinatory solar system took the form of a large flat mirror, which merely reflected light from an obscure source the Punggol called the Deep Fire, as close to a deity as anything in their queer system of beliefs. Their two-dimensional sun threaded itself through the central hole on a daily

schedule, while Pung itself rotated serenely around its empty centre, a year being the measure of its full revolution. A Punggol map is a diagram that would baffle the most proficient cartographer. In the Punggol scheme of geography, all the inhabitable regions of their world lie on the inner rim of the doughnut, for the outer diameter sees little if any sunlight for at least six months of the year. This long ribbon of lifeless ice corresponds to the poles of our Earth. But there was an additional reason why the outer rim could not sustain life, quite apart from its temperature. For the Punggol had no conception of gravity in the ordinary sense of the word. It was their solidly held belief that objects were held to the inner circumference of Pung by centrifugal force alone, and any organism wishing to set up home on the outer rim would be instantly flung off by the same immeasurable energies. I could recall no other culture, primitive or otherwise, which had entertained such an absurd notion of its own place in the universe, but I thought it politic to keep such comments to myself while I endeavoured to learn as much as I was able about the Punggol and their beliefs.

It has often been said that there is a grain of truth in every myth, and the Punggol must have had some experience of the bird-people and their burrowing habits, for every instance of seismic activity in Pung's history was immediately blamed on the perfidious Kadaloorians and their incessant digging. The bird-people, bereft of any sunlight in their interior kingdom, were naturally covetous of the surface territory and, according to tradition, were persistent in their attempts to break out from the Inside and take over lands rightfully held by the Punggol. Earthquakes were just one of the tactics used to break the spirit of the proud race of purple spheres, and the Punggol were constantly on their guard against spies and blackguards amongst their own people.

Rarely have I met a more belligerent or less trusting race. While their society was riven by countless lesser feuds and intrigues, the Punggol tended to divide for reasons of political expediency into two loose coalitions, and a state of

open warfare had existed between them for many generations.

The origins of their mutual enmity were founded in an unseemly squabble over the country's most abundant natural resource: a mineral known locally as novena. The Punggol themselves had no use for this white, chalky substance, which lay in long, fat reefs beneath their barren country. Novena's value was only appreciated by the inhabitants of other nearby planets, whose monstrous cargo ships were perpetually in orbit above Pung, sending down transporter modules to remove the ore from the extensive Punggol mines. A broad, lifeless band of exhausted novena mines served to separate the two nations, who were both extracting the ore as fast as they were able, in order to buy weapons that could be hurled against each other.

The Punggol themselves were by no means certain as to the purpose to which their precious natural resource was put. They were not by nature an inquisitive race, and as long as their customers paid for their goods, they were satisfied. Some of the Punggol hinted that the soft, white rock was, under the right conditions, an effective explosive, which made me wonder why they did not employ it themselves as an aid to their mining. A contrary rumour held that novena was a type of narcotic whose efficacy was limited to a certain species of giant single-celled organisms who ruled over a watery planet on the edge of their solar system.

Whatever the purpose of the natural resource which nature had judged fit to bestow on the Punggol, it had made them rich, and with wealth had come conflict. There was not a single community of these spherical oddities that had escaped the ravages of sustained war, and no individual lived who could remember the day on which hostilities had not raged in some part of the Punggol territory.

Locked in such a fearsome struggle, why did the Punggol concern themselves with the activities of the so-called Insiders?

"The Insiders consort with the enemy," was the reply of the ship's commander. "They conspire against us all, pitting one faction against the other. Their ultimate aim is to

weaken our resolve and annihilate our entire race. All the misfortunes that we Punggol have suffered can be traced back to their meddling.”

My impressions of the gentle Kadaloorians could not square with this grisly description, but any attempts to alter their opinions were inevitably futile. One might have easily persuaded a man of the Devil’s benevolence. But the malevolent Insiders were a relatively recent addition to Punggol mythology, for the bird-people and their labyrinth of tunnels were discovered with the digging of the first novena mines. Before the unearthing of that fateful mineral, the Punggol had lived a simpler existence, rolling around the expanses of flat rock at peace with their fellows and unaware of the great wealth sleeping beneath.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked the chief of the purple beings, as we swept magisterially over the edge of the sacred reserve, and began to enter mining country, a land scarred by a thousand wounds, its skin blistered with rubble and quarries, and dotted with pale lavender cubes, hundreds of metres tall, which I correctly took for mining facilities.

“We are taking you to our capital, where you will be interrogated,” was the chilling reply. “We are not entirely convinced that you are not a spy for the enemy, even if you are not an Insider.”

The city had little to recommend it to the student of architecture. Constructed mostly in mauve, its buildings were no grander or more delightful to the eye than the Punggol mines, and clung rigidly to the aesthetic of stark, brutalist boxes. As we made our soundless descent into what I assumed were the grounds of some police station or army barracks, something caught my eye, a monument standing in a deserted plaza. Standing alone amidst that desert of straight lines, a humanoid statue mounted on a pedestal could hardly fail to attract my attention. I called to a guard, who revealed a tolerably human face on the near side of his round body, and asked the meaning of the statue.

His violet face creased in unfriendly laughter. “You are a cunning spy who pretends not to know of the Great Traitor!”

“The Great Traitor? Why would any society

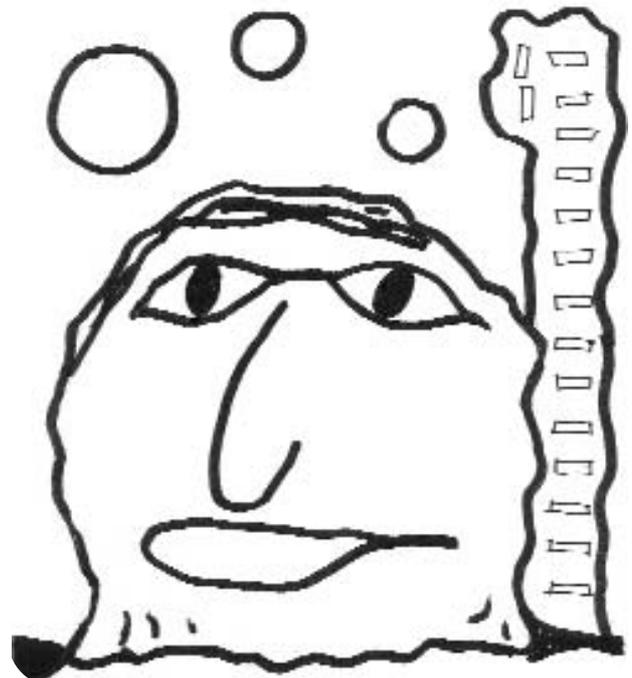
erect such a monument to a traitor?” I asked, but the guard’s face had been subsumed into his enveloping outer skin, and he stood there watching me without a word until the ship had settled and I was escorted out into a courtyard.

Ever since I had been taken aboard, my worst fears had been that the Punggol meant to imprison me. Now my worst fears were realised. Two or three of the purple globes butted against my legs impatiently, urging me forward towards a squat, windowless block. Thinking fast, I made a dash for it, and headed back towards the Punggol airship, but before I had travelled more than a few yards, powerful tentacles had ensnared my legs, and I crashed to the ground.

“I have done you no wrong!” I cried, as the Punggol guards bound me with their repulsive appendages, and lifted me bodily from the ground.

“You were caught trespassing on sacred ground! In all probability you were prospecting for new reefs of novena,” barked the ship’s commander. “That offence alone is enough to imprison you for a short stretch, say two hundred years.”

It appeared that the life expectancy of the Punggol was considerably higher than the brief century and a half allotted to humanity. The thought brought me close to despair.



“And if you are found to have engaged in espionage for the enemy, life imprisonment is the least you can expect.”

My cell was so cramped that I could barely sit upright. No ray of light could penetrate into this chill, stone pod, and the facilities were limited to a small hole in the floor. What is more, the chamber was round. Even the door was carefully shaped to complete the perfect sphere in which I was confined. Was this to be my home for the rest of my natural life? I refused to consider the possibility: that way madness beckoned.

The Great Traitor

“Ready to talk now, are you?” My interrogator sat at the tiny open doorway and viewed me with distaste. “Had enough?” A lilac tentacle emerged from his rotund body and poked at me inquisitively.

“Had enough of what?” I enquired. Was he under the impression that I had already been tortured? But I had only arrived here a few minutes ago.

“Oh, we have a tough one!” said the Punggol. “Well, we shall see how long you can hold out. In the meantime, let us see what we can learn from the contents of this bag.” He held before him my backpack, and began to unfasten the buckles with agile members. I could breathe easily on that score: there was nothing within that could incriminate me, even in the eyes of one of this distrustful species.

My empty water bottles were thrown aside, and my Dover and Somerset box shaken and rattled, but thankfully I knew it not to be damaged, as it was still operational, and interpreting the words of my captor without apparent error.

The Punggol had assumed a face distressingly like my own for the purposes of our conversation, and when he pulled the next item out of the bag, the expression of disgust which my own

reflected features assumed was something I would happily forget, were I able.

“What kind of debased monster are you?” shrieked the Punggol, dropping the item, and rolling away a few feet in horrified retreat.

I looked down at the offending article: to my mild surprise, I saw that it was the Bedoki puzzle I had accepted as a gift from the infant Kadaloorian. Carved from a round Bedok nut, the irregular pieces of the game formed a sphere when complete, as they did now. The sight was a reminder of happier times spent in the company of the benevolent bird-people. I instinctively picked up the Bedok nut, and cradled it in the palm of my hand.

“Put that down, I beg you!” screamed my interrogator. “How can you bear to touch it?”

I could not hope to understand the meaning of my captor’s distress, but I saw immediately the opportunity it offered. Uncurling myself from the curved recesses of my cell, I emerged into the corridor, and approached the terrified Punggol, holding the Bedoki puzzle in my outstretched hand, as though it were some form of weapon. The Punggol seemed to concur with that assessment, and shrank back into a corner, groaning piteously.

My demands were improvised, and had I been given time to consider at my leisure, I should have revised and expanded them. But in the urgency of that moment, my greatest need was for escape, and this I put at the top of my list. My Punggol interrogator, an individual named Bukit Paiyang, became my hostage, as I rolled him through the maze of corridors, fending off the incensed prison guards with a wave of my Bedoki puzzle. It seemed there was not one amongst the Punggol who could stand unflinchingly before the sight of that harmless child’s toy, and after a few hectic minutes I was out in the courtyard, my hostage quivering all over his violet body.

“If you obey my instructions, the Bedoki will stay in the bag,” I assured my rotund captive. “But doubt not that I will use it again, should it prove necessary.”

“What would you have me do?” cried Bukit Paiyang.

I pointed to the aircraft in which we had arrived. "For starters, we will acquire this ship. I assume that you are able to navigate such a vehicle?"

Whether or not he had the necessary skill to manoeuvre the metal cube, my Punggol hostage had no stomach for dissent, and we were soon rising unsteadily above the blunted spires of the city. I instructed my cowed pilot to take us towards the wide desert of abandoned mines and scarred hillsides that formed a buffer between the two warring tribes of Pung.

Once again my curiosity was piqued by that solitary statue depicting a figure that, if I did not know better, I would have called human. I endeavoured to learn all I could about the so-called Great Traitor while I still had the upper hand, for it was far from certain that my current position of power would go unchallenged. Bukit Paiyang, terrified of a further confrontation with the Bedoki puzzle, furnished me with the following account, although he professed astonishment that anyone should be so ignorant.

"Long ago, in the earliest days of Pung, we Punggol lived in harmony with each other, and with other intelligent species."

"Ah yes," I said. "All cultures have their mythologies of a lost innocence, a time of unblemished delight when communities lived in a state of simple moral virtue. But these are mere hankerings after a childhood misremembered and cleansed of all uncomfortable truths."

"You must allow me to tell the story in my own way!" protested Bukit Paiyang, with a peevish tone clearly audible from my Dover and Somerset box. "The story is a traditional one, and some of its rougher edges may have been polished down with repeated retellings. Nevertheless, you asked me to relate the history of the Great Traitor, and I can only speak of that which I know. Of that which we cannot speak, we must remain silent!"

Pausing only to wonder where I had heard that phrase before, I promised to desist from any further interruptions until the tale had been told.

"As I was saying," continued Bukit Paiyang. "In the antiquity of our civilisation, it is written that all the inhabitants of Pung lived in mutual

respect. It was a time of poverty, but a poverty that kept us free from vices. We wanted for nothing, which is the greatest good that can befall any living thing. Our societies progressed slowly, and the ways which had sustained our great-grandparents would sustain our great-grandchildren without the need for improvement or change. Our principal means of subsistence was grazing on the lichens and moulds that grew on the surface of rocks, for nothing else has ever thrived here. We had evolved our peculiar shape and means of movement to suit the environment we shared with the lichens. On a flat plain of hard, smooth rock, without cracks or crevasses to break up the continuous surface, a rolling ball is the most efficient mover, and we Punggol are built to cover great distances over such terrain. The humans – our brother race – were a recent addition to the ecology of Pung, and they had evolved under very different circumstances on another world. But, since they showed no interest in our delicious lichens, we had no reason to fear their arrival.

"For generations we lived side by side as considerate neighbours, until a day came when this balance was upset forever. The humans had been carrying out exploratory drillings deep into the bedrock of Pung, and it was not long before incredible rumours began to spread through both our communities. The analyses of the humans' drill cores had revealed a miraculous substance locked in reefs beneath the surface in unprecedented quantities. Novena was the name given to this mineral by the ancient humans, and it was claimed that representatives from far-flung galaxies would soon be flocking to our humble planet to purchase the raw material for sums that could scarcely be reckoned using the primitive counting systems then current. The joy with which we greeted this news can be imagined. We would be the wealthiest race in the galaxy, with unrivalled power and resources. The human drillers sent word out to potential customers, and we all waited for the money to start flooding in.

"Before any buyers had a chance to inspect the goods, a sabotage was uncovered that threatened to undermine the whole scheme. The culprit was a human going by the name of

Outram Park. He had been caught red-handed by a group of Punggol guards, interfering with the drilling equipment, and in possession of large quantities of an unknown chemical, enough to fill several large vats that were found on the back of his transporter. Park was arrested and held for questioning by the Punggol, in the very same gaol you were so recently a guest of. A basic analysis of the mysterious liquid was enough to raise the alarm: the chemical was a compound of Park's own devising. When mixed with a small amount of novena, a violent chemical reaction was sparked, reducing the novena to so much smoke and oxidised slag. Apparently, Park had planned to inject vast quantities of this volatile fluid directly into the novena reefs, destroying utterly the future wealth of our planet. His methods were clear enough, but his motives remained a mystery. He appeared of sound mind, and why would anyone in possession of their wits wish to reduce the best hope of his community to a heap of worthless, black soot?

"The Punggol authorities announced that Park would be tried for treason, but the human community balked at the idea: their notions of justice differed from ours to such a large extent that neither side could contemplate the trial taking place under anything other than their own judiciary. The humans demanded Park be transferred into their custody, and were refused, first civilly, but with increasing impatience, by the Grand Bukit of the Punggol.

"In order to forestall any further complications, the Punggol announced the imminent execution of the traitor. Such a provocation caused a seismic shift in the political landscape of the humans, and a newly formed party of anti-Punggol populists quickly overthrew the existing government.

"It was not until Outram Park was liberated from the Punggol prison by a mob of armed extremists, that negotiations between the two communities broke down, sabre-rattling ceased, and swords were drawn in earnest. The conflict was brief and decisive. Humanity was quickly decimated, and reduced to a few wretched bands of guerrillas huddled in remote caves. They had

not reckoned on the low cunning of the Grand Bukit and his government, who had been in discussions with inter-planetary merchants throughout the political period of the struggle, and had already purchased highly advanced weaponry on credit, with future deliveries of novena promised in advance.

"And so the great sabotage plot of Outram Park was foiled. Humanity was all but annihilated, and the Punggol could assume the enviable position of masters over a highly-coveted natural resource. It seems incredible now to think that nobody in a position to alter the course of events had the foresight to see what was coming next: of course the Punggol then turned against each other, and the warzone we are now crossing is the unhappy result."

As Bukit Paiyang concluded his narrative, my mind was left reeling, unable to compose so many new and astonishing revelations into any semblance of a whole, as I had been equally powerless to assemble the pieces of the Bedoki game. If Paiyang's story were even remotely true, then members of my own species had for many generations called this remote planet home. How they had arrived here, when, and to what end, were questions which I dared not ask myself, for fear that my own sanity would not tolerate the answers which might emerge. For now I limited my curiosity to one question alone.

"And what became of Outram Park, the Great Traitor himself?" I demanded of my purple captive.

"His fate is unknown," replied Bukit Paiyang. "Some historians maintain that he assumed the leadership of the human guerrillas, and died the death of a rebel leader, clinging to his threadbare ideals in the badlands where no Punggol dared roam. Others suspect that he was accidentally killed during his own rescue, but that the humans conspired to hush up the calamity, for fear that their Punggol enemies would capitalise on the news and employ it to further squeeze the morale of the human army."

Our craft was gliding soundlessly over great quarries, choked with rubble and the monstrous, rusting skeletons of mining machinery.

“But why did he do it?” I asked. “What were Park’s motives?” I was addressing these questions to myself, and did not really expect an answer. For who could enquire into the mind of a long-dead saboteur?

Nevertheless, Bukit Paiyang responded immediately, “Because of his great wisdom, naturally! He was trying to save us all, Punggol and Human alike, from the bitter fate we have drawn down upon our own heads. Had the novena never been discovered, then our two communities would have doubtless continued to enjoy peace and companionship for untold generations. He alone saw that neither race could enjoy the riches of their planet without ultimately destroying both, and he bravely decided to save us from ourselves, by destroying the source of our future miseries.”

“Poppycock!” was my first and, I must say, my lasting judgement of Paiyang’s historical analysis. “Park was no sage! Quite apart from the fact that this golden age of innocence of which you speak is no more than a cosy fairytale, it is apparent from your own account that it was Park himself who was the trigger for the orgy of destruction in which your people have indulged ever since. Just think what great heights your civilisation might have climbed to, had your new-found affluence not been squandered on this futile militarism!”

The Punggol was shocked at my suggestion, and waved a distressed tentacle before me. “You are mistaken! Outram Park was our greatest hero and genius! It is to our eternal shame that he was not recognised as such during his lifetime, but imprisoned as a traitor and threatened with execution. That is why we have erected that monument to him in our city, which caught your eye, and which serves as a reminder to all Punggol of how abominably we treated our human neighbours. Outram Park shall ever be a symbol of those extinct humans and their superior moral worth.”

An eye appeared on his violet surface in order to look balefully at the floor. His last statements baffled me, but I could not refuse to disabuse my hostage as to my own identity.

“But can you not see?” I demanded. “I am human myself!”

Bukit Paiyang made a noise that approximated laughter. “You? Human? I hardly think so!”

“But look at my shape! Do I not resemble the statue of Outram Park? I have two arms and two legs, just like he!” I cried, feeling rather discomfited that my membership of the human race should be called into question.

“Ah, all you anthropoids look alike to us Punggol,” was Paiyang’s infuriating reply. “In any case, true humans are wise, like Outram Park. They would never think of employing such appalling weapons to achieve their own selfish ends.”

“Weapons? What weapons? I stand before you unarmed!”

The Punggol gestured timidly to my backpack. “The thing in the bag,” he whispered with a tremulous voice, lest he wake the horrible item within.

“You mean the Bedoki puzzle?” I asked, remembering the horror that had greeted me at every turn when that toy was brandished. “There is something about it you fear?”

“Of course!” said Paiyang with difficulty. “It is the shape, you see.”

“The sphere?”

He flinched. “Please, do not use that word in front of me!”

“But you Punggol are yourselves spherical!” I remonstrated. “And how could such a simple form cause you distress?”

“Yes, that is the shape of our own bodies,” explained Paiyang in a low whisper. It was clear that the subject was not one was easily broached in polite Punggol society. “But in any other object, that form is hideous to our eyes, intolerable to our minds. It is a shape subject to the strictest and most inflexible taboo. Virtually nothing in the Punggol world, bar the Punggol themselves, is... well, the form you mentioned.”

“Spherical?”

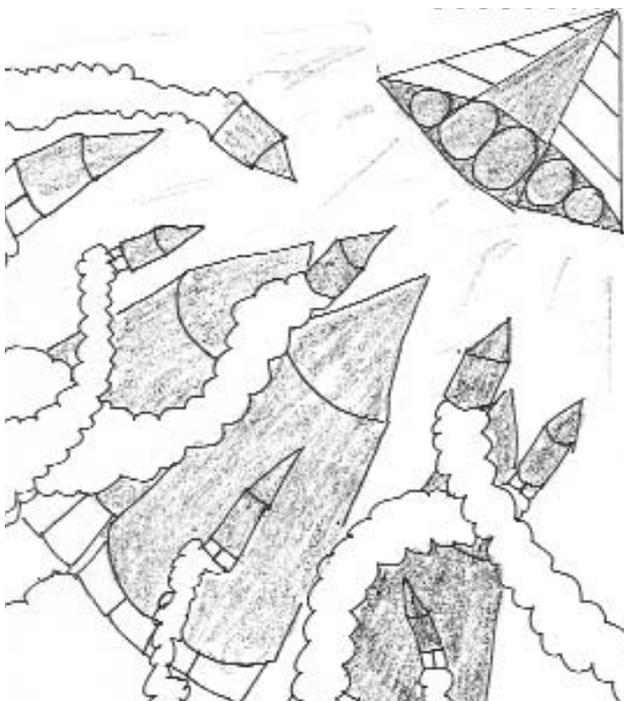
“Yes, yes, spell it out if you must!”

“Such an absurd taboo!” I protested. “Why, there must be a thousand natural objects, seeds,

fruit, raindrops, which take the form your race abhor!"

"Not so many as you would expect," said Paiyang. "Any plant species that put forth fruit of that obscene type were rendered extinct by our ancestors. And the revulsion we all share has its uses. Do you not recall the shape of your own cell at the prison? It was specifically designed in order to break the will of recalcitrant detainees. No Punggol has survived more than a few hours within those torture chambers without sacrificing a large portion of his understanding. That concave reversal of his own body mocks him, and eventually robs him of his sense of suchness, the integrity of his individual existence. Most long-term inmates of Punggol gaols are as good as dead, for they are no longer certain whether they are still alive. The prison guards are not much better, degenerate wretches who must spend their working lives in such close proximity to unimaginable suffering."

My estimation of the Punggol had sunk to a new low. Surely no more debased and irrational species had ever risen to dominate their environment, as the Punggol clearly were masters of the bruised and gutted terrain below. Gazing out of the cockpit window at the fleeting landscape, a flicker of darkness shot beneath us, and as I shifted my viewpoint, I saw it re-emerge on the



other side, enlarged. Another ship was approaching, and with one hand inside my backpack, I played idly with the Bedoki puzzle, currently my only trump card in this uncertain game.

A square of pale lavender light began to flash urgently on the control panel. Paiyang had noticed it too. "They're firing on us," he said without emotion, and I looked up to see an angry swarm of dark missiles buzzing towards us.

Peculiar Habits of the Rumbia Beetles

It may appear a morbid tendency on my part, but my immediate conclusion on realising that I had survived the destruction of the Punggol craft was that the universe had developed an inexplicable anomaly. By the judgment of any rational observer, our ship, and all living creatures unlucky enough to have found themselves aboard, should have been utterly annihilated by the attack. The vehicle, it appeared, had not withstood the force of the missiles, for I awoke to find myself surrounded by the debris of that singularly graceless aircraft. My former gaoler, and more recently my hostage, was absent, and I searched in vain for Bukit Paiyang's mortal remains. Scorched and twisted ribbons of black metal were all I discovered. And yet I had, by some miscalculation of the cosmos, survived not merely uninjured but entirely without inconvenience or mishap. My lightweight prison uniform had come through the ordeal intact, where solid panels of hardy alien alloys had been rent asunder as though they were mere paper. The

carnage spread over an area of perhaps a square kilometre of land, and it would require several minutes' journey on foot to reach beyond the evidence of the explosion.

My mind was fit to bursting with questions, and the discomfort of this condition was made more acute by the utter lack of means to answer them. For one, what had become of Bukit Paiyang? While I could not forgive him for my imprisonment, I nevertheless felt a pang of guilt that he might have perished with the Punggol aircraft. And if he, as I, had miraculously survived, where was my hostage now? And the enemy ship? I scanned the darkening, plum-hued skies and saw no black cuboids to trouble me. Very possibly they had assumed, on launching their missiles against us, that my fate was sealed, and had not thought it necessary to tarry any longer. Apparently they had underestimated my resilience. Was it possible, I mused to myself as I wandered aimlessly amongst the fused wreckage, that the Punggol weapons were effective against inanimate objects alone? Could such an explosive device exist? A foolish thought. I was, after all, a thing of mere flesh and blood, a quivering jelly of tissues and soft, yielding organs, infinitely less able to withstand an explosion than the floating, armoured cube of which I had so recently been a passenger.

If I had not resisted the missiles, then perhaps I had been rescued from them. But by whom, and to what purpose? And where were my benefactors now? Would any rational creature save a man from destruction, only to abandon him in this rubble-choked valley, alone in a lifeless, alien landscape? Questions bred questions, until my mind was teeming, and thirsting for answers.

I thirsted too in the more prosaic sense, for I had been walking, without any particular direction, for a considerable distance, and I carried neither food nor water. My surroundings were not promising: the Punggol craft had disintegrated in what appeared to be a disused quarry of immense proportions. Here and there were scattered small, flaky shards of a dull, white chalky rock, and it did not take me long to recognise that here was the substance known as novena, the source of the Punggols' great wealth, and

also of the state of continuous warfare for uncounted generations. It had no smell, and offered no clues as to the ore's ultimate purpose. A narcotic for a distant civilisation, as Paiyang had suggested? Anything was possible. I pocketed a few handfuls of the substance, for no particular reason, and moved on.

This, I concluded, was an exhausted novena mine: a wide, undulating furrow had been dug into the earth, and stretched to the horizon in either direction. It was a hundred metres deep, and its bed was a jumble of giant boulders. Apparently the Punggol had blasted their riches from the depths of the planet, and once the seam was exhausted, they had moved on.

I stood now on the precipice, overlooking this steep, artificial valley, and a desperate thought occurred to me: if water existed anywhere in this desolation, it might run at the bottom of these crevices. My chances of success were incalculable, but I had no choice but to investigate. I even considered the possibility that I might once again encounter my erstwhile friends the Bird People of Kadaloor. Could it be that their network of tunnels reached up to the level of these open-cast mines? Hope was beguiling my rational mind at this point, and I did not stop to consider that the Kadaloorians might not offer me so cordial a welcome as they had before. Whatever happened, by following the seam, I would at least avoid travelling in a circle, as might befall me in a desert without such landmarks.

My search was neither long nor arduous. Within a few moments, the unmistakable flash of light reflected on water caught my eye. Barely a thought could I spare for the possibility of contamination or impurity. Like a beast on all fours I knelt and drank, till the tiny, brackish pool was no more than a smear of wet mud between dry rocks. Only when I had had my fill did I notice the commotion caused by my presence. For surrounding the exhausted reservoir, creatures, unmistakably beetle-like in their form and expertly camouflaged against the grey rocks, barely large enough to discern with the naked eye, were scuttling hither and yon, in and

out of the once-brimming hole, with every appearance of frantic yet purposive activity.

My curiosity piqued, I bent closer, and observed their efforts. From the depths of the dried-up pool the beetles were unearthing what at first sight seemed to be tiny white seeds, but which I presently recognised as eggs. The larvae within pulsed and wriggled behind their protective membranes. A procession of beetles struggled up the muddy slope of the watering hole, each bearing a single egg, and the column stretched off in a crooked line, around boulders and between miniature gorges in the jumble of rocks that littered the bed of the ravine. Despite my own infelicitous circumstances, I confess I found myself fascinated by the organised efforts of these humble insects.

I do not discount the possibility that delirium had taken a hold of my senses. Certainly the heat and aridity of those desolate territories was not easily tolerated, nor had I ever shown any interest or capacity for entomology before now. Whatever the explanation, my whole attention was now fixed on these minute beetles and their collective project. I followed their march until I discovered a second pool of water, no larger than the last, and containing but a meagre mouthful of refreshment. As each worker reached the rim of the new crater, it rolled its precious burden down the slope, where the larvae vanished beneath the cloudy surface of the water.

Understanding dawned: these tireless labourers were protecting the future of their colony. No doubt the beetles' larval offspring could survive only when immersed in water. The crisis caused by my own gigantic thirst had set the colony at sixes and sevens, and now the nursery was being evacuated. Contingency plans had been activated, and the offspring saved from dehydration. It was a remarkable example of cooperative activity among the lower orders of life.

Unfortunately, my prolonged observation had renewed my thirst, and I was compelled to undo all the beetles' recent progress in a single draught. Naturally I experienced a certain measure of guilt at the destruction and pandemonium left in my wake, but these misgivings were outweighed by a sensation of nausea and

strong revulsion when I came to understand that I had imbibed several hundred beetle eggs along with the water. Regrets were futile: I had already swallowed the unborn larvae and would soon no doubt digest them with, I hoped, no ill-effects.

This remorse was short-lived: the intensity of the noonday heat necessitated that I seek out a further source of water. As I tracked the tireless column of insects on their mission, I began to ponder the following mystery: whence flowed this meagre supply of moisture? Close observation of the beetles' next underwater nursery provided the answer. Here, in a tight circle on the rim of the pool, stood a host of beetles, dissimilar in form to those I had followed on their travails. This new class of insect bore large, flat wing-casings, which dwarfed their grey carapaces. As the beetles stood facing away from the crater, these wing-casings sloped down towards the half-empty reservoir, and taken as one, they formed a kind of living funnel. I bade my thirst be patient, and persevered in my observations.

Presently my forbearance was rewarded: I watched as a droplet of water grew on the back of one of the circle. It was followed by another, and the process was repeated until a trickle of water ran down the sloping wing-case, and added to the gradually swelling reserves at the bottom of the pit.

So these remarkable creatures were condensing water vapour from the air, and collecting it in these regularly spaced reservoirs for the rearing of their young. The ingenuity of nature had never stood so high in my estimation until that moment. But, as I scooped up the hard-bought moisture into my mouth, trying my hardest to ignore the sensation of dozens of larval eggs passing over my palette, I knew that several questions remained unanswered on the subject of these remarkable beetles.

Firstly, the mechanism by which the beetles condensed water on their wing-casings was a mystery. They must, I reasoned, maintain their body temperatures at a much lower level than the ambient, at least those parts of their anatomy which were involved in the production of liquid water. I speculated that the beetles might

produce some kind of chemical coolant, which circulated in their blood, if blood they in fact possessed. I was, I hastily reminded myself, on an alien world. Nevertheless, the existence of trees, and possibly even of human-like anthropoids on this planet, encouraged me to assume that nature played by the same ground rules here that she observed on Earth.

Secondly, I asked myself, what prevented the accumulated water, so painstakingly harvested from the atmosphere in these reservoirs, from merely evaporating once more in the fierce desert heat? To that puzzle I could offer no suggestions, save for appealing once more to the vague notion of an organic coolant of sorts.

Thirdly, and this was perhaps most infuriatingly of all, it struck me as inexplicable that a species of insect, wholly dependent on a constant supply of liquid water for their successful reproduction, could have evolved to dwell in such a dry climate. Absurd that such a water-dependent race of beetles should have chosen such an arid spot to raise their young.

It is difficult to estimate the period of time I wasted in idle speculations of this kind. In my defence I must stress that the atrocious heat cannot have had anything other than a deleterious effect on the proper functioning of the brain. Nevertheless, there can be no excuse for my behaviour on this occasion. Less than a distant memory was my apparently essential mission, cut short by the *Tanjong Pagar's* malfunctioning. The whereabouts of that cannibalised vehicle was still more absent from my list of queries. Subsequent, and one might argue, equally pressing concerns about the fate of my erstwhile captor, Bukit Paiyang, and my own surprising survival were paid as little heed, as my entire attention had been swallowed up by the quotidian minutia of a nameless species of miniscule beetles.

But were they so miniscule for all that? The question might strike the reader as inapt, but as I crouched in that dusty, grey ravine, I happened to glance up where a shadow seemed to move, and saw two members of the insect colony, perched on a rock above me, waving their antennae in a purposeful manner. They appeared

vast, monstrous, and I told myself that here was a mere trick of perspective, perhaps a mirage or similar anomalous phenomenon caused by the extreme heat. Then, without a moment's notice, my hands were gripped behind my back by powerful, shiny black claws, and a hideous chirruping noise was troubling my ears.

Awaiting Trial in the Rumbia Colony

Thus for the second (but for what would by no means be the last) time since my unexpected arrival on this alien planet, I found myself taken captive. My captors: a race of unnaturally large beetles, whose reservoirs of water, painstakingly condensed from the air, I was now accused of purloining. No less a charge than mass murder was levelled at me by my invertebrate interrogators, for my alleged theft had deprived their larvae of the moisture essential to life.

That I persisted to maintain my innocence might strike the inattentive reader as churlish at best, even dishonourable. But I urge this reader to re-examine the facts of the case, and am confident that a more thorough understanding of my narrative will acquit me of such imputations. For while I freely admit that raging thirst had driven me to drain several small pools of water trapped between the rocks, and I may indeed have unintentionally imbibed innumerable microscopic creatures, my conscience remained clear. Never a squeamish or sentimental man, the fate of a handful of bugs caused me little anguish. But the beings in whose detention I now found myself were giants, over eight feet

tall, and if one included their antennae, taller. I had no reason to harm this race of oversized beetles.

My sole misgiving was the uncanny resemblance between my present captors and the diminutive species I had previously observed. Was it conceivable that they had grown to such vast proportions, and in such a brief instant? My reason rebelled at such an outlandish suggestion, but the only logical alternative was, if anything, more disconcerting still. Had I, in the manner of Alice in Wonderland, unwittingly ingested some naturally occurring shrinking potion, a chemical compound the effect of which had been to reduce my stature to that of an ant, easy prey to the heavily armoured beetles who now frogmarched me into their underground kingdom and cast me into prison to await my trial.

On this occasion, my cell was considerably more generous in size, and more orthodox in shape, than the Punggols' spherical chambers of confinement, designed expressly to attack the Punggol inmate at the deepest psychological levels, a cruel ruse which had failed utterly to dent my own endurance, unaffected as I am by the Punggols' peculiar phobia of their own rounded form.

To speak the truth, the accommodation provided me by my insect captors was more luxurious than certain youth hostels of my acquaintance back on Earth. The bed was at least as well sprung as that in my living quarters aboard the *Tanjong Pagar*. (Oh, but how I missed my erstwhile spacecraft, lost now in some forgotten corner of this treacherous planet!) A leather armchair had been very thoughtfully provided, as had a modest library of leather-bound volumes, containing many of my favourite boyhood tales: *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* among them. Over the week or so of my incarceration I busily reacquainted myself with these fondly remembered romances. The walls were decorated with faded but cheerful hunting oils: packs of hounds and red coated aristocrats bounded across the English countryside and across the walls of my cell, in pursuit of their unseen quarry. The Rumbia

beetles did their best to provide a cuisine fitted to my tastes, a favour for which I was grateful, for their own diet of grubs and seeds did little to inspire the appetite. Their beef Wellington was really quite adequate, even if I grew tired of seeing the same over-steamed spotted dick appearing alongside it in the serving hatch that was built into my prison door. A very acceptable red wine, the origins of which I could never ascertain, was always served, and did much to reconcile me to the constraints of my situation.

I had but scant opportunity to study the civilisation of the Rumbia, in whose hands my fate now rested, but the guards who patrolled along my wing of the insect gaol were usually content to answer any questions I put to them with the aid of my Dover and Somerset translation mechanism.

The Rumbia dwelt in a series of artificially created caverns, whose size and intricacy of design inspired both awe and respect, not only for the Rumbias' engineering capabilities, but also for their aesthetic sense. No squalid Kadaloorian burrows these, but lofty halls of cathedral-like grandeur, every inch scraped from the deep bedrock by innumerable pairs of tireless Rumbia pincers. Both the hue and texture of the stone were akin to the sandstone of Earth, with one noticeable difference: seams of unidentified minerals striated the rock, weaving undulating ribbons of ochre, tangerine, olive and copper green into the muddy yellow weft of the earth. The Rumbia architects had made ingenious use of this natural ornamentation and had in many places followed these mineral deposits with their arches, overhead walkways and pillars, giving an effect that may have lacked symmetry, but was nevertheless ineffably graceful.

Unsurprisingly, my impressions of the Rumbias' architectural achievements were limited to the brief and bewildering moments following my initial arrest, and subsequently to the view from my cell window, which happily overlooked one of the principal thoroughfares of the colony. Once I had tired of reading and re-reading the adventure novels of my youth, I spent many a fascinated hour observing the rest-

less, fretful lives of the beetle citizens in the streets below. It so happened that my prison had been carved into the roof of a grand chamber, with the result that the insects scurrying below me seemed no larger than they had before my mystifying transformation, an irony that was not lost on me.

Much that I observed from my crow's nest cell baffled me, and it was only with the assistance of my wardens that I was able to make any sense of this unquestionably advanced species. No less than sixteen distinct classes of beetle crowded the Rumbia colony, each with its own physical characteristics and social role. The vapour-condensing class I had already encountered. Their enlarged wing-cases marked them out from their fellows as they marched in columns to and from the colony's aquatic nurseries on the planet's surface.

I was soon struck by a puzzling anomaly: if the Rumbias were possessed of such capacious and secure lodgings as these, why banish their larval young to the vicissitudes of the parched and hostile exterior, where thirsty predators such as myself might exhaust their reserves in a single thoughtless gulp?

As with many similar riddles, my beetle guard furnished the answer: the Rumbia were not by nature a desert-dwelling species. Untold generations past, the Rumbia had lived a more comfortable existence in the humid swamps that had once existed here, before the discovery of the novena, and the mining operations which followed. Evolution had furnished them with the necessary faculties for a humid existence. The swamps might have evaporated, along with the moisture, as the novena mines fundamentally altered the continent's water table, but natural selection moves with considerably less haste than the interplanetary novena trade, and the larvae of the Rumbia still required both sunlight and water in abundance if they were ever to reach adulthood.

The fully developed beetles had, it was apparent from all I observed, learned to adapt to the darkness. One remarkable class of Rumbia, possessed of glowing abdomens, performed the task of streetlights, and spent the greater portion

of their lives clinging to the walls and ceilings of the caverns, emitting a ghostly mint-green luminescence for the benefit of their fellows.

The hospitality of the Rumbia was sadly short-lived. The prison guards, while loquacious enough on general topics, had all to a man refused to divulge any details of the Rumbias' judicial process, for fear of unlawfully interfering with the course of justice. This scrupulousness alone was some small comfort to me, and I told myself that any race who adhered to such principles must be able to comprehend the travesty of justice which my arrest represented. But in my heart I was not content, and the reader can well imagine my trepidation when the day of my trial finally rolled around, and I was taken from my comfortable cell, a space I had learned over the past two weeks to call home, and marched through a perplexing series of corridors, tunnels and gantries to the Supreme Court of the Rumbia.

Though prepared for a chamber of some considerable splendour, I nevertheless could not contain an audible gasp of awe as the two beetle guards manhandled me into the courtroom. It was a space teeming with life. The public gallery was crowded with chattering hordes of insects. At a table before the judge's desk sat my defence lawyer, a small, burgundy-hued beetle who I had never set eyes on before. He greeted me with what sounded to me like a tone of resignation. I took my place next to him and stared straight ahead as he shuffled through his papers, and a thousand beetle eyes fixed themselves upon me.

I will refrain from narrating the entire contents of the trial in detail. At times even I found myself drifting into a brown study, though my very life depended on the outcome, so I am sure that the reader would find such an account doubly tiresome. Suffice it to say that after a period of several hours, the Rumbia judge, a towering, grey-antennaed old monster, returned to his seat after a prolonged period of private cogitation, to announce his sentence. No jury was necessary to aid his judgement, an omission that struck me as noteworthy.

"The defendant has been found guilty of fifty nine thousand, eight hundred and four counts of

murder," chattered the judge, my Dover and Somerset box translating his dismal message. "It has been decided that he shall serve as a childminder to the Rumbia larvae, in perpetuity."

This last decision caused no small amount of excitement in the public gallery, and I could not disguise my bewilderment. I was to be given the task of childminder? Was this some form of community service established by the Rumbia courts? It seemed extraordinarily lenient, given the crime of which I had been convicted. I leaned over to whisper to my counsel, who was visibly shaken.

"What does this mean?" I asked him. "A childminder in perpetuity? How can this punishment fit the crime?"

The insect lawyer's eye stalks wavered. "Don't you understand?" he said. "You are to become the sustenance of the Rumbia larvae! Your living body will be consumed, in microscopic mouthfuls, by the sucking rasping mouths of our maggoty young!"

I felt the blood drain from my face. "So it is a sentence of death!" I managed to utter. "How long will it take them to eat me?"

The lawyer shook his head. "The task will never be complete. You will be kept alive for all time, fed intravenously with a certain sugar-rich solution that we Rumbia excrete from a dedicated orifice located behind our middle right legs. This syrupy nourishment will pass into your system, only to be milked out by the thousands of beetle larvae who suckle at your weeping sores. It is the cruellest weapon in the judge's arsenal, yet to one with a perverse sense of poetic justice it fits the crime. You murdered thousands of our own young, and now you will nourish thousands more, for the rest of time."

Even the Dover and Somerset could not translate my anguished, animal cries, as I was seized firmly by the arms, and dragged bodily from the courtroom by a bevy of Rumbia guards, as I writhed in agonised anticipation of the tortures that awaited me.

All hope of release had fled, but at that very moment when blank despair seemed to triumph utterly, an unexpected rescuer flashed into view. I can offer no rational account of what next tran-

spired, save to say that my captors found themselves flung away from me, crushed and broken by an unseen agent of matchless strength. The courtroom was awash with Rumbia blood, and as the massacre proceeded apace, the very walls of the colony seemed to melt, and my thoughts flowed out from the confines of my skull, and mingled freely with the objects of the outside world, like droplets of ink dissolving in a glass of water.

A face shimmered softly into focus. A human face. A face I had seen before, but on what occasion, and in what circumstances, I could not say. Its expression was kind, but professionally so, keeping its distance. A calm smile hovered around the lips and eyebrows. The eyes, pale green, seemed to regard me with mild concern for a moment, before the face withdrew, and I was left alone, staring at a spotlessly white ceiling.

An Android's House Guest

I raised myself with difficulty from a supine position on what I discovered was a kind of stainless steel gurney of the kind often used in hospitals. Indeed, my immediate surroundings reminded me of nothing so much as a small private clinic, although the machinery and instruments that lined the steel shelves were utterly unfamiliar to me. My grimy and tattered uniform, bearing the insignia which identified me as the Captain of the *Tanjong Pagar*, had been removed, and replaced with a voluminous white dressing gown. So the last physical evidence and reminder of my abandoned spacecraft had vanished. The thought saddened me, but I had to console myself that at least I was not being eaten alive by untold hordes of hungry

Rumbia beetle larvae. How I had escaped from that disconcerting predicament was still beyond my comprehension, but I hoped that answers would soon reveal themselves to me.

I began a minute examination of myself and my environment. The dressing gown, now my only vestment, was both comfortable and wonderfully insulating and constructed of a soft fibre with which I was not familiar. That did not surprise me much – so far everything I had encountered on the Planet Kadaloor, or Pung, or whatever new label my current hosts had chosen to give their globe, had been uncommon in the extreme, and why should it have been anything other? I was, after all, stranded on an alien planet, perhaps the first human being ever to find himself in such a fix. Unfamiliarity was clearly the order of the day, yet I could not help noticing how the flat, raised bed on which I lay was built to carry the human form perfectly. It even had an angled section at one end to raise the head, and a cushioned pad to support me. Perhaps the belligerent Punggol race were right, and humans did inhabit this world, or had done at some stage of its history? It was an intriguing thought.

I examined my body too, and found no signs of wounds or sores, or the bite marks of the Rumbia larvae which I had so dreaded. In fact, I felt like a man in rude health, and with that thought, I leapt down from the gurney and began to stride around my quarters, swinging my arms and performing the callisthenic exercises which I had been taught at spaceflight academy. While in the middle of my spinal twists, I was interrupted by a gentle hissing sound, as a door slid open and through it stepped a man of medium build, an intelligent expression, and entire baldness. I stood upright, vaguely embarrassed at the interruption, and tried to catch my breath. The face I recognised. I had seen it twice before now. Once, the same day, when I had awoken, and then before, I now realised, on the head of a statue in the great capital city of the Punggol, a statue of The Great Traitor himself, Outram Park.

A flicker of confusion passed over the man's face as he observed my antics, and he stood

there in silence, apparently unwilling to greet me formally. I strode forward to shake his hand, and introduced myself as a representative of the planet Earth, a cosmic pioneer stranded on his planet, and now of course deeply in his debt. As I spoke, I read confusion in the man's green eyes, and understood at last that my words were so much gibberish to him. But of course! My Dover and Somerset device was missing. Without that, no meaningful communication could take place between us. I looked anxiously around the room for any sign of the machine, or any of my former possessions, but they had apparently been removed.

"My translation machine!" I said with urgency to my host. "Where is it? Did you keep it safe? Without it I cannot hope to make myself understood! I only pray that it has not been damaged. You haven't thrown it away, have you?"

Naturally, these were wasted words, and the bald man stood motionless, observing my anxiety with indifference. How could I make him grasp my purpose? I approached him again, and spoke in loud, slow syllables.

"A box," I said, mimicking the device's use with my hands. "About so big, you see? Yes? A metal box, with a speaker here, and a microphone, mounted on the side. Dover and Somerset? You took it, didn't you?"

Again, nothing registered on my host's face, and I sighed, defeated. Perhaps I could search the rest of this building, wherever I was. I moved to the sliding door, but it failed to open. Perhaps the door recognised only its appointed masters: I was refused egress, and in frustration began to hammer on the metal panels with my fists, uselessly of course.

"Let me out, you confounded dunderhead!" I cried. "I must have my Dover and Somerset! Give it back to me at once, you thief!"

I am afraid that the trying events of the previous few days had worn thin my nerves, and this childish tantrum was the unseemly result. Perhaps apprehensive of my intentions, the bald man took prompt action. I felt a sharp, stabbing pain in my arm, before the powerful sedative began to flow from the syringe into my bloodstream, and an overwhelming urge to sleep

flooded my consciousness. I sat down immediately on the floor, and closed my eyes.

When I awoke for the second time, I had once again been placed on the gurney. My head was weighed down with a dull pain, and my limbs were stiff and sore. I clambered down from my narrow bed with irritation, only to slip on the polished floor, and find myself sprawling on my hands and knees. It was then that I happened to glance underneath the metal frame of the bed, and noticed a small box into which my possessions had been neatly stacked. There was my unwashed, dusty uniform, and with it the few mementoes of my voyage so far: the bedok nut of the Bird-People, a few trinkets made me by my Kadaloorian hosts as parting gifts, and of course, my Dover and Somerset translation machine.

The relief I felt when I confirmed that the device still operated can easily be imagined. But no sooner had I switched on the ingenious device, than a human voice emanated from its speaker.

"So that is what you were so angry about," said the voice.

I looked up, only to see my host, sitting on the far side of the wall, observing me with calm detachment. I had no idea how long he had been watching me, and felt not a little discomfited by the thought.

"It is a universal translator," I explained, speaking into the microphone, and listening with interest to the unfamiliar, but nevertheless wholly human language with which the instrument responded.

"I assumed as much," said the bald man, and for the second time in our acquaintance I felt a rich sense of my own stupidity. As though he could not have grasped that simple fact for himself! I cringed inwardly, and cradled the machine in my arms.

"I hope you will not attempt to escape again," continued the man. "You are not constrained to remain here, so there is no need for you to panic. The door simply did not recognise the genetic signature from your skin cells. But this is easily remedied. I want you to feel at home here. This is, after all, your house now."

I stared, and was on the verge of demanding an explanation, but another question seemed more urgent. "How did you rescue me from the Rumbia?"

"The Rumbia?" said the man, surprised. "I do not know what you are talking about. When I found you out there in the desert, you were close to death, it is true, but mainly from dehydration and exhaustion."

I shook my head. "The Rumbia!" I repeated, idiotically. "The giant beetles who had taken me prisoner! Think, man, think! You were there in the courtroom when I was being sentenced! You attacked the beetle guards and delivered me from an eternity of torture! You have my undying gratitude for that," I said, bowing my head humbly.

"There were no giant beetles to be seen when I discovered you in an abandoned novena quarry," replied my rescuer. "A few tiny insects were scurrying over your unconscious body, but I soon brushed them off. They were a harmless species in any case."

This matter was beyond my comprehension, and I held my throbbing head in my hands. It seemed useless to pursue the matter further until I felt more mentally robust. I decided to change tack.

"You must forgive me," I said. "I have not introduced myself. I am Newton Braddell, Captain of the *Tanjong Pagar*."

"Yes, I know," said the stranger. "I took the liberty of examining your possessions while you slept. I hope you will forgive my intrusion."

"Not at all," I said, warming to my host. "And you are Outram Park, I presume?"

I was fairly confident of my analysis. The resemblance was too close for coincidence. But the man shook his head.

"No," he said, with a trace of sadness in his voice. "You are mistaken. Outram Park is dead, and has been these six centuries."

At first I was incredulous, but a moment's reflection was sufficient to convince me that the man could only be telling the truth. Had not Bukit Paiyang, my Punggol interrogator, and later hostage, told me much the same thing? His story of the Great Traitor had taken place in

antiquity, in a time when peace reigned between those spherical, purple beings, and their now extinct human neighbours. If Outram Park was indeed a human being, or something very like one, then how could he have survived the many centuries of internecine warfare since? I felt foolish to have ever entertained such an absurd notion.

And yet! Here at least, sat before me, his hands folded quietly in his lap, was one such human who had weathered the storm of Punggol warfare. And wherever one man survived, surely a community of his fellows must exist, supporting and sustaining him. My heart beat wildly with the thought of it! An entire tribe of kindly people such as this, who might welcome me into their fold! The months of solitude had not been easy, and perhaps I had underestimated the psychological stresses of such an extended period of isolation, for a longing for human company now ached in my breast.

Perhaps the selfsame isolation could be blamed for my error of identification. I had not set eyes on another human being now for longer than I cared to remember. Was it not therefore understandable that I should experience some difficulty in separating the one face depicted in stone with the other, formed from living flesh, at a distance of several weeks?

"I must apologise," I said to my host. "You must think my behaviour uncouth and unusual. I have been through many testing experiences of late, and my thoughts have not their normal rigour. I thought I saw a resemblance between your own features and those on a statue in the city of the Punggol."

Without even raising an eyebrow, the man said, "Yes, that is indeed a likeness of me. But the mistake lies not with yourself, but with the Punggol, or rather, their ancestors. They fancy they have preserved the form of my master Outram Park, but instead they have only depicted Eunos, his android servant, who stands before you now."

Words cannot express my astonishment at this revelation. The most advanced types of robot I had encountered on Earth were of a different order entirely to this robotic masterpiece, whose

imitation of humanity I would surely have never seen through, had he not chosen to reveal it to me himself. The technological level of a civilisation capable of such feats of engineering and craftsmanship was barely imaginable. I confess I found myself rather shaken by the proposition of such an advanced group of humans. I should cut a very sorry intellectual figure in comparison with this robot's creators.

"You say your master, Outram Park, is dead," I said, rousing myself from mute astonishment. "Whom do you now serve?"

Eunos smiled graciously. "I now serve you, Captain Braddell," he said with a small bow.

Electric Brain Parasites

That was far from the last surprise of the day. I tried as best I could to recover from this one.

"Me? What on Earth have I done to deserve your servitude?" I asked. "Have you no other humans who you must answer to?"

Eunos shook his head. "None whatsoever, Captain Braddell. The humans died out many centuries ago. Few of them outlived Outram Park by more than a few generations. The war with the Punggol exacted a heavy price."

"And you have been alone ever since?"

"Master Choa Chu Kang passed away two hundred and twenty years ago. Since then I have wandered the planet alone, awaiting instructions."

"Why bother?" I could not help but ask. "You must have known that the chances of you finding another human master to serve were infinitesimally small. Why not make your own destiny?"

His answer came without hesitation. "I am programmed to serve humans," he informed me curtly. "Since the death of Choa Chu Kang, I

have been executing a programming loop which instructs me to seek out another human, whose wishes I must then fulfil. Today, I have met the conditions to exit that loop, and now find myself following a new module in my behavioural program. I have no choice in the matter, nor do I wish that it were otherwise. I am aware that you humans find it difficult to comprehend my behaviour, but you must always remember that the issue of free will is irrelevant to me.”

His reply was the cause of much head scratching and private philosophising in the weeks that followed, but for the time being I merely nodded sagely, and changed the subject.

Many topics of enquiry begged for my attention, for there can have been few times in my life when I found myself so absolutely at a loss to clarify my circumstances. Where, for example, were the remains of the stolen Punggol aircraft, destroyed by missile attack, while apparently leaving me unscathed? My own vehicle, the once star-spanning *Tanjong Pagar*, was also missing, and I would have gone to any length of trouble to recover that noble vessel, despite the damage done by the Kadaloorians' well-meaning tinkering. An overview of the planet's geography would go some way to addressing my ignorance in this regard, and would be the natural first step to recovering my spaceship, and I intended to request this information from my newly indentured mechanical servant.

Existential questions aside, the presence of Eunos himself raised as many troubling questions as he could possibly answer. Who was this Choa Chu Kang of which he spoke, his previous master? A Chinese name I suspected, and the features of the android were themselves of the oriental type, captured with surprising accuracy by the nameless Punggol sculptor. Eunos told me the history of this historic mistake without compunction. At the time when novena deposits had recently been discovered, he had been the property of Outram Park himself. In a spirit of self-preservation, Park had sent his android servant on the difficult mission to sabotage the novena mines, and when Punggol security guards had discovered Eunos in the act, he had

assumed the guise of his master, and, in the parlance of the criminal underworld, taken the rap.

I could not help but feel a certain moral repugnance towards Park for what appeared to me an act of the basest cowardice, but Eunos was quick to correct my mistake. Park was no more to blame for his actions than any man who employs a tool to do a job. The word sounded harsh coming from what appeared to be a human mouth, but that is simply how Eunos spoke of himself: a tool in the service of mankind. And no mean tool at that: after learning of his imminent execution at the hands of the inflamed Punggol judiciary, Eunos escaped single-handed from his prison cell. In truth he could have done so at any time, so versatile and powerful a device was he, but his mission had been to protect the true identity of Outram Park. Had the Punggol made good on their threats, they would have quickly discovered that their prisoner was no man of flesh and blood, but a being virtually indestructible, self-healing and impervious to pain. The rumours of armed mobs storming the gaol were mere inventions of the Punggol media to save the blushes of their political masters.

Eunos returned to his own master, only to find that the human frame can be weak in more ways than one: in his absence, Outram Park had committed suicide. There was no note, and Eunos, fundamentally an incurious creature, saw no reason to speculate. He immediately abandoned his mission to destroy all the novena deposits on the planet, and wandered out into the desert to seek out a new human to serve. This next master, a soldier in the anti-Punggol resistance, gave his orders, lived and died in his turn. It was a pattern that the android was to follow, over and over, for the next six hundred years, until Choa Chu Kang breathed his last some twenty decades ago. Since that day, as far as I knew, humanity had been extinct on Pung.

One aspect of Eunos's history interested me particularly: what had been the motives for Park's apparent treachery? Was he in truth, as Bukit Paiyang had claimed, a great seer, a man forewarned of the ecological disasters and military conflicts which would inevitably follow the discovery of such a rich mineral resource, and

who had in his wisdom decided that the only sane course was to remove the source of that wealth? I found that explanation hard to swallow, and privately held that Outram Park was far more likely to be creature beset by delusions, a madman bent on notoriety and self-destruction. The news of his suicide seemed to confirm my suspicions, but Eunos himself could not corroborate my theory.

“Master Park declined to explain the purpose of my mission,” the android informed me. “I was merely to carry out the mission, destroy all existing novena deposits, then return home.”

“But on a planet this large!” I exclaimed. “Even if you had never been detected in your sabotage, the task might have taken centuries.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Eunos. “But Park programmed no time limit into the module. I was only to cease my work when it was completed, or else I was captured.”

“But weren’t you even the least bit curious as to why Park wanted the novena removed?” I asked, but before Eunos had chance to reply I already knew the futility of my question.

“Curiosity is not a trait I have been programmed with,” he said mildly. “I am afraid that I have no definite answer for you, Captain Braddell. Master Park’s motives were his own, and so far as I know, he never spoke of them to any man. He was a solitary figure in any case, and shunned human company. The Punggol historians speak of an underground network of human saboteurs. It is true that once war had been declared, the humans banded together into guerrilla units, for the sake of their survival. But in the very beginning, it was Outram Park alone who decided to attack the novena deposits.”

“And so precipitated the war that has raged between Punggol and humans, and thereafter amongst the Punggol themselves, ever since,” I mused. “A bitter irony for one who was so keen to prevent violence, eh Eunos?”

The android shrugged in a non-committal way.

And so Eunos’s home became my own. Since the death of Choa Chu Kang, he had very wisely used the intervening time to design and build a habitation ideally suited to his next human

master, whoever that turned out to be. The house was a masterpiece of utilitarian design, an elegant white structure built on a high bluff overlooking the grassy plains below, for he had transported me far from the unforgiving desert where the Punggol had shot me down. Eunos had spent many centuries making improvements and elaborating on his initial design, and the house had been extended underground, so as not to spoil the graceful conical outline of the structure when viewed from the outside. I spent the first few days exploring my new residence, and at first I must confess to a recurring feeling of guilt, since I had neither built nor purchased this house, and had done nothing to deserve such a gift. But Eunos was adamant that the dwelling was now my property, and that he expected no reward or return of favour. He was programmed to serve the first human he came across to the utmost of his ability, and I had been fortunate enough to fulfil that role. I decided to name my new residence Woodlands Rise, after the large stand of trees which sheltered the house on three sides, and which formed a series of pleasantly shady walks.

Our meeting had taken place just in time too, or so I then thought. Minutes later and I would have had a maggot filled pit of eternal suffering to call my home. But when I spoke again to Eunos on this subject, he was unexpectedly brusque.

“Did I not tell you before?” he said with an impatient tone. “When I discovered your unconscious body, you were alone, lying in the bottom of an abandoned novena quarry. This nonsense about giant beetles is just the remnants of some fevered dream.”

“But I spent many weeks there, in the Rumbian prison!” I protested, and proceeded to furnish the android with a detailed account of my incarceration and trial, as I have already set out in a previous chapter of this narrative. But at the end of my story, Eunos was unconvinced.

“You softheaded buffoon!” he chided me, in a manner that seemed ill-suited to his role as my robotic servant. “Can you not see the flaws in your own account? You tell me that you were reading Jules Verne novels while in prison, and

that the beetles served you with beef Wellington and steamed puddings? Does that sound plausible to you?"

I had to admit that these details did sound, in retrospect, out of the ordinary.

"And how do you think that these giant beetles acquired oil paintings of English hunting scenes to hang on your cell wall? Eh? What a weak-minded fool you really are!"

I took exception to this kind of abuse, and had no hesitation in telling him so.

"My apologies," said the android. "I am afraid that my only models of interaction with other humans have been my previous masters. Choa Chu Kang always spoke to me in these frank terms, but if you wish me to moderate my language, I shall certainly attempt to do so."

His explanation mollified me to a degree. I couldn't help but wonder just what manner of man this Choa Chu Kang had been, to have imposed such immoderate language on his servant, and to have endured similar insults in return.

But a fever dream lasting for weeks on end? I cannot have slept for that length of time! And what could have caused such a delirium? I sought Eunos's advice again, and he offered to investigate the matter by performing a brain scan.

The scan was a painless and non-invasive procedure, and took only a few seconds. Eunos fed the raw data into his own processors, and at the same time printed out images of my own brain in cross-section, magnified many thousands of times. Of course, I have no expertise in this field, and could make little sense of the coloured patterns on the transparency. But after consulting several electronic medical manuals, Eunos was prepared to make his initial diagnosis.

"What's the news then, Doc?" I joked, unaware of the hammer blow that was about to fall.

"I am no doctor," said Eunos gravely, "but the symptoms are hard to mistake. You are suffering from a parasitic infection of the brain. A microbe, normally present beneath the skin of certain species of beetle larvae, has entered your

body, and travelled up your nervous system to the frontal lobes. I am afraid that the infection has now spread to every part of your brain."

"And the prognosis?" I asked, reading the worst from the android's stern expression. "Is it fatal?"

"Apparently not," said Eunos, and I breathed a long sigh of relief, prematurely as it turned out.

"So, what's the cure?"

Eunos shook his head. "If the parasite is caught in the early stages of infection, then there is hope. But in your case, the microbe has been allowed to reproduce to such an extent that any surgical intervention now could endanger your life, or at least cause irreparable damage. Motor functions could be destroyed utterly. Short-term memory would almost certainly be affected. Other areas of the brain would be vulnerable too, but it is impossible to predict which, or to what extent."

"But you said that the infection was not fatal!" I shouted, grasping at this meagre straw of hope. "So why are we worrying about it? Can't I just live with it? It causes me no pain."

"True, there is no physical pain associated with this infection," agreed the android. "But you are likely to suffer psychologically. In fact, I would say that you have already suffered an acute attack. Your imprisonment at the hands of giant beetles was a hallucination caused by this parasite. This microbial organism, just like an electric eel, has its own source of electricity, albeit on a microscopic scale. It is a means of self-defence against predators not much larger than itself. A tiny electric shock, produced by a natural chemical battery, deters would-be predators."

"So when I drank the water from those tiny pools," I interrupted, "I also ingested thousands of beetle larvae, and with them, the electricity-generating microbes that live on their skin."

"Exactly," nodded Eunos. "The microbes normally feed on the larvae's dead cells, but when they enter the human blood stream, they tend to proliferate in the brain, where the tissues are most similar to that of the beetle larvae. But it is their electric discharges that cause the real problems. They disrupt the synapses in the brain,

the cells which send their own tiny electrical impulses from one to the other. These electrical impulses are the physical basis for thought itself, and any interference from the microbes can cause chaos on the microscopic scale, and on the scale of human psychology, severe and sustained hallucinations, paranoia and psychotic attacks.”

“So you’re telling me that those giant beetles never even existed?” I asked. “They were merely a projection of my diseased consciousness?”

Eunos sighed with apparent exasperation. “Again, yes,” he said.

I made a mental note to remind him later not to use that tone of voice again. Perhaps Choa Chu Kang had enjoyed being condescended to in this way, but I certainly did not.

“Your pre-existing feelings of guilt,” continued Eunos, “were magnified and dramatised during the episode. You were acting out a morality play within your own head, with you as the protagonist and, ultimately, the victim. A rather pathetic notion, isn’t it?”

I frowned. “Are you using the word pathetic to mean ‘full of pathos’, or in its pejorative sense?”

“Does it matter?” asked Eunos. “The important point is that we now understand the cause of your delusions.”

“Are they likely to recur?” I asked anxiously.

“Almost certainly,” said the android, without a trace of sympathy. “It would be unheard of for the psychosis to disappear. The most likely scenario is that you will suffer longer and more frequent attacks as time passes. In some cases, the patient descends into a virtually permanent state of madness, and emerges rarely.”

I began to wonder whether a sentence of death might not have been preferable to this psychological sword of Damocles, and it was with a heavy heart and little hope that I put my next question to the mechanical servant.

“How can I be cured?” I implored him.

The android’s Asiatic features did not flinch. “I do not know,” he replied, folding his arms. Were I a less tolerant man, I would have instantly leapt upon that insolent creature and pummelled that tranquil face until it was no

longer recognisable. But as I hastened to remind myself, such a display of violence would serve no purpose: Eunos could not, so he claimed, feel pain, and had he wished, I had no doubt that he could have crushed me like a fly in his metal grip.

I had to think fast before despair caught a hold. “Right!” I said decisively, although I lacked any strength to make a decision. “Here’s what I want you to do...”

“You’d like me to research a cure for the parasitical brain infection?” anticipated Eunos.

“Yes! That’s exactly what I want you to do!” I cried, relieved that at least the android had some capacity for using his initiative. “Do you think you are capable of such a feat?”

I had aimed to pique his pride with that last remark, but I should have known that Eunos had no such vice to exploit. “We shall see,” was his only reply. Soon afterwards he withdrew from my presence to begin this challenging mission, and I sat down on the polished metal floor of the clinic and sobbed into my hands.

An Awkward Cohabitation

My relationship with Eunos, my android manservant, despite my earnest endeavours to maintain an amicable atmosphere in the house, was marked by regular misunderstandings, contretemps and loggerheads. The reader might consider it inappropriate to speak of my dealings with an android in terms of a relationship and, logically speaking, I am forced to agree with him. One does not maintain a relationship with one’s desktop calculator or washing machine, however idiosyncratic these devices might appear to us in their operation. They are mere tools, to be employed as we see fit.

But try as I might to apply a similar rationale to Eunos, his resemblance to a bald middle-aged man of Han Chinese descent was so perfect that daily I caught myself thinking of him as a real person, and had to adjust my thinking accordingly. The matter was not helped by Eunos himself who, as we have seen, had taken Choa Chu Kang as the model for his behaviour. With every untoward incident between myself and Eunos, my estimation of the dead man's character dipped a little further.

To give an example taken at random: one morning soon after I had been diagnosed with brain parasites, I awoke very early and suddenly in my living quarters to find Eunos standing at the foot of my bed, bellowing demeaning insults at me.

"Get up at once you swinish sluggard!" thundered the android. "Are you going to fester there all morning, you shiftless cockroach? The best part of the day is already wasted!"

With such comments as those he yanked the covers from my bed, leaving me to feel the chill blast of the air-conditioning. The robot's contemptuous stare made me ashamed of my nakedness, as foolish as that might sound, and I hurriedly dragged a sheet around myself and sat up, blinking and amazed. As soon as I had recovered my faculties, I demanded to know the meaning of this ungentlemanly intrusion.

Instantly compliant, Eunos politely explained that it was in such a fashion that Choa Chu Kang had desired to be roused whenever he overslept. He was a man, so I gathered, who felt all too keenly the brevity of man's life, and wished to waste not a minute more than was absolutely necessary in idle slumber. He slept, so I was given to understand, no more than five hours a night, and consumed large doses of stimulants to keep his mind whetted and in pursuit of his work.

"And what was the nature of this work?" I asked the android.

"Choa Chu Kang was by profession a seismologist," replied Eunos. "It was his life's ambition to map all the tectonic plates beneath the surface of the planet."

"A highly laudable aim," I commented,

revising upwards slightly my opinion of my predecessor who, despite his eccentricity of lifestyle, had been nevertheless a man of science. "And did he complete this project?"

"No," said Eunos blandly. "He died before the planet's fault lines could be fully charted. It was his addiction to stimulants that killed him in the end."

Another bitter irony, I thought. A man whose dedication to a scientific puzzle was exactly what prevented him from fulfilling his quest. One thing still bothered me and I put the question to Eunos. For whom did Choa Chu Kang work? If he had been employed by a research establishment of some kind, then might a remnant of human civilisation not persist, even now?

"It was purely a private hobby," said the android, dashing my hopes of genuine human company with those few words. "Choa Chu Kang was a recluse. Even in his lifetime, the surviving members of the human race were scattered thinly across the planet. It is likely that you are the very last representative of your species."

A sobering thought, but I knew that Eunos had unwittingly spoken an untruth. For back on my home planet, countless hordes of my fellow men swarmed over the Earth, and showed no sign of nearing extinction, or had not when I embarked on my interstellar journey.

"And have you continued to work on Choa Chu Kang's task since his demise?" I asked Eunos, more in the way of conversation than anything else.

The android shook his head. "He left me no instructions to do so. The day he died was the last day I spent in his study."

This last remark struck me as odd, and I wondered whether it was really I who was the sluggard. "You mean to say that Kang's research has not advanced a single iota since he passed away?"

"Why should I?" said Eunos mildly. "He cannot profit from my aid now."

"Yes, yes," I said. "But don't you think he would have wanted you to continue his work?"

Eunos failed to see the sense of my argument. "Choa Chu Kang is dead," he kept repeating, as

though I had lost sight of this plain fact. "His work ended when he did. My programming instructed me to cease serving Kang on the day he died. Since then I have been busy preparing this house for future masters."

Was I imagining it, or did I hear a faint sense of injured pride in that last remark. For the umpteenth time I reminded myself that it was futile to project my human personality traits onto this machine. "And a very nice house it is too," I said, "But I think it would be best, given what you have just told me, that you continue with Kang's work, and complete the tectonic map of the planet. It would be the honourable thing to do. I will help you if I can."

"That will not be necessary," said Eunos. "I can continue the project more efficiently without human intervention. Even while Kang was alive, the work might have been finished had he left the calculations to me, instead of which he insisted on checking everything himself, resulting in many errors and a great deal of wasted time."

Again, I had to tell myself that this was not real impatience on the android's part, but only my own interpretation of his words.

"Very well," I said. "It will be a source of great satisfaction to me to see the realisation of Kang's dream."

"Am I to assume that my research on your parasitic brain infection is to be abandoned?" said Eunos.

I started. "No, of course not!" I said, a little petulantly. "Do you have to have every little thing spelled out for you? A cure for the brain disease is, naturally, my paramount concern!"

"As you wish," said Eunos, leaving me alone to collect my thoughts.

While the android carried out his allotted task, I found myself very much at a loose end. That the robot could perform most tasks with far greater competency than I could ever hope to was undeniable, yet I still felt his rejection as a positive snub. I spent several days exploring all the wings and rooms of my new residence in a mood of surly resentment. I discovered an extensive library deep in one of the underground levels of the house, and this soon became my

favourite retreat. I spent whole days together there, ensconced on an armchair, surrounded by teetering piles of books and charts which I pored over. Of course, all the volumes housed there were written in a language wholly unknown to me, and my Dover and Somerset device was useless in this regard: it had no function to translate written scripts into my own tongue. Nevertheless, I tried to absorb what I could from illustrations, diagrams and especially maps. I was most happy the morning I finally unearthed a complete atlas of the planet, Kadaloor or Pung, or whatever other names it bore. I was reluctant to disturb Eunos while he was engaged in his research on the parasites which still threatened to overwhelm me with madness, but a little instruction from him helped me to locate the house on a large island continent in the northern temperate zone of the planet. The android also provided me with a translation of the key, and thereafter I was able to make a good estimation of my route so far.

In contradiction to what my erstwhile hosts, the Bird People of Kadaloor had assured me, it appeared from my atlas that Kadaloor was not solely a planet of forests. As I had discovered for myself, there were great swathes of land that had been decimated by novena mining, and were now swallowed up by the desert. But my maps indicated other terrains as well: mountains and rivers, lakes, grassy plains such as those which the house overlooked, and other features that I could not comprehend.

So Eunos pointed out to me, the house he had built stood on the very end of a peninsula, at the south-westerly corner of a large island continent. He had chosen that very spot, so he said, after many decades of travel and comparison, having judged it the most suitable site for human habitation: secure, aesthetically pleasing, as well as providing adequate supplies of fresh water, with a climate that was variable but never extreme. From this point, I could trace my path backwards, across the desert that bounded the Punggol territory to the northeast, and further away, the great forest that dominated the bulk of the island to the east, home of the Bird People. Even so, my calculations were estimates of the

most general kind. It was impossible to pinpoint the probable location of my spaceship to anything smaller than a square several hundred miles on its side. Undaunted, I continued my studies, and planned out in my mind an expedition to recover the remains of the *Tanjong Pagar*, and then I could set the android slave to the task of restoring it to its original design.

Meanwhile Eunos and I saw very little of each other. I tended to avoid his company unless I had a specific request to make of him. I was uneasy in his presence, and felt as though he begrudged my intrusions and questions. Silly misgivings perhaps, but to one unused to androids of this advanced type, it was well nigh impossible to banish my natural emotional responses.

There was nothing at all about the android's appearance to excite suspicion that this was anything other than a genuine person of flesh and blood. Although I never enquired too closely about the matter, from chance remarks dropped here and there by Eunos himself, I understood that he was composed of a metal skeleton, surrounded by synthetic muscles and skin. The muscle tissue was purely cosmetic, as motors attached to the metal bones themselves provided movement. What struck me as most odd about Eunos was the fact that the calculating components, his "brains" if you will, were not located exclusively inside his skull, but was distributed throughout his body in many identical circuits and processors. Should he have had the mischance to become decapitated, he would still be able to function more or less as normal, until such a time as he was able to construct a new head.

I did not witness this macabre feat for myself, nor did I wish to, but Eunos assured me that it was the case, and I had no reason to disbelieve him. There was so much else about my companion and his behaviour that was at the very least highly eccentric. Eunos did not sleep. Naturally, as an android powered by an electric battery, he did not need to, and could recharge by simply plugging himself into one of the many solar panels fixed to the roof. Consequently, he was busy working either on a possible cure for my brain disease, or at other times on

completing Choa Chu Kang's seismological map, twenty-four hours a day. His diligence made me feel guilty whenever I was not usefully employed, either sleeping or just sitting out on the balcony watching the clouds and the afternoon sun, and very soon I found myself spending more and more of my time in the library, working on my own plans and projects. I began to understand the reasons why Choa Chu Kang had become obsessed with his seismological survey, to the extent that it had been the indirect cause of his death. I felt it simply intolerable to spend so much time in wasteful idleness, when Eunos was toiling ceaselessly to carry out my orders. I toyed with the notion of ordering him to sleep for at least eight hours in the twenty-four, even if this were to be a sham of sleep, simply to assuage my guilt. But I decided against it, for fear that my reasons would be misunderstood, or perhaps understood only too well.

Several times during the next few weeks I experienced a recurrence of the hallucinations that had first assailed me out in the desert. The content of these waking dreams was markedly different from then, and thankfully the colossal beetles made no reappearance. Most of my hallucinations now seemed to figure Eunos himself. I suppose this is only to be expected, given that he was the principal subject of my daily worries and concerns.

On a typical occasion, I awoke from an afternoon nap to find the android beating me around the face and head with what appeared to be one of my own shoes. The assault was vicious and sustained, and although the android declined to speak during his attack, I could read the absolute hatred in his eyes, as I lay on the floor, uselessly trying to defend myself against the rain of blows. After a few seconds, I succumbed to the violence, and fell unconscious, in which state I remained for several days. When I finally recovered my senses, I furiously sought out the android and demanded an apology, only to be informed that the entire episode had been an invention of my unconscious mind. Had I any facial bruises or cuts? In his customary unflappable manner, Eunos pointed out that I was unin-

jured, and that my story was merely that: a fiction woven together by the misfiring synapses in my brain.

Naturally I was anxious for any good news from Eunos's medical research, but he refused to offer me false hope, and maintained that he was still studying my brain scans. I tried, without success, to put the matter from my mind, and went for many long, lonely walks in the countryside surrounding the house. I am no naturalist, but I gained some pleasure, and distraction from my woes, in the observation and study of alien flora and fauna. I began a sketchbook of those specimens which caught my interest, and slowly improved my skills as a draughtsman. I made the mistake of showing these sketches one evening to Eunos, in the vain hope that he would be, if not impressed, at least politely interested in my efforts. Instead, after a cursory glance at my amateur efforts with a pencil and pad, he showed me the many large volumes of natural history which lined the walls of the library, many illustrated with high quality coloured holograms. My little drawings were less than paltry in comparison and, as Eunos was quick to point out, wholly redundant. There was virtually nothing about the organisms of the planet not contained in these authoritative encyclopaedias. Outwardly I concurred, but privately decided not to share any of my future projects with the robot. I knew I was behaving irrationally, but could not pretend I felt otherwise. I had begun to despise Eunos.

New Hope and a New Friend

At some point during my stay at the house of Eunos, the android, I decided to take stock of my situation, to draw up a list of objectives

achieved, and those yet incomplete. In the event, the second list proved a good deal longer than the first, and I shall attempt to summarise it below.

My irresponsible fixation with a child's computer game, stored on the navigational computer of the *Tanjong Pagar*, had in some way led to my forgetting even the most basic outline of the mission entrusted to me by my superiors, with the result that I had not the slightest notion of my objectives.

Nevertheless, given that my crash-landing on the surface of this planet, following some ill-advised hacking of my own into the navigational computer, was purely accidental, I judged it highly probable that my mission required me to continue on my journey through space to another location in the galaxy. In all likelihood, my sojourn on Kadaloor was no more than a distraction from the main assignment. Therefore, it was imperative that I should recover the wreck of the *Tanjong Pagar* at the earliest opportunity, and make it spaceworthy once again, possibly with the aid of the android Eunos. Once this hurdle had been overcome, it should be possible, I reasoned, for my android slave to perform a systematic scan of the ship's computer memory banks, in search of clues to the content of my mission. Should this search prove fruitless, I speculated about the possibility of performing yet another brain scan on myself, in the hope of recovering those mislaid memories. Surely I cannot have permanently forgotten such a vital nugget of information as my mission! Do we ever really forget such things, even if they might be, for one reason and another, temporarily inaccessible?

I worried too about the growth of my brain infection, and could not discount the possibility that further and more frequent bouts of hallucination might prevent me from carrying out any or all of these tasks. But there was little I could do on that score until I had more definite answers from Eunos. Patience was all I could contribute to that undertaking. I did my best to put the delusions of the past, my imprisonment at the hands of gigantic insects, aside. A layman in psychiatry I might have been, but my intuition

told me that sanity depended on this, not dwelling on past traumas, whether imagined or real.

This effort was sometimes hindered by thoughtlessness on the part of Eunos. He had been accustomed to serving his previous master, Choa Chu Kang, with a dietary regime broadly Oriental in character and, having always been a man of wide-ranging tastes, I saw no reason why this should change. However, I was forced to take exception when a dish of boiled beetles and their larvae in a soy and ginger sauce was placed before me at the dinner table. I laid down my chopsticks as carefully as I could, for fear that my mounting fury might lead me to snap them in two.

"Is this some kind of infantile joke?" I demanded, rising from my seat, red in the face.

Eunos looked at me with an expression of condescending serenity. "Is there something about tonight's meal you dislike?" he asked, all innocence.

"Yes, there jolly well is!" I replied warmly. "And I should think you know perfectly well what the problem is, unless you have blown one of your brain circuits, you mechanical booby!"

Eunos then informed me that Choa Chu Kang had often enjoyed a dish of cooked beetles, a traditional delicacy in his culture.

"And had you no thought to the associations which this concoction would have for me?" I demanded, still furious despite his protestations of innocence. "Given my recent psychological stresses?"

The thought had never entered Eunos's head, or so he confidently claimed. I had little choice but to give him the benefit of the doubt on this occasion, but declined to taste the dish he had prepared, careless of whether his feelings were hurt.

I am conscious that some readers might judge me to be self-indulgent in narrating these trivial spats, but this is just one among dozens of similar incidents, which serves to give a flavour of the conditions I had to endure in this period.

Quite apart from my uncertainty about the location of my spaceship, and the details of my mission, there were several other unanswered

questions which, although not quite vital, were nevertheless intriguing in the extreme. For one, what was the ancestry of this Choa Chu Kang? Had his kind migrated to this planet from Earth at some point in the distant past? If Eunos's story contained even a grain of truth, then humanity might have roamed the surface of Kadaloor for over a millennium. How had they arrived here? After much procrastination, I resolved to ask the android for a full explanation. I encountered him one morning while out walking one of my regular routes. He was sitting in a leafy glade, apparently motionless, staring at a rock. It was so rare to find him unoccupied, that I took a chance, and joined him in his meditations. After a long period of silence, I put my question to him. His reply took me aback.

"I don't know a great deal more than you yourself," he replied, with surprising candour and modesty. "It is clear enough that human beings are not a native species to this planet, but just how far back their colonisation can be traced was always a matter of some controversy. Of course, all the masters I have ever served were born and died on Kadaloor, but their heritage remains clouded in doubt."

I smiled. "You are mistaken Eunos!" I retorted, enjoying for once the opportunity to correct him. "You say that all your masters were born on this planet, but there is one exception."

"Oh?" he enquired, picking up a small nut or pebble from the forest floor and examining it closely as though it were of intense interest.

Was that a fleeting trace of irritation on those mechanical features?

"Yes, you are forgetting that I myself am not of this world. I am, I suppose, an extraterrestrial being to you! A native of the planet Earth, that's me. Does that shock you?"

I had been deliberately saving up this bombshell for an occasion such as this, with the hope of seeing Eunos astonished and bemused. Nothing could have been further from the truth. He shrugged and looked away momentarily. "Very well," was his comment.

"Is that your only response?" I demanded, a little put out.

"What kind of response would you like,

Captain Braddell?" replied the android in a tone close to impertinence.

"I just thought you might show a little interest," I complained, feeling deflated. "It's not every day you get the chance to meet a being from another world, is it?"

"You forget, Captain Braddell, that I am incapable of curiosity, although I have reminded you of this fact on many occasions. Rest assured that I have taken note of your other-worldly origins, and will not forget it. But it is unreasonable to expect me to pretend an enthusiasm which is alien to my nature."

Eunos stood up and, putting the pebble in his pocket, prepared to quit my company. There was no arguing with him, for Eunos was, as on most occasions, in the right. But I was not yet willing to give up the fight.

"So I take it that you want to know nothing more about how I got here, the circumstances of my home world, my mission here on Kadaloor?"

"If you wish to tell me such facts, I will certainly listen," said Eunos, turning back to where I sat morosely with my back against a tree. "But I cannot see how they are relevant to the task at hand."

"You cannot judge for certain until you have heard them," I remarked, rather astutely so I thought.

"In that case, I would be most interested to hear about the nature of your mission, Captain Braddell," said the robot. I got the impression that I was being humoured.

"As a matter of fact," I began, acutely chagrined, "I have forgotten the precise details of my mission, but no doubt it is of the gravest importance."

Eunos put his hand in front of his mouth for a minute. To disguise a smile of amusement? Surely not. "You have forgotten your mission?"

"Yes," I said, stonily. "And I was wondering whether you might be able to help me recover that memory. You might use one of the brain scans you performed on me. If you could spare the time from your busy schedule," I added archly, noticing that once again, Eunos was bent double, rummaging amongst the leaf litter on the forest floor and ignoring me.

Of late he seemed to have been spending an inordinate amount of time wandering uselessly around the surrounding countryside, instead of carrying out the crucial assignment with which I had charged him. So far I had shied away from upbraiding him about this shirking attitude, but my solitary walks were being spoiled by my always bumping into the fellow, or espying him on some hilltop, standing motionless, deaf to my shouted greetings.

"My time is yours to command as you wish," replied Eunos now, secreting more random items in his coat pockets, "but I suspect that I am on the verge of a breakthrough in my research into the brain parasites."

I leapt to my feet, overjoyed. "Are you serious?" I cried. "What makes you say that?"

Eunos brought out a handful of his finds for me to see. "During our conversation, I have been examining the molecular structure of these seeds," he said. "I suspect that they might contain a chemical compound that acts as a naturally occurring antidote to the disease currently afflicting you. However, only further research in the laboratory will confirm or deny that hypothesis. I hope you will understand if I waste no more time, but return directly to the house. There is much to be done."

I assented without hesitation, and he stalked away up the hill through the avenue of trees towards our shared residence in silence. Hope had rekindled itself in my heart, and for the rest of the day I trod the hills and valleys with a lighter step. I made several detailed landscape sketches, some of the most competent I had achieved to date.

It was also on this day that I first met Raffles, who was to become my constant companion for many of my subsequent adventures. Raffles first appeared to me as I was busily cross-hatching the leaves of a large tree-fern I had sketched while sitting on the banks of a wide, slow-flowing river. He slithered out from the undergrowth, and looked up at me inquisitively.

He was as strange a creature as I had yet encountered on that planet of oddities. Less than a foot in length, not dissimilar from a snake in shape and movement, but endowed with a



covering of fur, as soft as a mouse's, and pure white in colour. Limbless, but with surprising agility, the creature snaked towards me and began to investigate my boot. Its face was neither wholly mammalian, nor reptilian. It had whiskers and a snout, but the eyes, of that piercing pink colour so characteristic of albino organisms, were narrow and glinted with a snake-like intelligence. They were also, so I later learned, double-lidded. I would hate the reader to conclude that Raffles was an animal of malevolent appearance, although I am afraid that the poverty of my description might lead him to exactly that conclusion. On the contrary, Raffles had a matey look about him, a sort of genial curiosity entirely absent in the android. And perhaps it was that very difference that attracted me to Raffles. I decided to keep him as a pet, and named him after a Great Uncle of mine, to whom I fancied I saw a subtle resemblance in the animal's whiskery visage.

Raffles seemed as pleased to make my acquaintance as I was to make his, and he spent many hours asleep in the pocket of my cardigan. His habits were by no means nocturnal though, and, in his irregular periods of activity, he would creep around the house, hunting down the insects which formed his staple diet. I had to prevent Eunos from destroying, or at least

ejecting from the premises, our new house guest. I cannot say that the android fully understood my reasons for keeping the animal, and I would have been uncomfortable explaining them to him, as it was in part his own diffidence and haughtiness that had driven me to seek out a more sociable companion. After our initial disagreement, Eunos asked no questions about Raffles. No doubt he had already decided that this was just another symptom of the encroaching brain disease, or maybe just another pointless aspect of human behaviour that simply defied rational analysis. It was always my suspicion that he disliked Raffles, and found his presence repulsive in some way, but that would have been to make the mistake of attributing human emotions to Eunos who, as he never ceased to remind me, was supremely non-human.

That albino creatures existed on Kadaloor as well as on Earth was in itself a point of interest, to me at least. There were many such analogies between the natural history of the two planets, analogies which I was at a loss to explain, and could only wonder at. Many times, on my explorations of the land surrounding Woodland Rise, the familiar shapes of trees and flowers could have almost persuaded me that I was back on Earth itself, only to be jolted back into reality by the sudden appearance of a woodland creature or plant so un-Earthlike in appearance that it confounded the imagination to wonder how such weird organisms might have evolved.

After dark there was little danger of confusing this world with my own. For one, the moon was missing, and it is difficult to describe how disconcerting that absence is to one who has never experienced it. The constellations were completely foreign too, and in my more fanciful moods I imagined some impatient deity shaking the sky like a snow globe to rearrange the pattern of the stars. It goes without saying that all of these constellations were recorded in minute detail in several exhaustive volumes of astronomy that rested on my library shelves. I cannot remember ever bothering to consult one, although I spent many long evenings staring up at the night sky with a growing sense of awe. It was not something that I expected Eunos to

understand, and of course he did not, but that had ceased to irk me to the same degree.

To be frank, I had begun to spend more and more of my time doing precisely that which I knew would baffle and provoke my android servant. It was as though I wanted to prove myself superior to him by engaging in those activities which to his mind were the least productive and most pointless. I had trained Raffles to slither from a pocket on one side of my cardigan to the other, on my command. The task had taken me three weeks of patient effort, and cost the lives of hundreds of grasshoppers as bribes, but I had accomplished it. All the while, Eunos grimly toiled away in his laboratory, in pursuit of a cure for the parasitic disease which was growing daily in size, infecting more and more of my brain, colonising my memories and warping my thoughts.

In Search of the Red Hill Clementi

Columns of smoke were rising again from the green horizon. Clumped together in twos and threes, they might have been the campfires of some advancing army, and were I not confident that no such armies roamed this region, they might have caused me some vague unease. Humans had deserted this land, save myself, and I was only an accidental tourist here. "Forest fires," Eunos assured me, when I pointed out the charcoal yarns unravelling towards the heavens. "They often happen at this time of year," commented the robot, scanning the horizon with his telescopic vision, far superior to my merely human powers of sight. "It would be safer if you did not venture out into the woods for a while. These blazes are unpredictable. The winds might even blow them in this direction. Fortunately,

the house is completely fireproof."

"Oh, good," I said, squinting at the smoke once more. One or two of them had vanished abruptly. I felt a vague sense of disappointment, however inapt that might seem. I suppose I would have welcomed a little excitement in my sedentary existence. I had become rather comfortable of late. Perhaps too comfortable.

It is a remarkable quality of human beings that they can become used to almost any conditions of life, however arduous, unfamiliar or bizarre. The last category comes closest to describing my own circumstances during the long period I spent living at Woodland Rise. I was alone, perhaps the last human being in existence, on a planet many thousands of light years from my home, where the dominant species were, apparently, a race of flightless birds and another composed of warlike purple, undulating spheres. I had no living companion save Raffles, an albino snake-mouse of limited intelligence but voracious appetite for grasshoppers. My location in the galaxy was a mystery, as was the whereabouts of my crashed spaceship. My chances of ever returning to my home planet were bordering on the infinitesimal.

In the credit column of my life's balance sheet, I had become, through mere chance, the lord and master of a handsome and well-appointed house, complete with an android manservant of great talents, but surly manners.

Finally, parasitic microbes had infected my brain, and had no compunction in meddling with my brainwaves, causing hallucinations, panic attacks, paranoia, night terrors and other disturbing psychological phenomena.

The purpose of my existence was less clear than it ever had been. For my whole life, during my childhood and youth, the future had been a wide and brightly lit corridor, with a series of easily read notices pointing me in the correct direction. Should I have ever wandered away from the main avenue into fruitless or dangerous byways, kindly figures of authority were always on hand to steer me back on course. At the age of five, along with many other boys of my acquaintance, I had decided that I would become an inter-planetary explorer. Ten years later,

unlike the vast majority of my playmates, I was well on my way to achieving this goal. Another decade on, and after overcoming countless obstacles, setbacks and the competition of my peers, I graduated from the Spaceflight Academy, and it was with a sensation of near disbelief that I embarked on my first solo mission into space.

From the perspective of my deckchair on the veranda of Woodland Rise, all that hectic diligence looked very distant. I was drifting, all my bold intentions forgotten, pottering around on a backwater planet at the edge of the galaxy. But, entirely unexpectedly, I was happy. It took me a while to notice it, and almost as soon as I had, with the perverse logic which has always seemed to characterise my fate, it all changed.

The new turn my life was about to take was announced, appropriately enough, by Eunos. I was taking my customary afternoon nap on the terrace, enjoying the autumn sunshine, when the android appeared and, without warning, tore the sunhat from my sleeping face, and shook me brusquely by the shoulder. I sat up immediately, my brow furrowed in annoyance, and the thought crossed my mind, not, I confess, for the first time, whether it was philosophically or even physically possible to murder an android.

"We must leave immediately," said Eunos. I bridled inwardly at the note of authority in his voice. This sounded less like the suggestion of an underling, and more like an order.

"To what end?" I replied, struggling to maintain my cool.

Eunos thrust a printed sheet of paper into my hands, uselessly it turned out, for the page was printed in a script alien to me. I sighed and handed the page back to him.

"Please explain, in English," I said wearily.

"By studying the genetic structure of certain seeds, I have discovered facts pertinent to your brain infection," said Eunos.

I goggled. "Yes? What is it? Do you have a cure?"

"Not as yet," was the dispiriting reply. "But progress has been made. The plants native to this continent cannot offer a cure, but I am of the opinion that another, related species might well

provide a key to combating the parasites. It is a species of plant known as the Red Hill Clementi, and it grows only in a small mountainous region on the island of Senja."

I tried to think back to my abandoned studies of Kadaloor's geography, but the name failed to register. I prompted Eunos for more information, and he explained that Senja was an island continent, isolated from its nearest neighbours by many thousands of sea miles in any direction. It was also, as far as we were concerned, in the antipodes, and an arduous trek of many months lay ahead of us, back through the territory of the Punggol, and crossing through the great forests of the Bird-People before delving deep into lands which even Eunos spoke of vaguely.

For a moment, lying there on my deckchair, with a crushed ice cocktail melting slowly in the afternoon heat, and Raffles sleeping quietly in my shirt pocket, I considered calling off the whole thing, and letting the brain parasites have their victory. The prospect of journeying in the sole company of Eunos did little to dispel my lethargy. In the end, it was my abiding sense of sheer terror, at the depths of madness which awaited me should I fail to act, that propelled me into action.

I leapt up from the deckchair, and quaffed my cocktail in a single icy gulp. It was the last I was to taste for many years.

"Are we packed and ready to leave?" I asked the android.

"No, Captain," said Eunos, taken aback, I suspect, by my alacrity.

"Then why are you wasting time standing around here?" I chided. "Saddle the horses and let us be off!"

As ever, Eunos's grasp of figurative speech was incomplete. "We have no horses," he said blandly. "No such animals exist on Kadaloor. As an alternative, I suggest that we take the hovercar."

"We have a hovercar?" I asked, intrigued by the prospect.

"I believe that is the closest word in your language, yes."

It was entirely typical of Eunos that he had chosen to keep the existence of this vehicle a

secret from me until now. All this time it had been hidden away in an underground garage, “to prevent the sunlight damaging the paintwork”, according to Eunos.

As a neatly concealed trap door slid aside, and a pneumatic platform raised the vehicle silently to ground level, I could see at once that the contraption in question bore precious little resemblance to any car I had seen on Earth. In shape and colour it looked like a blanched almond. Its matte surface was devoid of windows, handles or devices of any kind, and it exuded a kind of other-worldly serenity as it sat there, absolutely motionless, about six feet off the ground. The vehicle was large enough, I estimated, for at least a dozen passengers, and once inside I was relieved to find that the designers had made provision for separate living spaces, sealed off from one another by adjustable screens. I had dreaded the prospect of being cooped up for months on end, with no escape from the android’s disapproving looks and belittling comments.

I decided to make it clear from the outset that I would be spending the lion’s share of our travelling time alone, studying. Eunos seemed to fall in with that suggestion readily enough, and he had a surprise for me, he said, which would aid my studies. Since Eunos had quickly learned and adopted my own language, my Dover and Somerset device had fallen into disuse, nor had I missed it when Eunos had, without my knowledge, taken the instrument into his workshop. It emerged now transformed: a flexible metal eye-stalk protruded from one end, and a small, semi-spherical screen was mounted on the front panel. Eunos had converted the Dover and Somerset to a reading device, which displayed its translations on the globular screen in a fast-moving stream of text. I thanked him sincerely for his efforts, but he shrugged off my gratitude with the air of a long-suffering wife.

The mood of conviviality was broken when it came to the question of Raffles. I insisted that he accompany us on the journey. To leave him behind now, to fend for himself, was unthinkable. He was a tame creature, no longer used to foraging for his food. But Eunos had strong

arguments against me. “We will be travelling through climates wholly unsuitable to such a small, vulnerable creature,” he pleaded. “And it will not always be possible to secure suitable food.”

“Nonsense,” I replied. “Raffles is not a fussy eater! Just yesterday I discovered him eating one of my socks.”

“In any case,” continued Eunos, it would be unhygienic to keep a small animal like this in the confines of the car. Think of the droppings. And he might scratch the upholstery.”

I suspected this was the real reason behind Eunos’s reluctance. Eventually a compromise was reached. Raffles would accompany us on our quest, but he would be confined to a transparent box for the majority of the journey. I felt sorry for the poor creature, as he slithered into his new home, and Eunos closed the lid with an impatient gesture.

My own quarters would be similarly reduced for the duration of the trip, but at least I would have the opportunity to explore more of the planet’s surface, and from a relatively safe viewpoint too. Most of the hovercar’s internal space was allocated to me, naturally enough, as Eunos could survive comfortably in conditions so cramped that they would cause acute claustrophobia in any normal human. He spent most of his time lying flat on his back in a coffin-like cubby hole on the base of the structure. He was plugged into the car’s own navigational computer, and could monitor our progress from there. That left me with little responsibility. Keen to road-test the new vehicle, I ordered Eunos to switch the car to manual control. Predictably, he balked at the notion, but eventually gave way, and relinquished some control over the vehicle’s speed and steering to the miniature cockpit mounted on the wall of my living quarters.

One of the most striking features of the hovercar was a clever device by which it appeared from the inside entirely transparent, like floating inside a gigantic sliver of ice. But step down from the hatch, and the dull beige, metallic surface was entirely opaque, leaving the observer unsure whether there were any passen-

gers inside at all. Its operation was virtually silent too, apart from the shrill whistle of air, eddying over the surface, the occasional brush of low hanging branches, and now and again, a brief thud, as some unwary creature became Kadaloorian roadkill. From my vantage point inside the car, such events were particularly jarring, as every surface became a perfect window, allowing me to observe the collision in excruciating detail. Thankfully, the car was also self-cleaning, and any gruesome detritus smeared onto the exterior could be quickly removed.

We made impressive progress in the first few days, thanks in part to the astonishing speeds of which the hover-car was capable. I almost wished we were travelling a little more slowly, for already the landscape outside our flattened bubble was changing beyond recognition, and I would have dearly liked to have taken my sketchbook on a walk into the woods and marshes that flashed by.

But we had no time to waste. My illness was progressing steadily, so Eunos assured me, after performing another brain scan en route. Occasional hallucinations and flickerings of madness disturbed me on the journey, but nothing as severe or protracted as my encounter

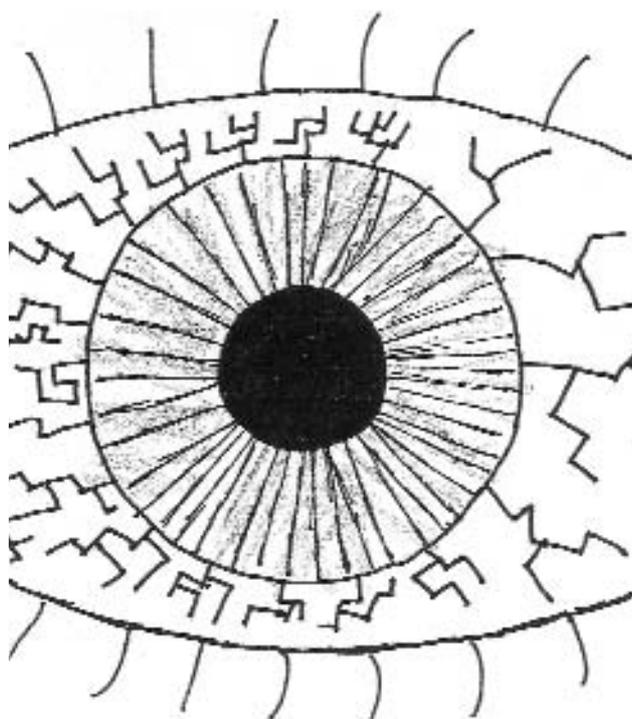
with the Rumbia beetles. Now and again I would catch, in the corner of my eye, what I could only think of as a hole, a circular gap in the weft of my reality, through which, if I turned my attention to it, I could spy on momentous doings. Universes were being born on the other side, giant gas nebulas were forming, cooling and shrinking into galaxies. Unimaginable energies were being flung out in all directions by the relentless engines of creation. Then Eunos would tap me on the shoulder, or call me through the intercom system, and I would be jerked back to my quotidian world, dazed and disappointed. I knew that I should learn to ignore these visions, train myself not to succumb to their divine temptations, but each time I caught sight of that mote of unreality, curiosity overwhelmed me, and I dove inward, into another big bang, to a place where time had not yet been born.

To distract myself from the lure of insanity, I resolved to learn how to control the hover car, and, overriding Eunos's ardent protestations, I spent many happy hours buzzing the craft over the undulating surface of Kadaloor at great speed. Thankfully, the car was equipped with sensors and intelligent navigation, which protected me from obvious blunders, and several serious collisions were avoided in this way. But even with these safeguards, Eunos was never happy about my command of his hover car, and was inconsolable whenever a scrape against a tree trunk or boulder caused some minor cosmetic damage to the exterior of the car. I suppose he probably had in mind the extra work it would cost him to fix these scratches.

"Did you build the car yourself?" I asked Eunos one day. I had been thinking that his solicitude about these minor bumps and bruises might be explained if the vehicle was his own creation. Considering that he had constructed Woodland Rise without assistance, the thought was not implausible.

"No," he answered me, through the intercom. I watched his face on my monitor as he spoke. "It once belonged to Outram Park."

"But that was over half a millennium ago!" I gasped, agog. "How can the car have survived such an interval intact?"



It may have been my imagination, but I fancied I detected a flicker of discomfort on the normally impassive features of the robot. “He was a very careful driver,” replied Eunos, after a pause.

“Even so...” I murmured, trailing off into silence as I sat in awe of a civilisation so far ahead of my own, that inventions humanity could only dream of were, to the men of Kadaloor, antiques.

Eunos’s face flashed onto my screen again, this time furrowed with anxiety. “Captain Braddell, look out for that...”

Although he never got to finish the sentence, it made little difference, for the object he had in mind to complete the clause was directly ahead of us. We hit it square on, and at such speed that the car flipped upwards, like a tossed coin, and engines hitherto silent were suddenly screaming in alarm, as they struggled to right the craft. We landed nose first, the front of the car burying itself into the earth to such a depth that I had to

exit the car via a hatch in the engine compartment at the back.

Eunos had already found his way out, and he offered me a sullen hand as I clambered through the narrow hatch, and stood on a mound of earth thrown up by the grinding engines of the hover-car.

“What did we hit?” I asked, brushing myself down, and rubbing an ache here and a bruise there.

Eunos simply pointed at the thing in question.

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” I said. “But what is it?”

He shrugged, a gesture rarely observed in the android. I put my hands on my hips and sighed, trying to make some sense of the confused jumble my eyes were registering.

A grating, squeaky noise filled the air for a moment, and after the briefest delay, my trusty Dover and Somerset translated the announcement. “I am Thanggam,” intoned the machine. “Bow before me or perish!”

The Quarterly Review

Cars

John Lasseter /

Joe Ranft (dirs)

Film, US, 121 mins

In this belated sequel to Stephen King’s underrated directorial debut, *Maximum Overdrive*, humanity is long gone – the resistance displayed by the survivors in that movie utterly forgotten, and the cars given autonomous life by a freak cosmic accident rule the world.

However, in a horrifying echo of George A Romero’s mall-shopping zombies in *Dawn of the Dead*, the cars continue to perform the mundane duties they undertook when mankind still lived, so we see them travelling along motorways, going on touring holidays, attending sports events, and so on. They lack the imagina-

tion to come up with new activities for themselves, now that their erstwhile masters are gone. Worst of all, like public schoolboys who grow up to beg a madam’s cane, they throw themselves into life-threatening high speed races, struggling to recapture excitement in what once was torture.

In common with other recent children’s films, such as *Ice Age* and *Robots*, and of course with the aforementioned George A Romero, *Cars* takes an uncommon interest in entropy, and its ultimate expression, death.

In *Cars*, to be built is to begin to rust; to turn on your engine is to become outdated – there will always be a newer model, and from the moment you are created you begin the fight against decrepitude. A depressing topic for an adult film, and even more so for a film made for children.

And so, although the marketing for *Cars* betrays little of its origin, its themes perhaps stay closer to the horror of Stephen King's work than you might imagine.

It is highly recommended. – *HP*

The Descent

Neil Marshall (dir.)

Film, UK, 99 mins

This movie is terrifying and thoughtful. Losing loved ones, friendship and adventure ride along with revenge, fear of the unknown and the desire to live. – *RT*

Three Moons Over Milford

ABC Family

TV, US, 40 mins

At last, a TV show for anyone who thought that *Gilmore Girls* would be much more palatable if (a) there was a simple unifying reason for everyone in the town of Stars Hollow being so damn quirky all the time and (b) that reason was the impending destruction of all life on Earth.

Now, I know sf fans, being one myself, and I don't need to ask if you're intrigued yet – I know that you are.

You've read the *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, and learnt of ordinary mainstream programs with science-fictional premises, and wished you could have seen them. Sometimes you've tracked them down, only to find out they were just as mundane as the rest of mainstream television.

But what about this one? Do the fantasy elements make it worth watching once, at least, even if it isn't worth loving?

The initially innocuous title explains the premise – the moon has broken into three parts, which are expected to fall to Earth in the near future (estimates range from less than a year to

over twenty of them), and we watch how this affects the inhabitants of a town called Milford.

Cannily, the show begins some time after the initial disaster, by which time armageddon fatigue has begun to set in. Teenagers use it as an excuse for breaking the law, adults as a reason to indulge their every PG-rated whim. The ramifications play out in a number of reasonably funny and imaginative ways. It isn't a bad show.

However, it may end up falling between two stools. *Eureka* (A Town Called *Eureka* in the UK) is probably a bit funnier, has a more engaging cast, and more convincing special effects, while the upcoming *Jericho*, the story of a small town struggling to survive after the nearest city is destroyed by nuclear bombs, may well leave this cosy catastrophe looking just a little too frivolous.

SF fans should catch at least one episode, but if you have never been tempted to watch *Everwood* (in the UK, *Our New Life in Everwood*), say, or *Seventh Heaven*, or any of those other comfortable drama-soaps, one episode will probably be more than enough.

Of course, the fate of *Three Moons Over Milford* – and the fates of *Eureka* and *Jericho* – may not be in the hands of science fiction fans, or this reviewer, but of our moms – call it the *Charmed* factor, or the *Stargate* factor, but spare a thought for *Angel* and *Farscape* either way. If our moms don't watch it, no fantasy show will survive very long. – *WB*

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest

Gore Verbinski (dir.)

Film, US, 150 mins

There were monsters, with swords, but the Caribbean had a sword too, and he was fighting them. Another man had only one eye, and he bit some treasure, but it hurt his tooth and made his tummy poorly. – *LCT*