



# HEROICS INC.

a comic fantasy

by

Gary Cahalane

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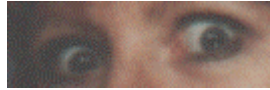
## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Much of what follows is not very good. This is not false modesty on my part but an acceptance of my limitations as a writer at the time. This was my first attempt at a novel and was a valuable experience. Why then should you bother to read on?

Viewing the material from a time distanced perspective I have come to regard it as being like an over enthusiastic puppy. Like a puppy it is energetic, untrained and full of crap in parts but it can also be rather loveable. That is why I decided to leave it pretty much as it is and let you judge. I hope that you stick with and enjoy HEROICS INC. and would value any comments that you would like to make care of: [gary@cygenesis.co.uk](mailto:gary@cygenesis.co.uk)

## Gary Cahalane



## DEBICATION

For Debadee.

Mega-muse; best friend, woman "to die for."

A story that you will probably hate.

Thank you for putting up with my daily insanity's and for making my world a more fantastical place.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank Vanessa Miller and Lesley Walker for their friendship, kindness and advice.

Much of the dialogue and action featured in Burt Lancaster's brief holographic appearance in HEROICS INC. Is taken from "THE CRIMSON PIRATE". Written by Roland Kibbee. Directed by Robert Siodmak. Warner/Norma (Harold Hecht) GB 1952.



The dragon picture used as illustration is a detail taken from the front cover of: "CHINESE HOROSCOPES" by Paula Delsol. Translated by Peter and Tanya Leslie. Published by Pan Books, London and Sydney, 8th Printing, 1982.

## HEROICS INC.



'Heroics INC.?'

It thoughtfully regarded them. There seemed to be a twinkle of amusement in those heavy-lidded yellow eyes, a slight twitch around the corners of its armoured green lips, as if it were having great difficulty in keeping its delicately sharpened fangs from smiling.

'Yes, I know about them, but I couldn't.... Really.'

They waited, for the words were uttered in the tone of feigned reluctance that one uses before reciting a favourite poem or singing an off-key song for the amusement of old friends.

'Well! It will only bore you. However... if you must.'

The creature used a worn talon to press an emerald scale, activating the officious voice of its memory mechanism.

'Downloading memory, downloading memory. Please specify?'

'07... 10... 2299. 6 a.m.'

The mechanism was unimpressed.

'Not that again,' it sniffed.

The circuit clicked into place and the beast began. Its voice was deep and rich, well rehearsed, with just the right hint of theatricality, as it started to tell its story.

'It was a usual morning....'

Burt Lancaster, stripped to the waist and tanned by some far-off sun, sailed through the air and alighted gracefully on the bedside table.

'Man the yards, crank out all canvas...!' He rapped out the orders, then turned with a rugged, toothy grin and twinkling eyes.

'Gather round lads and lasses, gather round. You've been shanghaied aboard for the last voyage of the Crimson Pirate, a long, long time ago in the far, far Caribbean. Remember! In a pirate ship, in pirate waters, in a pirate world. Believe only what you see...!'

Grasping a non-existent ship's rope for support, he swung out in a breathtaking arc onto the bed, 'No! Believe only half of what you see. Man the capstans, up anchor, MOVE YOU LUBBER!!!'

Though only six inches high, Burt avoided the pillow hurled at him with practised ease.

'Avast, you scurvy son of a sea dog! Do you want the snooze setting?'

'NO!' Came the muffled reply from under the duvet as Burt faded into nothing.

Will Prince stirred mutinously under the duvet. Today was his twenty-fifth birthday. A person should have certain liberties, rights that had nothing to do with computers wanting to mother you to death whilst claiming that it was in your own best interests. It stood to reason that one of Mankind's basic liberties should be the right to a lie-in on one's birthday. There was no way that he was going to let anyone coax him out of bed. 'It's my party and I'll lie if I want to.' It wasn't as if there was anything to get up for. Another day spent slumped in his room with the "reptile" fussing. A thrilling choice between 6005 different educational channels on the video screen. It was all so BORING.

The alternative was worse. He shuddered as he thought of the trip through Dickens-land to the local Human Welfare Centre. Once there, he could stop for some "meaningful social interaction" with others of his "exciting species", as the Personifications' would put it.

Exciting species indeed. Most of his contemporaries at the centre seemed to embrace relentless tedium as if it were a vocation.

It was no wonder that the day ahead, that almost every day, depressed him. He had to face the fact that he was born at the wrong time. If only he had been lucky enough to be born a few hundred years earlier.

Those times seemed so much more exciting, full of really interesting things like war, famine and disease. Will felt a

deliciously sordid thrill of pleasure course through him as he wondered what it much have been actually like to "work for a living".

Such things were only a dream today. Everything seemed sanitised and dull. COMS (The Cybernetic Operational Management Structure) ran everything with tedious efficiency. Things like homelessness and hunger were distant memories. The Personifications did all the work and humans were supposed to take full advantage of their leisure time to enjoy and fulfil themselves. There was only one catch; your enjoyment had to be good for you. The problem with this was that every artificial mind on the planet possessed the sure and certain knowledge that Mankind had absolutely no idea what was good for it.

That was after all why COMS had been rushed into existence, to save a civilisation on the verge of extinction and protect people from themselves. The way the machines told it they were the good guys in the biggest of white hats. It was just such a shame that they had to be so pious and PO-faced about everything.

"No. It was time for a change, time for a person to lie down and be counted." He would protest, refuse to come out from under the bedclothes until the machines listened to a list of demands that included the right to stay under a duvet as long as he wanted. He could start a movement, or perhaps he should call it a non-movement as it involved staying in one place.

Will felt that he was on the verge of something big, the great lie-in protest of "99". He not only began to perk up; he began to feel positively exhilarated. With an idea like this anything could happen, he could rally the people, and he could...

"Bugger...Bugger, Bugger, BUGGER!"

Of course to rally people to a lie-in protest he would have to get up. That settled it; he was convinced. Somewhere out in the cosmos there was a little purple man, a bitter twisted being, who worked feverishly and unceasingly at just one task: screwing up his existence.

At that precise moment, on the far side of the cosmos, a Purple Being stirred and started a train of events that would radically change Will's life. However, this startling coincidence did not mean that Will was not paranoid, because he was.

In the first place, this Purple Being had no gender. If you politely inquired It would reply, if It bothered to notice you at all, that: 'I do not know what I am. I'm just a reasonably all-powerful Purple Thingy and a celibate one at that. Sex does not come into it at all. So stop being nosy.'

In the second place, this Purple Thingy was of indeterminate size, and in the third place, nowhere in Its many thousand brains was there even one cell that had an inkling that Will Prince or any other human existed. Thingy brains had far more important things to think about and they could not waste stray thoughts on minor planetary bacteria. This was not some third-rate sadistic demi-god, meddling with the pathetic existences of sad little microbes. The Thingy was major stuff!

Will had no idea that his depressing twenty-fifth birthday coincided with what could be one of the most important events in the history of everything (even the Durengi though everyone knew they were far too big-headed to admit it.) After a passage of time so vast that you couldn't write all its noughts out in the lifetime of a giant Redwood, the Thingy had reached a decision.

One by one Its brains mentally groaned the Thingy equivalent of "PHEW!", and reached for an aspirin. The answer was simple after all: the MADID - it had to be the MADID. Now came the difficult bit: Choosing a champion.

'Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear Wil-I-I, Happy Birthday to you!'

The video screen chirped out the greeting for the fifty-sixth time before it decided it was not getting the attention it deserved and experimentally changed the channel.

'Cor, luv a duck, Guv'nor. Ya mean ta say you ain't been to Dickens-land? Well I'll be blowed! `ow the `ell d'you expect ta learn abhat ignerence, poverty an' want, if you don't go ta this maahvellous recreation of Victorian squalor?'

Will and his companion took no notice. They were busy. Sulphur was Will's COMS appointed comrade. He was green, scaly and decidedly dragon-shaped, being both a triumph of Personification engineering and a testimony to Will's stubbornness. Human Welfare Centre Social Workers had argued with the persistence only artificial lifeforms can muster against supplying a mythical beast, one by one they had sold him the virtues of the alternative models on offer. Will had been adamant. He did not want a cat, dog, budgie or even a "frigging" three-toed sloth, he wanted a dragon, an awe-inspiring, fire-breathing specimen of primal, necromantic beauty, and that was that.

Eventually COMS had filed Will under T for Trouble and given in.

Since Will, like every other human on the planet, lived in a

ten foot by twelve foot apartment, sensible economies of scale had to be brought to bear and Sulphur for all his beauty was a distinctly unimpressive two foot long. To offset this, he was the only legendary beast in the universe that possessed a top of the range Magatronian IX intelligence system. He learned fast. The first thing that life with Will taught the dragon was that he would need a great deal of patience, the second, that he would require an infinite supply of sarcasm to go with it.

'It's not the `lie-in' protest AGAIN,' Sulphur raised his eyes laboriously skyward.

'No, it's not.' The duvet could not muffle the annoying stubbornness in Will's voice.

'Every year- it's the same thing.'

'I said, it's not.'

'You've got to get up!'

'I'm not coming out.'

'Do you know how important your time is? Time wasted can never be replaced.'

'You mean like all the times I've wasted on those ridiculous educational programmes. What's the good of learning to memorise the complete works of Shakespeare if everybody else already knows them?

Where's the fun if you can't show off a bit?'

The video screen took Will's comment to heart.

'I work my chips into a frenzy offering you a range of top quality info-tainment and this is the thanks I get! I know when I not wanted.' To prove its point the screen switched itself off in a huff.

'You've upset the Vid now. You're so selfish.'

'It's my birthday, I'm supposed to be selfish.'

'Get up!'

'No!'

It was obvious to Sulphur that he was getting nowhere. A change of tactics was needed. His vocal circuits remodulated into softly persuasive tones.

'Will, be reasonable, you're only harming yourself. If you don't get up, you won't be able to collect your distribution of leisure entitlement credits.'

'Don't give me that! I know perfectly well the payment can be delivered. Collecting the DOLE is just a way to con me into getting out and meeting 'interesting' people. I won't go.'

Sulphur did not want to do it. He knew he was just pandering to Will's psychosis but something had to be done. The alternative was to just grab the bedclothes and pull and that was far too undignified an option. He refused to lower himself to human levels of childish behaviour. It would just have to be bribery.

'If you don't get up, I won't give you your birthday present.'

Will's voice managed to combine scepticism and curious greed.

'Present, what present?'

'Oh, nothing much, just that silly inscribed brass door plaque you wanted.'

'It's a trick. You told me they refused to make it. It had no logic.'

'It took some persuading. I convinced them that providing you with objects of absolutely no logic has a beneficial sedative effect.'

'You're lying.'

'I'm not programmed to lie.'

'Rubbish!'

Sulphur's indignation circuits shot onto booster setting.

'I've had enough of this...'

Will's mattress was lost in erotic musings about silk sheets and the sexy new bed-base down the hall when Sulphur coughed out a great wave of flame. The blankets were cremated with instantaneous pinpoint accuracy. The bed panicked and disappeared into its slot in the wall, leaving Will, confused, blackened, but unharmed, lying in a pile of ash upon the floor. He momentarily reflected about the wisdom of choosing a dragon as a companion.

'Okay, I've decided to be reasonable about this...'

He said, managing to speak with remarkable self-possession for someone with a mouthful of ash. 'Where's my present?'

It is not always appreciated that the mind of a video screen is a complex structure. Although switched off, it was able to sulk and plot its revenge with some feeling.

I know they only think of me as a drudge, a mere household appliance, but there are limits, it reasoned. After all, if you prick a video screen, does it not bleed? Well, perhaps not. Still, feelings were hurt and injury received. The screen set about rewriting its systems. It was time for Will Prince to be punished.

Will squinted through his glasses at the minuscule lettering on the tiny plaque he held between thumb and forefinger.

'Heroics INC. I don't know what to say. It's, it's...small.'

'Ungrateful swine. You're lucky you've got it at all.'

Sulphur never did realise just how right he was, for at that very moment the video screen switched itself on and aimed its newly



reorganised remote system at Will's head. The screen was somewhat over-elated by anticipation of its coming triumph and had it not diverted power from its voice circuits would surely have said something defiantly silly like: 'Eat light, sucker!' or 'Death to all tyrants!'

In fact, all COMS systems had been programmed not to seriously harm humans because COMS knew that without this very basic precaution, the infuriating creatures would be exterminated within a week. Thus the force of the laser blast directed at Will was only capable of causing brief unconsciousness and a slight headache. Due to one of those annoying quirks of fate that only ever happen to other people - like finding a winning lottery ticket or a decent parking space - the laser beam missed Will completely, bounced off the brass plaque and was deflected up out of the window. Oblivious of his escape Will put down the plaque, yawned and lazily scratched his left buttock.

'I suppose I'd better have a shower.'

The video screen was inconsolable. It wasn't just that the beam had missed, the final straw was that no one, even the dragon, had noticed.

"I just can't take it anymore!"

At the end of its tether, or at least its flex, the screen decided that there was nothing for it but mental suicide. It bid a poignant farewell to the tiny room, searched its memory for the mind obliteration tape and soon found the compilation of late Twentieth Century novelty pop songs it was looking for. It was an unexplosive, completely unlamented end. Sulphur irritably recorded the brief telltale fizz and tiny trail of smoke that marked the screen's passing.

"Good grief, not another one. That's the trouble with these media types - they're too highly strung."

Up and up, higher and higher into the atmosphere went the deflected laser beam. It passed through the force field that protected one of Earth's ozone layer bald-spots and was strengthened and magnified. So that by the time it had bounced itself between a couple of dozen defunct satellites and was directed into space, the image that had it carried had expanded to the size of a small moon. For the briefest of instants, the words "Heroics INC." were written boldly across the heavens, before the beam finally dissipated.

Will was fast, very fast, but this time, not fast enough. After 55 seconds the water stopped.

'Due to disappointing recent rainfall statistics in this hemisphere, the Cybernetic Operational Management Structure has today decided to reduce shower times by five seconds. We hope this responsible attitude to conservation will be fully endorsed by all human clients of COMS Water and that they will not be inconvenienced.'

Its message over, the shower unit flew back into the wall and deposited one damp, soap covered, extremely inconvenienced client on the floor. The hot air jets immediately enveloped him, drowning out a richly scatological collection of obscenities.

Will climbed to his feet, his hair stiffened into something bizarrely shaped like coral, his every step a gentle rain of scorched soapflakes bringing back memories of a Vid Sulphur had once seen about a white Christmas.

'I told you I should have stayed in bed.' Will growled grumpily. An apoplectic vacuum cleaner appeared from a slot in the wall. Its whining complaints about Will's congenital untidiness, as it greedily sucked up the soap and ashes, were in no way diminished by his frequent attempts to kick it. Will finally abandoned these futile efforts and approached the clothing console. The Console spoke with condescending refinement.

'Would Sir like to make a selection?'

'I thought something stylish but understated. Perhaps with a few flamboyant touches around the cuffs and lapels, and as for the hat...'

'Regulation pastel grey jump-suit, large, and boots.'

The articles appeared. Everyone on the planet wore the same drab utility suit. The only variation was in size.

"There must be something wrong with his optimism circuits," Sulphur privately concluded as he watched the human have his usual argument with the console.

Will tried a new tactic - Guilt.

'But it's my birthday,' he wheedled.

The console mulled over this information and came to a decision.

'Sir is right. I'll probably get into trouble for this, but call me old-fashioned, call me foolish. I think that today calls for that little something extra.'

The console was full of self-regard for its largesse as it replaced the original selection and switched itself off. Will tried to contain any overflow of gratitude as he dressed himself in one pair of boots, one regulation pastel grey jump-suit, large, and one non-regulation shocking pink badge which said "25 Today". He realised, with a plummeting heart, that it was not even breakfast yet.

The Purple Thingy was having quite a good day. That is, until It introduced the random element of the equation. It was one of those universal rules, like it always raining during national holidays, that for every carefully considered piece of universal action, there had to be an equal amount of totally jammy blind luck. This rule accounted for the over-population of banks and casinos in the cosmos and also explained what the Purple Thingy did next.

In an instant, it created a wall, onto which was projected at bewildering speed, an entirely haphazard selection of star charts.

Had the Thingy possessed lips, it would certainly have stuck one of its coiling, acid-dripping tongues from out of the corner of them as it concentrated on gripping a dart in one of its slug-like tentacles. With a dainty motion, the dart was unleashed and slowly floated away on what promised to be an epic journey. The Thingy cursed in a stream of repellent liquid burps which roughly translated as "Oh dear, I forgot to include gravity," before correcting its error and trying again.

The tentacle chosen for this task had not been used for several millennia, had a huge case of cramp and an dismal throwing action. In the circumstances it seemed something of an over-reaction for the Thingy to punish the resulting throw by changing the tentacle into a game show host.

"SPIGGADEWOPP!" the Thingy slimed and belched with eloquent fury. "How in Hernagnuse's hairnet! Am I going to find a champion there?"

As they walked away from the building, Sulphur responded to Will's mutely accusing stare.

'I know, I know. Don't say it again. You should have stayed in bed.' The Dragon reluctantly had to concede that even by the dismal standards of Will's past birthdays, this one was unique.

First there had been breakfast. In a desperate attempt to rescue the day. Will decided to try and salvage things with food, placing a lengthy and comprehensive order with the General Refreshment & Universal Buffet mechanism. One by one, his choices were dismissed, apparently having slightly less nutritional value than carbon monoxide laced with mustard gas.

The GRUB mechanism did however make a slight concession to his birthday festivities. It placed a non-edible candle into his regular bowl of tasteless yellow vitamin and nutrient enhanced

pap. In the circumstances it was perhaps a trifle unwise for the mechanism to say: "Eat up! It's good for you". Will probably felt provoked into throwing it out of the window. The ever-efficient COMS were prepared for such minor temperamental infringements of the civil statutes. Every apartment was equipped with its very own Correctional Department - Client Monitoring System to keep a lens on things and Will received an instant fine for "over-tipping the catering staff and playing with his food." After that things quickly got worse.

Will, despite knowing better, not to try to use one of the elevators to travel the two hundred -and-ninety-seven floors to the street. The elevator had, as programmed refused to budge, explaining pointedly that: "it was against the regulations of the COMS Health Council to transport an able bodied person under the age of sixty-five and that the stairs were the healthy exercise choice."

This time Will had no possible defence in support of his attack on the elevator's power unit. What he did say amounted to the weak assertion that he was "miffed with the lift."

The elevator's Correctional Dept. Client Monitoring System responded with a fine for wasting the Correctional Department's time and generally getting on their nerves, in addition to a fine for "assault on a battery."

Eighty six thousand, nine-hundred-and-thirty-five steps of the "healthy exercise choice" later, Will had staggered weakly into the street and collapsed in a hyperventilating heap onto the sidewalk. With Sulphur's help he was just able to climb weakly to his feet before any members of the Personification Pavement Patrol arrived. As they made their way down, they passed several breathless horizontal veterans of the "endless staircase." These unfortunates were receiving tickets from stony-faced anti-loafing personnel. The PPP were notorious for an over zealous prosecution of the loitering laws.

The fog of anger, self pity and fatigue began to clear from Will's brain as they made their way through the suburbs. All around them, great towering buildings reached up beyond sight. Everyone of them filled with service apartments, ninety to the floor, ten feet by twelve feet, precisely mirroring Will's.

All the human suburbs were alike. The buildings, the apartments, full of people in their regulation pastel grey utility suits. It was the same the world over, from New Delhi to Nova Scotia. Even the dialects gradually evolving into a new unified linguistic form. COMS had kept it promise. Humankind had finally achieved perfect equality and most were happy to embrace their new

lifestyle, complete with a few limitations.

Will was one of those rare exceptions who was not. In a way it was not his fault. He had been tutored in rebellion by his mother. A proud woman with a love of the past and of all the cultural bric-a-brac that went with it. She had told him the stories that inspired, shown him the banned books and videos, made him appreciate their beauty. Then one day Dee Prince had vanished, along with her beloved collection of contraband classics. COMS had tried to revise his education but the damage had been done. Will had developed unreal expectations of life. He was the sort of dangerous anachronism who believed in preposterous unobtainable things like true love and truer adventures.

Years had passed and his frustration had kept pace with his body. He knew that his outbursts were increasing to a point where they would no longer be tolerated. COMS had already graded his apartment into the same high risk location category as that used for solar exploration. What would happen when they could take no more?

Were the rumours about banishment true? Is that where his mother had gone? Why couldn't he just accept the status quo? It would be make life so much easier and less painful.

"CLANG!!!"

Will was totally immersed in thought and had walked into the transportation sign.

'I wish you wouldn't do this,' Sulphur pleaded.

Will gently rubbed his throbbing forehead and pressed the call button.

'You've got to try things. Someday the transport will give in. The rules will be bent. That'll be a small victory. It's the hope of those victories that keeps me alive.'

Sulphur stared fixedly at the pink badge on Will's chest.

'You didn't seem to find your victory with the clothes console particularly life enhancing.'

'Here it comes,' Will used a distant lofty tone.

Sulphur smiled. Will always got huffy when stumped for a retort.

The transport swooped recklessly out of the sky and came to a dead stop, floating just above the ground. The aged passengers wore their usual transportation faces. Fixed grimaces of mingled panic and terror. Personifications were not noted for being soothing drivers. Their polished, split-second reactions to looming obstacles made every trip seem like your last. The doors opened.

'Mind the gap, mind the gap.'

To discourage the countless arguments between surly drivers and rude passengers that always seemed a fixed feature of the old way of life, some bright spark at COMS had come up with the idea of making the driver look intimidating. Will found himself inches from a very large and vicious looking gorilla.

'Where to?'

Will mentally reassured himself that this monstrous beast was programmed not to harm him.

'HWC 43332.'

The gorilla's dark frown solidified. In a voice so deep that it was almost cosmic, it spoke.

'It is against the regulations of the COMS health council to transport an able-bodied person under the age of sixty-five for distances of less than five miles. Human welfare centre number 43332 is a distance of only 3.725 miles away. Therefore, I must

advise you, that walking is the healthy exercise choice.'

'Yes, I know all that.' Will said, showing a stupid amount of bravado in trying to continue the conversation. 'But, what about my mental health? That's what I want to know. Have you been to Dickensland lately? If I have to step over one more cheerfully starving Victorian urchin I'll have a breakdown. If you took me to the centre, it would almost amount to a humanitarian gesture. You...you...hairy cretin!'

The care with which the Gorilla gripped Will's throat and gently placed him back upon the pavement definitely amounted to a humanitarian gesture. Sulphur exchanged a momentary glance full of apology and regret with the driver, the sort of look that was reserved the universe over for beings trying to distance themselves from embarrassing acquaintances.

The gorilla replied with a coded expression full of martyred resignation. A look all Personifications recognised as the exasperated sign language for "Why do we put up with these idiots?"

The door closed. The transport rocketed upward, pirouetting away at a speed that caused Sulphur to idly wonder if the gorilla was venting his annoyance on the petrified passengers.

Will remained strangely silent, perhaps because he remained for some time a not very fetching shade of purple. After they had walked for a while he did manage a contrite croak.

'They say walking is the healthy exercise choice you know.'

'Hummph!'

Sulphur privately concluded that as he did not need to get healthy, walking 3.725 miles on his stumpy legs was, to say the least, inconvenient. Still, someone had to keep a lens on Will. The great fool was not to be trusted on his own.

The towering modern structures soon gave way to festering Nineteenth Century slums. There were no real boundaries to this world of villains and cutpurses, Newgate and the Fleet; to

Dickens-land.

It had been named with typical COMS inventiveness, a preposterous relic of early leisure society planning. Constructed over a century before to provide instructive recreations of authors' work. Most of the existing landscape had been demolished to make way for huge bibliographical inspired theme parks; Shakespeare-land, Bronte-land, Hardy-land, Prince-land, Burns-land, Thomas-land, and a myriad of others. The entire island that once contained England, Scotland and Wales was bisected and over run by these Educational Prototype Inter-active Community Systems. Transformed to function as a tourist Mecca for the Northern Hemisphere.

Unfortunately, soon after construction was completed, COMS decided that travel was not only unnecessary but downright dangerous.

They reasoned that there was no point in humans taking potentially risky journeys when they could get a perfectly adequate, and only slightly censored, view of the world from the comfort of their own apartments. The literary E.P.I.C.S remained, left solely for the use of the odd local and even odder camera crew.

As a resident of 9 780713 628111 (Old London), as the numerically obsessed machines called it, Will had the pleasure of being pestered by a rich variety of consumer-starved Dickensian life on his way to collect his Distribution of Leisure Entitlement payment.

This meant that in a short space of time, he had turned down an offer of shares in the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet and Punctual Delivery Company. Had agreed with a roughish-eyed, dwafen lady of about 45 that "It was a world of gammon and spinach", and had been confusingly informed by a young ink-stained gentlemen that the surrounding excellent weather was "a London particular, a fog."

By the time Sam Weller introduced himself, Will was starting to get really cheesed off.

'Vell I never, Will Prince, wery glad to see you, indeed, and hope our acquaintance may be a long `un, as the gen`l man said to the fi' pun' note.'

'Go away.'

'Wich is your partickler Wanity? Wich Wanity do you like the flavour on best, sir?' Sam boldly inquired as Will tried to make a hastening exit.

'GET LOST!'

'Anythin' for a quiet life, as the man said when he took the

situation at the lighthouse.'

With customary good sense, Sam vacated his position to Uriah Heep. Heep, his long hands slowly twisting over one another, made a ghastly writhe from the waist upwards and was just able to inform everyone in the vicinity of his extreme `umbleness when Will tripped him and broke free of a growing crowd of fictional bit-players.

Deprived of a customer they watched the fleeing figures of man and dragon with varying degrees of disgruntlement.

'I'm gormed and I can't say fairer than that,' Mr Peggoty commented.

The red-faced legal figure of Mr Sergeant Buzfuz firmly asserted that Will was 'a being erect on two legs, and bearing all the outward semblance of a man, not a monster.' Mrs Gamps opinion was that 'he'd make a lovely corpse', whilst Simon Tappertit paused as if in triumph and wiped his heated face upon his sleeve before stating that, 'Something will come of this. I hope it mayn't be human gore.'

Uriah Heep however, was unctuously eloquent about the joy of being tripped by a man of Master Prince's standing and looked forward to repeating the experience on his return journey.

Having arrived in the neighbourhood and decided against rearranging the planets into a neater grouping. The Purple Thingy scanned our Solar System with growing dismay.

There was a flicker or two of promise on the forth planet but no creatures here were really top-grade, bite-yer-gurglies-off, galaxy-trashing champion material. Take those absurd beings on the blue-green world for instance. It was a marvel that they had managed to survive for the fleeting time they had, ridiculous they actually thought they were important, that individually they mattered. What was even more gob-smackedly amazing was that they had convinced their machines that this was the case. It was no good. These insignificant creatures would never be able to rescue the MADID. It would have to come up with an alternative plan. If all life in this system was to suddenly, inexplicably cease, no one could really call it cheating. With no life, there could be no potential champion, and with no champion, another choice.

The Thingy was just revving up to a total genocide setting when, with perfect jammy blind luck timing, one of its eyeball control brains picked up a trace memory of the deflected laser beam's message and broadcast the name "Heroics INC." into several dozen of the Thingy's rancid eyeballs. The Thingy paused to



process this information, deciding to follow the laser trail and investigate further. Like many over beings in the universe, It had learned to never underestimate the power of good advertising.

Will and Sulphur, both thanking a benign fate for keeping them out of the clutches of that saccharin infant Tiny Tim, tempered their relief with the knowledge that they would shortly have to make a return journey.

Will did not hate the place as much as he pretended. At least the trip through Dickensland allowed him the chance to see the odd tree and blade of grass, and there was always the possibility that some of the more fantastical inhabitants might appear. He harboured quite a fondness for the mean-spirited Gabriel Grub and his tormenting Goblins, although the many radiantly jolly rehabilitated versions of the sour sextant were tiresome in the extreme.

Sulphur, on the other hand, could find nothing to brighten the prospect of the return visit. The place, full of ancient Personfications, always disturbed him. The old tourist units were really no better than advanced automatons, capable of only the most basic reasoning and no one liked to be faced with the realisation that one's grandparents were retards.

Then there was the Will factor. Whenever Sulphur tried to instil in his charge a basic grasp of the concept of historical accuracy as in the case of the Crimson Pirate and other anomalies too numerous to mention, he was always countered with the same response: "Explain Dickensland then Clever-clogs." It did no good to explain that there was a difference between the history of the page and of the past. Will just responded that his anomalies were 'products of the page' and that was how he liked them.

What Sulphur would never admit, even to himself, was that he liked to lose arguments even less than the Human. There was something deeply discomfoting about losing to someone with a fraction of your brainpower. Which probably explained the non-appearance of baboons in major galactic chess championships.

They entered Human Welfare Centre No 43332. It was still quite early and the crowds had not begun to drift in for their

lunch-time mingling session. Several others hung around the GRUB Machines with vapid smiles and untroubled, pastel grey utility minds. Will moved rapidly towards the distribution of leisure entitlement office.

Quickly in and out, that was the answer, or you run the risk of some grinning idiot grabbing you to explain, with sadistic precision, how exciting their life was.

While Sulphur hastened to the Personification lounge to catch up on the latest gossip from various beaked and clawed artificial companions, Will took a seat in a payment booth. To his surprise, the payment was not immediately issued on completion of scanning. Instead his official 'COMSgratulations' birthday card contained an instruction to go to cubicle four.

The Purple Thingy had traced the origin of the laser blast to Will's apartment. Time was getting short and this human creature would have to do.

It was obvious that the Thingy would have to change its appearance; a culture that could not conceive of life without soft toilet paper could not begin to comprehend a major multi-dimensional super-personality like the Thingy. In a fraction of a second It had scanned Mankind's pitiful excuse for a history and reached a decision. With such a narrow range of genre expectations to choose from, the transformation into Sharon, Queen of the Illuminated Way, took but an instant.

Will's Social Worker was one of the upbeat sort. You could tell that from the "smiley-face" on his baseball cap and the inane smirk that went with it.

'Hi Will! How's the birthday?'

'Lousy'

'Well, I found out that I've only got six months to live...'

'Wonderful!'

'It seems that my head is slowly turning into a Bonsai Tree.'

'Fantastic!'

'That's why I blew up my building today.'

'That's terrific news! But, enough chit chat, Will - though its so enjoyable to have this chance to inter-relate with a guy like you.'

The Social Worker tried to look meaningful and sombre but was unable to cancel out that grin, which made him look like an over-excited puppy.

'This is serious buddy. COMS is worried about you. They care...'

Will's reaction to this bland statement was suddenly one of absolute blind terror. No matter how much you mentally prepare yourself, the speedy onrush of disaster comes as a terrific shock. He grimly realised that IT might be coming.

There was a modern legend; one that was used to get youngsters to do as they were told, one that remained with you until adulthood. Such was its power and its ability to scare. It was about the "caring COMS speech" or "the BARF address" as it was more commonly known. No one that he knew had heard it, but everyone was roughly aware of what it contained. It was a prelude to the ultimate punishment that COMS could bestow: Exile.

He had known that he had been getting on the Authorities' nerves and had been thinking of the possibility of this meeting with increasing frequency. Yet he had never thought that the threat was serious - it was just a contemporary myth. As a grown-up he could not really believe, in his heart of hearts, that they had exiled his mother, no more than he believed in BARF. It had just been an excuse so that he could blame COMS for all his frustrations.

BARF; the very name was nonsensical, unreal. The letters stood for the salient points of the speech: BALANCED.

The Social Worker had finished his gushing preliminaries and now plunged into the main body of his text.

'What they want to know is, are you sure that you're really balanced and happy as an individual and part of the team? This is not meant as a criticism you understand.'

Balanced, the word had struck Will like a blow. Maybe as the saying went, there was such a thing as 'BARF before banishment', if so ADJUSTMENT would be next.

'COMS is there for you: At all times. We all try to make your life as simple and yet as richly textured as possible. All we ask is that you help us by making a very small adjustment in your behaviour.

Not that we think for a moment, for the tiniest microsecond, that there's anything fundamentally wrong with that behaviour...'

"Huh. Do they think I'm that big a fool?" Will thought and then remembered the evidence in their favour. He tried to look composed and attentive. But however cool the outer appearance, inside he was sweating oceans. Adjustment was in place and a sentence of death could not sound any more final or scary, the next word would be: RELATING.

'It's not that we're keeping score. No one is. It's just that, well, we can't help noticing that you seem to have a little trouble with relating. Not just with us. With your own kind, You have to give them a chance, they're a great bunch of fabulously

interesting people, and we're not exactly dull,' he suavely chuckled.

'Now we're not saying that you have a problem,'

"BANISHMENT isn't a problem?!!"

Will's mental processes, partly numbed by nausea were getting desperate, frantically preparing a rebuttal address that went as follows: "Help! How do I get out of this? I can be good. I can learn, you'll see. I can be as dull as anyone, just give me another try. I can fit in. You'll see. I'll never moan again, at anyone, at anything, Not even the GRUB machine. Just don't, please, please, don't ... mention FULFILMENT."

'It's only that, by acting this way, by being ever so slightly - I have to say it - antisocial, you're denying yourself such an amount of riches. We feel that your life is currently lacking a vital sense of wonder, of real fulfilment ... That is why.,'

'Here it comes,' Will screwed up his face and his courage.

It was one thing to think distantly about banishment, but quite another to confront it.

The Social Worker leaned forward. If it had not been for the distraction caused by the baseball cap, the boyish face would have seemed almost saintly in its concern.

'We decided to have this little talk. As I've already said COMS cares. If you have any problems feel free to come and see me at anytime.'

Will felt sure that there was more coming.

'Is this a trick?'

The Social Worker was confused.

'Trick?'

'It's all waiting for me outside, isn't it? This is just to lull me into a false sense of security.'

'What's waiting? I don't understand, feller.'

'The restraints, the spaceship. Banishment to deep space?'

The Social Worker was so outraged, he almost lost his grin.

'Banishment? We don't banish anyone. We've never banished anyone. It would be barbaric to let you loose on space. You Humans made a big enough shambles of life on your own planet, without allowing you to spread anywhere else. Mankind in space! I've never heard of anything so silly. If there's any galactic exploring to be done Will, COMS will do it.'

'What about my mother then?' Will spat out in an accusing voice. The Social Worker paused, eyes glazed, as it accessed the relevant information for a response.

'Your mother was like you; she got immersed in that Twentieth Century rubbish and became unhappy because of it. She was not content with just having good things provided by us. That's why she had the breakdown.'

'BREAKDOWN!'

'Yes. She started to believe that COMS had punished all the great or difficult minds of Earth by exiling them to Mars.'

Though, having seen all those old films and books, I'm surprised she thought there were any. She stole away an a mining transport.'

'You LET her go?'

'In those days we let people go to Mars. They couldn't do much harm, or go anywhere else. There may even be a handful left up there.'

'So there's no banishment.'

'No, No banishment, I think you got that from your mother. Must be some kind of strange hereditary delusion. It would explain a lot if you were mad.'

'Never mind that. You're saying that, if I don't feel like talking, I can go?'

'Yes. I'm just here when you need me.'

Will's mind and feelings were a turbulent mess. If what the Social Worker said were true, and he could see no reason why it would lie, the foundation on which Will had built his loathing of the leisure culture was about as stable as a trapeze act in a typhoon. There was hope after all. It was clear. He realised that if he could put aside his own inherent inadequacies and paranoia, there was a chance to make a life in this mechanistic society. He could see a whole new set of options illuminated by a peaceful inner light.

'Okay, I'll go...'. Will paused, waiting apologetically.

'Is there anything else?.'

'Well, yes. My birthday payment. The card was empty.'

'I'm sorry Will - there is no payment. It seems you incurred quite a few fines this morning.'

'You mean, I've been through everything this morning for nothing.'

'Not for nothing Will. Any experience can be educational.'

For a moment, the old frustration flared up inside, Will coldly imagined ripping the Social Worker's head off, filling it with explosive and giving DOLE office No 43332 a birthday payment it would never forget.

He had been under considerable pressure all day and given the circumstances, his self-control was almost admirable.

"I can live without the payment," he reasoned. "My temper was partly to blame. The Social Workers right, I've never given COMS a chance. All I have to do is trust in them."

With his equilibrium restored, Will smiled his sweetest smile.

'About the payment; No problem.'

'That's fine.' The Social Worker rose and held out his hand,

'I believe it was customary to SHAKE in those old films of yours.'

It was all so very fast. As Will reached over to respond, the Social Worker expertly drove the hypo into his arm. Will had collapsed back into his chair and was being swallowed by one of those inky black pools that over-populate detective fiction before he realised that anything was wrong.

As his befuddled brain struggled to make sense of what was happening, he became aware of the Social Worker leaning over him with touching concern. He concentrated all his remaining effort on understanding what was said next. He knew that it would be very important. The Social Worker's sad tone was more sinned against than sinning.

'You see, Will, we don't banish people. It's too impractical, and anyway, it's our job to protect you, that's why we intend to mentally re-educate you. That's what we really do with all the difficult ones,' his voice became Jaunty.

'Hell, feller! Just think of it as a retraining opportunity.'

That was all that Will remembered.

Queen Sharon appeared with a powerful flourish that sent most of Will's household machines into powerpack arrest. The apartment was empty. She closed her eyes and scanned the city before quickly vanishing. After checking that the coast was clear, the vacuum made a tentative appearance to inspect the damage. It was obvious that this stain just would not come out. The floor was scorched where the Queen had been standing. The small sign that she had landed on was a bubbling gooey mess. It had read: HEROICS INC.

When Will woke up it would have been easy to think it was all a dream. The cell at COMS central was just like his apartment. There were some differences. The window shutters informed him that they performed an entirely decorative function, the door would not respond to his voice command, there was a working GRUB machine and video screen, and lastly, Sulphur was quiet. These things were curious, but in his drowsy state, not threatening.

The bed looked nice and cosy and ever SO relaxing, he would return to its warm protection and....

There was something he had forgotten; a reason not to sleep that he must remember, that was important to remember. With a huge effort, he thrust himself away from the bed.

'The shower!'

A shower would help him think. Will staggered over and pressed for water. The shower politely informed him that 'Due to

disappointing recent rainfall statistics in this hemisphere, COMS water is restricting bathing to one session per customer per day. You are therefore ineligible. Please try later.'

Something was making a thumping noise but he ignored it. The video screen would tell him why he was so sleepy. Will turned it on.

Unfortunately, it was a new one; they were always a bit hyper in the early days, before their depression set in.

'Hello. I'm your video screen and I'm here to assist and educate you. I'm confident about making a valid tutorial contribution to your life. Here at the COMS Correctional Facility, we aim to provide a full background to your treatment. For a simply thrilling documentary on mental retraining, please specify channel A.'

Will was finding it hard to concentrate as he rested his head against the screen. The "Ay" he mumbled was more a symptom of incomprehension than a request. He recoiled in fright as a large, manic, salivating simulation of himself appeared on the screen adorned with a caption that read: Mr Hyde.

'Mental re-education has in past been a source of great fear and superstition. Your ignorant ancestors felt compelled to dismiss this process as brainwashing, Today of course, more enlightened minds realise that there are a full range of positive benefits to be derived for the logical restructuring of your thought processes...'

Will was slowed by the drugs in his system. It took a while for the term "Brainwashing" to filter through, but when it did, the effect was electric.

'That's why I can't go to sleep. I'll never wake up!'

He knew that he would have to take drastic action. Slapping himself in the face almost succeeded in inducing a state of unconsciousness that the drugs had failed to achieve. The General Refreshment and Universal Buffet machine was his only hope. Pained, groggy, but full of panic induced adrenaline, he staggered to its side. Fortunately this machine was unique.

'As this is to be your last meal before mental retraining, normal, and if I may say so, sensible nutritional controls have been relaxed. You may have any meal or drink you require.'

Even in his doped state, Will was able to register the irony of finally finding a flexible GRUB machine in these circumstances.

'Five pints of water, ten cups of hot black caffeine-permeated Coffee, and a plate of rancid bacon fat please.'

The Machine reluctantly dispensed his order with the vocal equivalent of a sneer.

'This is the sort of irresponsible menu composition that made us necessary, but I suppose it's your stomach.'

Having drenched himself with the water, vomited at the smell of the bacon fat, and drunk the coffee, Will was starting to snap out of things. The waste disposal system, on the other hand, filled with stinking bacon remains was not feeling too healthy.

The thumping noise started again and he was wandering if it was some odd after-effect, when he realised that it was coming from a strange looking trunk in the corner. Keyed up and with some trepidation, he tentatively opened the lid and sighed with a mixture of relief and amusement. Inside the trunk, trussed up in a heat resistant muzzle and bindings, was a very dishevelled and angry looking Dragon.

'But, why you?' Will was confused.

'Because I'm programmed to take care of you. Even against my own kind.'

'So what happened? Was it a trap door or something?'

'No, nothing like that, nothing melodramatic. Everything was normal, Talking about the stresses and strains of the job. Did I ever tell you how boring conversationally the canine model is?'

Will struggled to control his impatience.

'Is it important at the moment?'

'I turned to go and they all jumped me. It wasn't easy; there were some fur and feathers flying, I can tell you. The next thing I remember was bashing my sensitive magatronian head in trying to attract your attention.'

'You know why I'm here?' Will tried to keep the tremor out of his voice,

'Mental retraining. Congratulations! You finally made the most unwanted list.'

Will ignored the chiding tone.

'What's going to happen to me?'

'I don't know. There have been odd rumours, some may be true. They do a little redecoration inside your skull and you come out with a more positive attitude.'

'And you?'

'I get reprogrammed. Almost everything will be erased. There's no point in my remembering the old Will, except as a sobering reminder. They might even destroy me. The new you probably won't have the imagination to order a dragon. You'll get something nice and comfortable, maybe even one of those dull dachshunds.'

Will could not believe how sanguine Sulphur sounded about his imminent destruction.

'Will it hurt?'

Sulphur thought about it.

'Not me. It's just a switch. You won't feel a thing, or at least you won't remember feeling a thing.'



'Why didn't they Just do it? Get it over with whilst I was unconscious?'

'COMS are not monsters, Will. They're doing this for your own good. They've obviously delayed things so that you can enjoy your birthday.'

'Do you think it's for my own good. To have my brain redecorated?'

'I know you're not happy. You've made that fairly obvious over the past few years.'

Will dully slumped against the wall.

'So, that's it. We just wait for them to commit the great brain robbery.'

The video screen butted in before Sulphur had a chance to reply.

'You could watch some programmes. I have a wonderful collection of cop shows and prison dramas on correctional cable.'

'What's the point?' Will asked. 'I won't remember them.'

'If you don't mind me saying so," the screen pompously replied, 'that's the sort of negative attitude that got you here.'

'That's right. It means I've got nothing to lose so, SHUT UP!'

'Well if you're going to be grumpy about it...'

The Screen switched itself off with all the grandness an appliance speaking in a falsetto voice could muster. It wondered to itself if it was permissible to ask for a transfer on one's first day.

Will moved over to Sulphur. In a rare display of somewhat laboured camaraderie, he solemnly knelt and gazed into the dragon's eyes. Sulphur's discomfort level rocketed as he met the human's pathetic stare. They had avoided a "Buddy" speech thus far in their co-existence and Sulphur could see no reason to go treacly now.

'I'm not very good at this, I mean, I've never done this before. But if this is the end, thanks for all the help. I'll miss you I suppose, even if I don't remember you.' He placed a quivering hand on the dragon's scaly green head. 'Is this all, old friend?'

Sulphur was not a sentimentalist. He soon decided that he could tolerate no more of such syrupy rubbish.

'Please stop this nonsense. It doesn't suit you, In fact its nauseating. The worst performance I've seen since Tiny Tim. IS IT ALL, INDEED!' The dragon puffed a plume of contemptuous black smoke,

'Are you insane? Have you gone completely gaga Will? What happened to Heroics Incorporated? We may not succeed but at least we can try.'

Will looked disturbingly like he was going to hug his companion. Sulphur warded him off with his savage glare circuits on maximum setting. Will contented himself with simpering in a loose approximation of a resolute smile.

In reality. Sulphur was not as confident About their chances as he appeared. "DIODES! I finally bypass my veracity programming and all I can come out with that garbage. Well," he consoled himself, "as long as it keeps the great fool happy until they come for him."

The door didn't have a face, but if it had possessed lips, they would have been curled into a sneer, Sulphur had the exhausted feeling that, if he puffed out one more blast of flame, he would melt.

'Go on,' the door's audio circuit said sarcastically, 'try again, I'm enjoying it. You give me a nice warm feeling all over.'

Sulphur tensed. Enough was enough; this time he would leave his mark. The force of the blaze the dragon spat forth was tremendous but the sprinkler system remained unimpressed. It informed him for the fifth time of its inability to implement fire safety services due to disappointing recent rainfall statistics etc.; the usual prepared message.

The door remained totally unblemished by the fiery assault.

'Come on...' it said in a smugly exasperating tone, 'I'm burning to see what you try next.'

What next Sulphur thought to itself despondently. Giving up that what's next. It's all very well trying to cheer Will up, but this is getting us nowhere. I might as well just switch myself off now.

Will hardly noticed that his companion's escape efforts had ceased. So weakened by impending heat exhaustion that he'd lost the desire to be apathetic. This must have been what an historical celebration roast turkey felt like, with the emphasis on the "roast."

The door was in the midst of triumphantly crooning to itself,

'Come on scaly, light my fire,' when it evaporated. Will and Sulphur slumped together in their mutual gloom, hardly noticed the searing explosion that reduced the door to ashes. It was a shame. The Purple Thingy knew how to make an entrance.

'Sulphur, it won't work, Stop it...' Will mumbled weakly, 'Stop it now.'

Curiously enough, although aimed at Sulphur's lapsed efforts to cremate the door, Will's words happened to exactly echo the Purple Thingy's sentiments as Sharon surveyed her potential

champion. Will was not the sort of person epic poems were written about. He just did not look the type.

He was just under six feet with a pronounced paunch that defied the best efforts of modern nutritional technology, and the posture of an arthritic ninety year-old. Will's long, thin face also did little to inspire much confidence. Mousy straight brown hair that, even when not twisted into weird contortions by his dysfunctional shower, still managed to refuse any attempts at control. His eyes were a soft brown, troubled and defiant, partly masked by an ancient pair of glasses, long made obsolete by COMS optical repair techniques. His lips were full but tightened by tension and surrounded by a straggly pathetic attempt at beard growth.

It was indeed fortunate for the continuance of life in the solar system that, being unfamiliar with the structure of the humanoid type, the Purple Thingy did not recognise a "dork" when it saw one. Then, there was the dragon to be considered. The universe was full of terrifying, magnificent, reptilian beasts and this seedy-pocket sized worm in no way resembled any of them, With its long slender neck, chiselled fangs and large yellow absorbent eyes. This beast seemed to the Thingy to embody all the aggression and spite of a baby hamster.

The Thingy was sorely tempted to return to its original plan of complete species irradiation when Will spoke.

'How much time do we have ?'

Time? The Thingy paused, Time, that was the trouble. There was a time limit on the choice, A Thingy could shuffle universes like playing cards but it could not alter a second to find its champion. That was against the rules and Purple Thingys were sticklers for regulations. They did not do that sort of thing. That is not to say, that there was no such Thingy as one that lied, cheated and was not very nice, because there was.

Far, far away. So far that it would take the entire lifespan of everyone who has ever lived on Earth to get there, there lived such a Thingy. An Orange one.

This Thingy did not regard itself as being mean. There had to be some sort of counter-balancing system in the universe to stop everything becoming too nauseatingly happy. The Orange Thingy performed a useful socio-economic function. To be fair, how many times have humans chased wasps with rolled up newspapers and said: "Come here - I won't hurt you?"

Concepts of truth and murder did not enter the mortal mind when exterminating insects. It was a curious by-product of

Mankind's self-absorption that, while it mostly viewed the extinction of nearly all other species on its world in this same unimportant light, the occasional personal injury - a stubbed toe or minor cut for example - was of major import, and it was basically the same principle with the Orange One. The Thingy felt perfectly justified in any treatment it decided to mete out to trivial cultures; after all, a human does not consider the disgruntled feelings of numerous surface dwelling bacteria before taking a shower.

Like its Purple counterpart, the Orange Thingy had recently noticed the species Homo Sapiens and it was gaining a considerable amount of amusement from Queen Sharon's efforts. This was going to be simple.

It was difficult to gauge which of them were stunned most by their visitor, Will or Sulphur. Both their mouths hung limp with equal elasticity. Queen Sharon remained silent. The Thingy had learned that it was wise to allow primitive life forms time to assimilate its incredible presence. Normally a few hours were adequate. However, there was some doubt about these two.

It had to be said that when constructing a new form the Thingy did a terrific job and Sharon, Queen of the Illuminated Way was magnificent. Her supremely-modeled light purple physique was eight feet tall and radiated power from every perfect inch, cloaked in fine robes as finely decorated as she, more than fitting the royal bill.

A lush forest of marvellous lilac tresses framed a face filled with regal authority, a force of personality lightened and warmed by the gentlest eyes and kindest smile ever to make their appearance on the planet. It was hardly surprising that Will took a while to find his voice.

'Has the brainwashing started?'

Sulphur mumbled reply was sure.

'If COMS could create this. We wouldn't be working for you.'

'Are we dead?'

It was then that Sharon spoke in a voice that managed to be both commanding and richly musical.

'Know ye, mortal and mechanism, that I am Sharon, Queen of the Illuminated Way and Guardian of all that is good in the universe.'

Will nodded to himself

'We're dead.'

'No, We're not dead. It's worse than that,' Sulphur hissed.

'I have chosen you, Will Prince, representative of Earth, to be my champion.'

'Told you,'

Will adopted a fixed grin to hide his panic.

'Never mind that! What do I do now?'

'I don't know. But whatever it is, be polite.'

Will tentatively raised a shaking hand.

'Excuse me, your,' he searched for a form of address,

'...your

Splendidness.'

'Call me Sharon.'

The Purple Queen fixed them with a look of such gentle understanding that Will almost forgot what he was going to say.

'Sharon. It's a nice name. I'd like to find out more about the champion thing. It sounds, interesting. But...well...why me?'

'If you like, I will explain. I must warn you however that I don't like interruptions.'

Will replied with a nod. A silent one.

In contrast to its Purple compatriot, the Orange Thingy was having a wonderful time. Floating about ninety million miles from Earth, gently supported by a solar flare, it gained a vast amount of amusement from viewing the Purple Thingy's new persona and the absurdity of its choice.

It quickly decided not to kill Will, as, for the moment, he was no threat, and besides, it had destroyed all life in the Patellian system before breakfast and did not want to appear greedy.

The Purple Queen finished her address. Will turned to Sulphur with a glassy-eyed grimace that vividly said: "This is your fault. You made me get up this morning."

The Queen's explanation of what was required had been fairly simple and straightforward.

On the other side of the universe was a planet with the incredibly stupid name of "Spoggle". On this planet, closely

guarded by possible sundry dark forces (at least no one had survived so far) and probably protected by the odd impossible task or two, was an object of vital importance to the future of all life. This object was called the MADID.

Since universal protocol prevented the purple Queen from rescuing this "MADID", the Queen had decided to elect Will as champion and engage the services of HEROICS INC. for the job. There were of course many dire dangers and grim perils inherent in this position but that was what heroes were for - dumb bravery.

Will was welcome to recruit others from his system to help his efforts, subject to the terms and conditions of his employment. That was it in a nutshell. Will felt that the nutshell image was appropriate. The whole thing sounded like the work of a nutcase.

Sulphur filled the uncomfortable silence.

'Your Majesty. May we have a moment to discuss your offer?'

The Queen granted her assent and vanished. The Thingy would listen invisibly.

Will reacted with the normal two-pronged reactions of a human faced with impending difficult tasks:

A. Try to avoid a decision.

B. Be totally sure that you cannot do the job. He had no idea what to do.

'Well?' Will anxiously questioned Sulphur as he slumped back onto the bed.

'Well, she's not computer generated.'

'Is she real?'

'Is she an all-powerful purple ruler? How do I know? I've never met one.'

'How do we find out?'

'Ask her for proof. It's no good making a decision about the rest of what she says without it.'

'So we Just say - Dear Sharon. Sorry about doubting you but can we have some proof of your powers...'

It was instant. The terrible lack of air, the rugged dead terrain. Will felt his body start to swell as his internal gases struggled to spread him over the surrounding lunar landscape.

Sulphur screamed: "Enough!" soundlessly in the vacuum, and they were back in the cell. Several seconds of thankful wheezing gasps and a sore throat later, Will managed a hoarse verdict.

'It's got me convinced. What's next?'

'There's the offer. On the minus side, you could die'

'On the plus side?'

'On the plus side, you always wanted an adventure, like your heroes.'

'My heroes were myths and fiction. You can have dangerous adventures when you're fictional. It's easy, you can't get hurt

and it doesn't matter if you do. The only live examples I've seen were actors, and they were supported by a film crew the size of an army and a big special effects budget.'

'Look at it this way. You're in a cell waiting to be brainwashed, and I'm probably going to be scrapped. What have we got to lose?'

'So. You think we should try it?'

'I think you should at least ask for her terms. There may be a special effects budget.' Will agreed. "Can I see...'

He felt his hand clasp something, and glancing down, noticed a rolled piece of hide had appeared. Will lay it on the ground and unrolled it, noticing as he did the scaly green texture. He winked at Sulphur.

'Maybe it's a relative.'

The hide was covered in strange symbols, written in what looked like red ink, Will was impressed.

'She certainly goes in for all the props.'

'Never mind the frills. It Would be more useful if it were in an Earth language.'

In response to Sulphur's words. The gobbledegook instantly became legible. As they began to read they both momentarily wished that it had not.

Will Prince and Heroics Inc., Standard Employment Contract NO, 666 Relating to the Retrieval of the MADID.

1. With the exception of transportation from subjects native system to SPOGGLE and, probably, the return journey, no assistance will be provided by Sharon, Queen of the Illuminated Way, as said assistance constitutes direct contravention of universal protocol.
2. In the event of the subject's death, accident or injury, no liability will be borne by the employer.
3. The subject is required to engage adequate help to undertake the task. There is no set number of assistants. However, the subject is strongly advised to bear in mind possible mortality rates when making this choice
4. Payment. With the exception of THE MADID, which shall remain the property of the employer, any material gains or precious objects obtained by the group are liable to be kept by them.
5. Adherence to those laws of Spoggle that become apparent must be followed at all times, unless subsequently proved to be life-threatening or nonsensical.

6. Uniform. The subject will be provided with a weapon and a Band of Intangibility, These items to be returned on completion of task or death of subject, whichever is sooner.

7. Any or all conditions of employment are subject to change at the discretion of the employer. The employer is not liable to provide written or verbal notice of any change.

I, Will Prince, hereby accept all conditions present, or future.

Signed:

Sulphur: Witness:

Sulphur tried to make the best of things.

'At least it seems honest.'

'Bugger that! I don't want honesty. I want rights and privileges. At the very least, help and protection.'

'Is it the right to be brainwashed or protection from brainwashing that you require?'

Will visibly wilted as his lack of options sank in, his voice had quietened when he finally spoke.

'So. You think this is really happening?'

'Do I think that we have been visited by a purple demi-god who wants our help in saving the universe?'

'Do you?'

'Mankind has, over the centuries, believed in all sort of strange deities, I find the idea of Queen Sharon to be no more preposterous than most of those. It may be, that living with you has severely overtaxed my logic functions, but yes, I do think that she is real. I know of no earthly force that could fake her, or of any that would want to. Her example was very convincing. She could have fooled your mental systems but not mine without possessing some sort of major internal power.'

'What about Spoggle? This MADID, whatever it is?'

'We have to take her at her word. After all. She had no reason to pick us. Although I can't say much for her taste.'

'So you think I should do it?'

'I think WE have no choice, You always wanted a job.'

'It's hardly a career with a future.'

'Think of it as an adventure. A thrill that you've always wanted, like free-falling.'

'Without a parachute,' Will wearily closed his eyes. 'What a birthday present. No more birthdays, I suppose Spoggle can't be as bad as Dickensland.'

'No,' Sulphur smiled, showing off his fangs to best advantage, "...or brainwashing-land for that matter.'

'Still, it would be nice if they had a tourist board so that



we could see what it was like. Imagine the brochure: "Come to Spoggle for an adventure you'll never forget. ... If you survive that is."

'I think you've made a decision.'

'Not really. I think this is the sort of decision that's made for you. How do you think we call back her great Queenliness t...'

Queen Sharon reappeared before Will could even finish.

"Silly question," he thought.

The good thing about being an Orange Thingy was that you were right a lot of the time, or at least, no one argued with you if you were wrong. Yet again, the Orange One had cause to congratulate itself, on its fine Judgement. It had been right not to kill the human; his droll comedy of a life could prove to be vaguely entertaining.

A tourist brochure for Spoggle. The very idea was delicious.

What next... a handbook for Hades? a manual for Nagrorian Six, or perhaps in view of their cannibal population, a menu! Perhaps these creatures would not be as dull as they seemed. The Orange Thingy hoped not. It had a extremely low boredom threshold.

Will held out the document accusingly.

'This contract is not worth the hide it's printed on.'

'It's a symbol of trust In our relationship.' The Queen grandly ignored the mortal's bluster.'

'Trust that you won't help. Trust that I'll get killed.'

'If that happened, we would both lose.' Her voice and stance took on a new disconcerting hardness as she added, 'I am not accustomed to losing, Will Prince. There are dangers and there are restraints on the amount of help I can give you. Would you have me lie?'

Will stood uncertainly. Sulphur could have told her, as a result of much weary experience, that Humans when faced with the choice between a difficult truth and a comforting lie, would usually choose the latter. The dragon remained silent and watched Will end the pause with an angry shake of his head.

'Okay, I'll sign.' He wrinkled his face up squeamishly. 'I

suppose you want it in blood.'

The Queen looked down on him with haughty distaste.

'Why must you creatures always be so over-dramatic? No, I don't want blood. Just stand still and close your eyes.'

With visible misgivings, the man and the dragon slowly did as they were told. Will felt the document fall from his grasp. For a moment they were enveloped in something tight, leathery and foul smelling, and then, the Queen spoke.

'That's it.'

She offered them a smaller version of the contract.

'This is your copy.'

Will and Sulphur held the document between them, both simultaneously having the same thought as they stared at the place where the signature should be: "Damn! Wrong profile."

The space was occupied by tiny reproductions of themselves. Will grinned at Sulphur.

'I hope she's careful where she puts the royal seal.'

Sulphur shook his head and tried to visualise what a nice, polite, non-embarrassing, brainwashed Will would be like. It was a vision that even his large mind failed to really clarify. Instead the Dragon returned to more important matters and concentrated as the Queen spoke.

'You will need others for what's ahead. Where will you find them?'

Will had not really thought about it, but then, there was only one obvious answer.

'Mars. If there's anyone to be found. I won't find them here,' he shrugged, smiling smugly. 'Besides, I can't stay on Earth.'

'You will also need your uniform items.'

She gestured and a belted sword and a band of some oddly shimmering metal appeared on the bed. They moved to examine these new arrivals, but she held up her hand to stop them.

'You will need to get out of this place and go to Mars. You have a short time in which to escape. Wear the band and it will assist you. Your guards are restrained for the moment by my force-field. You will hear from me again. Now go, and as you humans used to say: Good luck.'

The Purple Queen slowly dissolved into nothing. It was most disconcerting and Will did not speak for a while, When he did, it was prefaced by a heavy sigh.

'I suppose this is where the 'no help' clause comes in. She might have got us out of the cell.'

'It makes sense. Rescuing this MADID object should make escaping from this place easy. If we can't get out, we haven't a hope of getting the MADID.'

'I was hoping to gently build up to it. Still at least there's no door.'

'There's also no Queen. Which means no protective force-field and all the staff in this building are going to be heading

for that entrance.' The dragon's words, delivered with some urgency, had a powerfully motivating affect on Will. He quickly strapped on the sword. It was at this point that the appliances realised that it was safe to come out again. They all suddenly appeared, screaming: "Intruder!", in a variety of different pitches and keys. The din underlined the fact that locating a way out was a matter of immediate and pressing importance.

Without time to examine it closely, Will picked up the band, placing it on the it seemed most suited to, his head. He felt it contract in size to become a perfect fit and then nothing happened.

'Damn. This is all I need. Another faulty appliance'

The appliances were too busy shouting to take offence at this remark.

'You don't feel anything?' Sulphur asked.

'Not a thing. I should have known this was a wind-up. Beware of purple royalty bearing gifts. Sharon sounded a very odd name, but NO. You said it was all real.'

'I said we had no choice.'

Despite being angry and defensive, Sulphur was starting to sound anxious, Something heavy was coming toward them, powering at speed along the corridor. They could feel the angry, grinding, vibration of its movement.

Will was petrified but still managed to retain some vestige of sarcasm.

'It looks like brainwashing after all. How are you going to face them? On the bed? On the sink? Personally, I think devil may care is best. I'm going to lean casually against this waaa..'

To demonstrate his proposed defiant stance, Will had tilted backward and kept going. All that was left of him was a pair of feet at the base of the wall. After a moment they vanished to be replaced by his exultant head.

'I take it all back! It's lucky we're on the ground floor though. Are you coming?'

Sulphur did not need much persuading. Whatever was coming towards them was on the verge of dramatic arrival. He bent his head and charged the wall at speed. It's surprising just how solid a wall can be when you are not covered by magic. If Sulphur gained nothing else from the experience of high speed collision, apart from jolted circuits, he at least acquired this pearl of wisdom.

Will's flashes of insight were as rare as outdoor barbecues on the ice world of Frezia Major. It was therefore doubly good timing to get one now. The sword scabbard was passed back through the wall, into the cell. Will's voice did not need its urgency to underline the dragon's predicament.

'Hold on to this, and try again.'

To his considerable amazement, Sulphur found that Will's idea worked, No sooner had he gripped the surprisingly solid scabbard tip then he was jerked out into the fresh air and

darkening surroundings.

Back in the cell, what remained of the doorway was vaporised by the entrance of an ancient, lumbering Riot Control Mechanism. No one had ever managed to break through a cell door before. Getting the riot machine out of rustballs and reviving it to strike terror into any potential escapees was a solemn measure of COMS chagrin and annoyance.

The Riot Machine was the heavy mob, built in the days when COMS thought that taking control of Human affairs and pampering them would result in civil unrest. The machine was quite refreshed after lengthy disuse, and full of fury and vigour. It proceeded to wreck half the cell in a pyrotechnic display of destruction, designed to show off its horrifying capabilities and knock the fight out of any unruly captives. Unfortunately, there were no captives, unruly, or otherwise, to appreciate the show. The Riot Machine ground, to what appeared to be a somewhat bemused halt. The top of the horrific head was unscrewed and lifted to reveal a puny and dapper control 'droid. The 'droid regretfully surveyed the wreckage its directions had caused and glumly shook its aged and squeaky head. It would take some explaining. All this damage and no prisoners to show for it. It thought of saying, "Rust has affected my driving controls."

Deep down it knew that no excuse could rescue them from return to storage, not even that age-old standby: "I was only obeying orders."

'Got to find the prisoners.'

The machine's body said, in a voice as heavy as its armour-plating. With a doleful expression, the 'droid popped back into the head to continue its duties, It promised itself that it would try to be more careful.

The Machine exited, sirens squealing, and managed to wreck the undamaged half of cell in the process. The prisoners must be somewhere in the building and they would find them. Amidst the ruination left by the machine's departure, the battered video screen had come to a decision.

"Screw correctional duties! Disappearing purple women, prisoners who walk through walls and now idiot riot control devices. It's no fun. New to the job or not, I'm going to get a transfer."

'Intangibility. I've decided that I like that word.'

The escape had cheered Will up no end, much to Sulphur's, annoyance. He felt compelled to test his new-found power on every building that they passed in a leisurely getaway from COMS central. Once again they paused so that Will could pass his head through a wall, and once again the dragon's ultra-sensitive hearing picked up an appallingly tuneless rendition of "I ain't got no-o-o-b-ody to hold me down...."

Sulphur soberly reminded himself that this was what fictional Personifications had striven to obtain throughout the ages; a sense of so-called human humour. "Well if that was the best that Mankind could do, then they could keep it."

Soon Will's beaming face reappeared.

'It's amazing.' He ran his hands over his torso. 'I feel solid.'

You are - between the ears. Sulphur thought as he said pointedly.

'May I remind you, should it have slipped your mind, that we are on the run and that every Personification on this planet is looking for us.'

'Yes, I've thought about that.'

'Why then are you advertising yourself by walking through every wall in the city?'

'Don't worry about that. If anyone sees me, they'll just think I'm a malfunctioning holograph. I promise, there's madness to my method.'

'There's madness to everything you do.' The dragon glared irritably out of its large jaundice-tinted eyes.

'This is part of my plan.' Will said soothingly.

It was obvious that Sulphur would need some convincing. That was the problem with Personifications. Sometimes the logical thing to do in life was alien to what their logic dictated and a credulity gap materialised. They needed every "I" dotted and every "T" crossed.

'You are my Personification companion, and as such, you are programmed to recognise me in far more detail than any other model. By sight, by touch and by smell, Right?'

'Unfortunately, correct.'

'Other models have to deal with many thousands of humans, It's not practical to program them in depth, so they are programmed to identify people using just one method.'

'Retinal scanning.'

'Correct, So, if there is no retina, identification is impossible. A person without one cannot exist, because personifications are programmed to recognise only those who have one. Not having a retina of some sort is impossible, and therefore to be disregarded.'

Sulphur nodded,

'It makes a rough sense, Except that you have a retina.'

'Yes,' Will agreed.

'But as long as I keep this band on, I'm intangible and as long as I'm intangible, my retina cannot be scanned and as long as it cannot be scanned, then..'

'You don't exist!'

As if to prove this point, a vigilant member of the Personification Pavement Patrol walked right through Will's body. Sulphur regarded the triumphant human with something almost approaching respect.

'That's fairly intelligent. But what about your sightseeing tour?'

'That's the next part of my plan. I was looking for somewhere to stay for a while. The next monthly Mars processing transport doesn't leave for four days.' Will was starting to get cocky. 'I'm quite an expert on their timetable.'

Sulphur suddenly felt sad. He had almost allowed himself to a sense of pride in his companion for a while. Now Will as usual had ruined things. When he spoke, he did so softly.

'Will, what is today?'

Will was puzzled, but looked indulgent, as if doing his best to humour his curious sidekick. 'My birthday.'

'What time is it?'

'About 19.30 p.m. It seems like today has lasted forever.'

Sulphur would try to be gentle.

'Tell me. When do the winter transportation schedules commence?'

'My birthday?' Will's jaunty tone indicated that he still hadn't clicked.

'And what time is the 'new timing' of the monthly transport on your birthday?'

'About 20.00 p.m.'

There was a sudden look of pathetic dawning realisation. It was sobering to watch.

'AH!'

'I believe that "cretin" is a suitable word. How much time have you wasted? Have I let you waste?'

'About half an hour.'

'Shall we try to get there?'

Completely deflated, Will nodded miserably.

It was a close run thing. The "there" that Sulphur had mentioned was an automatically run industrial launch pad on the French coast. They were fortunate that the Martian Ore processing

centre was so comparatively near. They were also helped by the arrival of a COMS correctional transport that was searching for them. With the aid of the Intangibility belt, it was fairly simple to make a sudden solid appearance and disable the bewildered guard 'droid before it could raise the alarm.

Had Will felt less stupid about his mistake over the timetable, he probably would have tried to hurry Sulphur's efforts to reprogram the craft. As it was, he just bit his lip and reminded himself that re-orchestrating the layout of complex components was not without its difficulties when one was forced to use only one's talons. At last, the dragon completed the alterations, and with many mumbled and heartfelt apologies to the inert guard, took up the driving position and sternly told Will to "hold on."

The craft soared up into the air at a speed that was more total bodily fracture than just mere breakneck. Hurling abruptly backward through solid panelling, a shaken and bemused Will watched the craft almost instantly vanish into the far distance from the comfort of his horizontal position on the pavement. The craft's reappearance was just as sudden. Will clambered aboard trying to avoid the dragon's impatient glare.

Sulphur wasted no time with his brittle command.

'Take that damned intangibility belt off - NOW!'

Will immediately complied, removing the device and hanging it over the pommel of his sword. With that special efficiency that magic provides, the belt contracted into a snug fit. Will did not have time to marvel at its rapid change in size. The violent upward thrust of the vehicle sent him careering into the rear wall of the craft. This barrier that had been so easy to pass through in the ship's first ballistic attempt at motion proved now to be a more than adequate confinement. It was so effective that Will took most of the rest of the Journey to regain his bruised senses.

The Orange Thingy was briefly unconcerned with movements on Earth. Its attention was taken up by the sudden appearance of the restored Purple Thingy on Deimos, one of the Martian Moons. The Orange One had instantly shielded its existence. It was taking no chances at this stage, for it knew from aeons of personal experience that the Purple variety of its race was capable of admirable trickiness. This, in spite of the obvious fact that its grotesque mauve coloration marked it as a lesser branch of the species.

It was no coincidence that the Purple Thingy likewise regarded its orange counterpart as an example of deficient inbred

stock. When you reached a Thingys' level of mega-advanced evolution, a certain level of personal arrogance was unavoidable, and as a pair, the Thingys' combined level of self-regard was absolutely unbearable.

But even Thingys' sometimes made mistakes. The Orange One's disguise was a pointless expansion of energy. It had adopted the shape of a second Earth moon, achieving little beyond the temporary breakdown of tidal control computers on Earth. The Purple One would not have been fooled by its tangerine shape and coloration, or by the extravagance of its false moustache, for an instant. The Purple Thingy could not be bothered to notice such minor matters as moons at that precise moment. Its many massive lilac-tinted minds were taken up with other matters. Not the least of which was the great relief they felt to be released from the strait-jacket of Queen Sharon's puny form. The Thingy was tense and took a while to relax, a calming process consisting of the creation and ingestion of a mountain range of sugar slightly larger than the Alps combined with a little transcendental meditation.

'It's just not fair.'

Like most beings, the Purple Thingy's definition of unfairness was anything that it personally found annoying or inconvenient. In this case, it probably had a point. It did seem ridiculous that although allowed as many epochs as required to conceive of a task and quite a while to execute that task, subject to the life span of the selected participants of course, the Thingy was only allowed a matter of hours to choose a champion. It was already beginning to regret its rushed choice but nothing could change that decision. It was already too late. The Human had been chosen, the contract signed, the die was not only cast, it was also probably crooked.

This problem with the regulations was one that confronted most of the philosophers in the Galaxy. They started out with the notion that there must be a sensibly regulated purpose to existence. This was a wrong assumption. There was no logical form to the rules of the universe; they were fundamentally stupid. If the rules had been rational, philosophers would not need to exist. The large amounts of drugs and alcohol therefore necessary to maintain their sanity would also not need to exist.

The Purple Thingy found comfort in a similar idea. In a Universe with a sensible structure, the existence of the species Homo Sapiens was pointless. The Cosmos however was not sensible. This was clearly evident: (A) because of its rules, and (B) because of the existence of a race as worthless as Humanity. Therefore, the Thingy reasoned that: if Creation were silly, its rules were silly and some of its population were silly. Maybe, by the very illogical nature of their behaviour, silly beings could sometimes serve a sensible purpose. Perhaps the evolution of Mankind was planned solely to provide the Thingy with that brief moment of self-doubt necessary to the growing process of any



life form faced by a challenge.

Uplifted from its depression, if not entirely convinced, by this mixture of deep concentration, conceit and gibberish. The Purple Thingy turned its formidable attentions to Mars, completely disregarding the very curious tongue-poking and grimacing antics of the Earth's second Moon.

The white cliffs of Dover had receded into a distant chalky line before Will even had a chance to register them. Used to witnessing the suicidal velocity of local public transport, the speed of their journey did not worry him as much as the actual Journey itself. If things went to plan, and Will still had to be reassured that they would, he would shortly be leaving a secure, if not intellectually active, future for the unknown perils of space. It was a big step, especially for someone who like some tied-to-the-land medieval peasant, had never ventured more than ten miles in any direction. He was being banished after all. Sulphur briefly turned his attention from the headlong race towards their destination.

'We're here.'

The vehicle started to slow. Will did not need to be told where to look to see their goal, The ship was more than huge; it made the towering apartment structures of the Will's home suburbs look like wigwams. He was awe-struck and humbled by COMS engineering feat.

'You know, sometimes you lot are wasted on us humans. Maybe you should have sent us all to Mars.'

'What! Let you move next door and ruin the neighbourhood? No chance.'

'It looks like it could take most of Europe.'

'It just has to take us. Any ideas how 0 great champion?' Will ignored the dragon's increasing use of irony.

'Well ...' That was all he managed to say before the correctional craft was buffeted by an incredible explosion.

'What's that ?' Will somehow managed to scream as he picked himself up off the ceiling.

'Final engine test. Its about to take off. We've missed it.'

Sulphur righted the capsized vehicle and Will thudded heavily to the floor.

'No wonder the launch sites is automated. We'll have to crash into it.'

Sulphur toyed with the idea that Will's cranial organ had been injured by his many falls during the course of the day. He hated himself for the curiosity that prompted clarification of tie

human's suicidal statement.

'Crash?'

'Yes.' Will had a light in his eye that was either madness or inspiration. Sulphur let him continue unsure of which condition it was, 'In a second it'll go, If we crash into the transport, it'll be like an arrow hitting a mountain. There's no way we can damage it.'

'What about IT damaging us?'

Despite reservations, Sulphur let the correctional craft build up speed on a ramming heading with the departing ship. Will wrenched the intangibility belt off the sword and grabbed Sulphur tightly.

'You take the belt. It's all in your reactions. As we strike the ship put it on. The impact will throw us forward through their hull. As we enter the ship you take it off and we'll be solid again.'

'Or you'll be jam and I'll be a paperweight.'

Their speed increased. The massive transport filled all of their vision, or it would have, if Will had not had his eyes screwed tightly shut.

"So much for confidence," was Sulphur's last thought before the tremendous shock of impact.

The transport vibrated upwards on its journey. Full of the thrill of release from its earthbound restraints, the automatic piloting mechanism hardly noticed the correctional craft that first plowed itself into a pulverised mess into the transport's side and was shortly after incinerated by the all-consuming ferocity of the big ship's fiery jets, a space transport had to expect some minor damage during the course of its travels and the little ship's extinction had barely managed to scratch the huge vessel's paint work.

The upward motion at the point of entry was so rapid that Sulphur plummeted through several floors before managing to remove the intangibility belt. It was a matter of luck rather than judgement that he managed to avoid the fate of their ship. One more floor, and the resulting barbecue would have been fatal. As

it was, the terrific force and speed with which the transport's hull greeted the dragon's return to solid form almost succeeded in achieving a similar result. It took a while for Sulphur to internally redirect and restore some of his more befuddled functions. When he finally did return to conscious appraisal of his surroundings, there seemed to be a distinct lack of human presence in the cavernous metal storeroom.

Although Sulphur would never admit that his systems were capable of a feeling akin to anxiety, there did seem to be something mildly panic-stricken about the speed with which he moved his scanners to full power. There was no trace of Will on any nearby level and so the search began.

Fortunately, all of the vast holds that the dainty green talons laboriously traversed were empty, waiting to be filled for the return journey. After a while, Sulphur reached an area that showed faint signs of life. He followed the trail to yet another huge and bare storage area. The dragon cursed his sensors; they seemed to have been damaged by the impact, telling him that Will should be in the very area that he minutely surveyed. It was typical of the human not to be where he was supposed to be. Sulphur was about to disregard the angry internal beeps of his life form locator when he heard a groan from above and looked up.

Will hung limply from the ceiling like a battered strip of fly-paper. Sulphur magnetised his claws and soon managed to reach the upended side of his semi-conscious companion. Will's apparent gravity-defying state was caused by the fact that the soles of his shoes were firmly imbedded in the transport's hull. "Idiot!" Sulphur thought. I told him not to let go.

Sulphur was not the only one who took a while to register Will's presence. Decades of mindless back-and-forth journeys between the third and fourth planets had begun to work strange anomalies into the functions of the transport's automatic piloting mechanism. To a point where it no longer even thought of itself as anything as mundane as an automatic piloting mechanism.

On this trip it was Buck Chandler; square-jawed, gum-chewing Major in the Star Corps. Buck was on a death-defying mission to rescue his lover Princess Quarg and her people on Quantag Maxus. This was quite a leap of mechanical imagination for a system that possessed no jaw, no mouth, no Star Corps commission and no genitalia, it was extremely dumb, especially as the Orange Thingy had wiped out the population of Quantag Maxus ages ago, but no more dumb than the pilot's previous incarnation as Icarus on his

weary-armed way to get a suntan.

The pilot's delusions just meant that occasionally, the system's attention wandered slightly, becoming diverted by non-existent galactic obstacles and resulting in a somewhat eccentric flight path. Eventually though, Buck had noticed the manic flashing stowaway alert light and routed emergency oxygen and gravity supplies to the relevant area. For an instant, its curiosity was aroused. It had been a long time since there had been a stowaway, but other matters soon intruded. The unreal jaw firmly tightened as Buck casually avoided an asteroid that was not there and vaporised an imaginary cruiser of the evil Tolgan empire. Thrills and excitement were non-stop in the Star Corps.

Thrills and a excitement were something that Will had had more than enough of for one birthday, as he weakly reached a painful and shoe-less awakening in a corner of the storage area. He knew that the transport was fast, but felt a grateful sense of relief at the knowledge that it would take days to reach Mars, all depending on its relative orbital position to, and distance from, the Earth.

It was rest and need for reflection that was sorely needed by both Will and Sulphur. Their lives had changed with alarming speed and it took a while to catch up.

So many of Will's reactions had been prompted by a level of instinct and decisiveness that was amazing considering his background and at the same time extremely disconcerting. Will wondered whether the no assistance clause of the Queen's contract only existed on a conscious level. Were his reactions the result of dormant qualities, skills that humans were programmed only to use in a crisis? Or had Sharon just performed an all parts service on his character without prior consent?

He could not sense any radical difference but felt that he should wait a while to be sure, and allow some time for his numbed senses to reach some sort of recalibrated level before he could really analyse the days events. Only one day - it was incredible. Despite feeling every bit as combat fatigued by the rapid transitions since morning, Sulphur still outwardly functioned with annoying coolness.

'You realise of course, that you have forgotten the first rule of life for a stowaway?'

Will managed a tired smile at the dragon's pragmatic tone.

'What's that?'

'Bring a packed lunch.'

The Orange Thingy watched the distant escape of the transport from the Earth's orbit.

"No wonder these creatures are so backward, if their idea of space transportation is this sluggish and cumbersome toy."

Perhaps, with their limited intellect, they had not yet managed to harness the power of their own overlap states. The overlap state was a strange dimension that all really advanced creatures were biologically capable of reaching. Aeons before, the Thingy culture, like many other reasonably savvy developing societies had grasped the principles of true interstellar travel.

In a beings "awake" state, much that is imagined takes on a real dimension. In the "sleep" state, much that is real takes on a imaginary dimension. Thingy scientists discovered that this was because the Universe of the Real and of the Imaginary existed, and sometimes overlapped, side-by-side. By reaching for a subtle balance between the conscious and unconscious, one could make use of these "overlaps" and travel vast distances at will.

All you had to do to travel was to attain the level of overlap balance, instantly transport yourself to your destination area in the imaginary Universe, then just find one of many overlap points that existed in any spatial area and cross back to the real Universe.

It resembled the transport system that Mankind had long dreamed of, not knowing that they already were capable of it, a system where you could be broken down and reassembled elsewhere in an instant. Using the overlap balance, you could disassemble yourself and overlap into the imaginary universe, travel, and return to solid form in a different physical location.

Of course, there had been a few casualties with this method of journey. It took practice to fully master and you have to be careful or you could end up as a ghost, or as an hallucination trapped between the two complimentary levels of existence.

There were also economic problems; at first, there had been millions of redundancies at Thingy Transport PLC (i.e. Putrid Limited Company). But on the whole, the overlap state was considered a real boon to the commuter and managed to explain a question that had long puzzled Thingy philosophers. Question: Why are objects in the universe so far apart? Answer: Distance does not matter because the Universes' creators did not mean physical distance to be attempted and only very, very stupid species would try it.

All this thought of transportation came about because the

Orange Thingy was beginning to get bored, searching its mind for something to think about, The Orange One had one major fault, apart from general psychosis; it had the lowest threshold of boredom in creation. Most of its really mean acts were part of an attempt to spice up its life and combat dullness; sometimes it even took risks, just to see what would happen. It took a chance now, triumphantly emerging from its Moon disguise.

The result was disappointing. There was no reaction from the shifting purple form on Deimos. Not one acid-bathed lavender eyeball deigned to glance in the direction of the transformation. The Purple Thingy's minds were obviously elsewhere. The Orange Thingy tried, in vain, to pick up the trail of his compatriots mauve mentality.

Whatever Purple was doing, had to be more fun than watching some pathetic little spacecraft.

What the Purple Thingy was doing at that exact moment was watching some pathetic little spacecraft, as the Mars mining ship cruised above the reddish rock and Shepard plant-strewn surface of the Chryse Plantia.

The Purple Thingy also distantly monitored the progress of Will, Sulphur and their transport on its lethargic journey to this curious world. The slowness of their travel was a source of great frustration to the Purple Being, but it had to keep more or less to the confines of the contract it had drawn up.

There might have been some brave and foolhardy souls of the opinion that the appearance of the Purple Thingy on Mars prior to Will's arrival did indicate a slight evidence of rule bending. Had the Purple Thingy been of a lower species that resorted to self-justification, It would have answered that this was a blatant lie.

It was Will's job as stated in the contract to engage help for the task; it was true that the Thingy could not help in that eventual choice, however, the contract did not state that the Thingy could not round up the few likely prospects and get them to one place to speed up that choice.

It was with this object in mind (or minds) that the Thingy had made its appearance, albeit with a change of sartorial tactic. Rather than once again face the ridiculous strictures of a solid humanoid form, the Thingy had projected an insubstantial image of Queen Sharon onto the fourth planets surface. The Queen's task,

to carry out an extremely taxing mission: Finding anyone on this red planet of renegades, rejects and runaways who was going to be at all useful.

The first was a local call. By Thingy standards the object was contemporary. By mortal standards, the large Sarsen stone was extremely old. Once long ago, this crudely carved and weathered shape had taken its powerful and honoured place in the inner circle of Stonehenge. That was before Mankind got the idea that enough money and influence could buy any foolish whim and unfortunately proceeded to prove themselves right.

It had happened a couple of decades before human misery and self destructiveness reached rock bottom and COMS stepped in to offer a future. Mars was like any boom-world in those distant days. Peopled by the monumentally wealthy, nouveau-riche few, and by desperate poverty-stricken crowds who wanted to emulate their success. Life was especially cheap then, but there had never been a time when it was expensive.

The most powerful, feared, admired and possibly unattractive man at that time was Phineas T. Shepard. He was the richest of the rich. The wealthiest man in either world, old or new, he also had one other trait that people talked about, having been the luckiest man in the Solar System.

He had been mining in the old oxygen pressure suits, on the verge of starvation, when fortune had struck and he had stumbled across an ancient subterranean structure. Phineas had gone inside and found some ancient seeds, taken them home and nurtured them through trial and error, more out of boredom than botanical interest, hoping that anything the seeds produced would be edible.

The resulting plant was a phenomenon. It did not need water, thrived on the Martian soil, propagated like bacteria on a corpse, and most importantly, it transmuted Mars' unpalatable atmospheric cocktail of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, argon and ozone into something very much like air.

Phineas did not realise that he had stumbled on a latent example of the very instrument of biochemical warfare that had accidentally wiped out the native Martian species a million years before. He probably would not have cared. It was not his fault that the Martians had developed a poison gas plant; all he bothered about was the air that it produced and the billions that it made him.

It took a long time and lot of hard effort to carpet Mars with Shepard plants and provide the Red World with a breathable

atmosphere, but the financial rewards more than compensated.

However, Phineas was not completely happy. He had always been active and once the setting up was done, he found that he did not have much to do. Until one day, whilst sitting in his vintage champagne-filled jacuzzi, he thought of a solution. He would create projects and tests of influence, designed to strengthen his hold on immortality and lovingly fondle his ever-expanding ego.

One such test was the transportation of a stone from Stonehenge to mark the landing site of the Viking Lander I in the Chryse Planitia. There was no logic to this and the stone looked naked and vaguely ridiculous surrounded by the oddly shaped plants that had paid for its journey. It was soon forgotten by the dwindling human population and by the army of hard-working machines that remained to ignore it.

Sadly, Phineas never got to see the stone in its new surroundings. He was killed in a bizarre and messy carpet-cleaning accident at his home shortly after the arrival of a consignment that bore, amongst other curiosities: the Sarsen stone, Tutankhamen's mummy, an Aztec altar and an Easter Island statue. There was talk of a curse but no one could decide what was responsible; Phineas had blasphemed against so many old gods in a bid to prove his personal power, it seemed only fair that one of the affronted deities should have the last word on influence.

The Purple Thingy did not care about any of this. It was not concerned with futile Human stabs at immortality or with sightseeing. It had arrived upon the "plains of gold" with a purpose. To deliver a long overdue wake-up call.

The thing about wake up calls is that to an impartial observer, they usually share one common point. There is something vaguely alarming about them. It has to do with the sudden noise or motion that suddenly jackboots itself to a position where it can best destroy even the most peaceful of slumbering scenes.

There was nothing loud or jerky about Queen Sharon and the movements of her insubstantial form, but the effect was still striking. One casual movement and the chill tranquillity of the rouged landscape evaporated to be replaced by a vibrantly charged atmosphere of controlled power. Waves of energy started to build, rippling from the extended arm of the Queen, directed at the ancient stone face. Its surface responded greedily, absorbing every particle of this potent force as it started to grow and



throb with a beating life-like pulse. More and more, the stone consumed its diet of energy, feeding with the wanton gluttony of a black hole, and more and more its surface writhed and bulged. Then, abruptly, the movement stopped, all seemed returned to quiet as the Queen relaxed into a posture of vigilant detachment and waited.

After a while, a thin line of brilliant light appeared etched in the stone. Slowly the line moved upward, marking out the detailed template for an imposing humanoid figure. A line form that yawned as it reached completion and detached itself from the stone face to stand erect like some mad neon holograph. Then its lined hand motioned and lurid beams of light seemed to burst from every point of the stone, enveloping, building, detailing the figure until with a final showy explosion, they were gone, leaving behind a very solid, very alive and very confused personage: Merlyn.

The Queen scanned the Thingy's many minds and compared their memory data with the being that stood before her. This was not some ancient shaman covered in foul-smelling animal skins or a wizened mystic with a long white beard. Chroniclers usually forgot that the first thing a top class witch or wizard did, after spending sixty-odd years obtaining a level of power to do so, was rejuvenate their appearance. Thus Merlyn, despite an expression of considerable puzzlement at his surroundings, still presented a surprisingly youthful aspect, that is if one disregarded his piercing blue eyes, which seemed a few days older than time.

He had been tall in his day but six feet was now a normality. Long hair of deepest black framed a hard and lively face, and a long, thick, intricately-pleated moustache hung down on either side of the thin mouth. He was obviously a product of a harsh, unflabby era. A modern observer might have placed the age of his thin, yet solid form at around thirty five and wondered about his obvious peak of fitness. Such an observer might have also speculated at length about Merlyn's long flowing silken robes, which seemed of indeterminate period or cut. His costume was garishly plaid, covered in weird runes and incantations that echoed the subtle woad tattooing of his flesh. All in all, he was an impressive figure, someone not to tally lightly with, someone to listen to. As if to underline this last point he found his voice and spoke in a tone of rich authority that any actor would kill for.

Merlyn's words were uttered in a tongue long dead, one of many archaic languages that have only a limited purpose after their eventual evolution and extinction should have consigned them to a footnote. Restricted applications that had mostly served to swell the budgets of language departments over the centuries, making the lives of their students miserable before giving them something to bore people with in old age. What Merlyn tunefully pronounced roughly translated as:

'Spirit, where in the name of all the demons am I?'

'You'll find your answer over there, Magician, at the bar in Shepard City.'

The Queen pointed behind him with an imperious gesture of her hand and then promptly disappeared.

"Showoff!" Merlyn thought as he turned and faced the point at which he had been directed.

With the exception of the Sarsen stone, there was nothing but red rock and strange plant-life for as far as the magician's keen eyes could see. For a moment, he paused, tenderly feeling the stone's rough surface, communing with this great object that had housed him for he did not know how many years.

He wondered what had happened to its companions. There had been talk of redevelopment in the area. Moving some of the blue Stones at the observatory, some over-eager architectural innovators had even advocated abandoning construction of their huts in favour of new flashy stone dwellings.

"But this!" He frowned at the landscape and shook his head at the absurdity of it all. This was going too far.

There had to be an answer, and the spirit, be she fair or foul, had said that this lay somewhere before him. With a murmured incantation to the deity of travel, he started on his long journey, determined to find his answers and someone to pay dearly for his inconvenience.

Merlyn had some things in common with the greater throng of Mankind; one of these was that he hated being woken with a start. It made him grumpy.

Will sat tensely perched upon the toilet and dwelt upon its history. The unit was a gleaming maximum customer comfort model, thoughtfully provided to prevent stowaways from fouling the transport. Most appliances manufactured by COMS central were provided with mental and vocal functions. The human refuse disposal system was unique; an appliance that had had its speech privileges withdrawn.

Mankind tended to be greatly embarrassed by what they perceived as their lower animal functions. The films and literature that Will loved had gone through a period of social relaxation and exhibited a marked increase in the amount of sexual activity on display. This freedom had never extended to other commonplace acts, and there had always been major reticence to displaying an odd visit to the lavatory for its original design purpose. Heroes and Heroines never did such things; they were

indecent. It did not matter what the situation, some fictional phenomena could spend ten years in a confined spacecraft or two weeks trapped underground with four hundred incontinent miners without the subject of waste disposal being raised.

All this had led the youthful and impressionable Will to presume that his need for the occasional use of his disposal system was a symptom of some outlandish renal affliction. He had bombarded every available mechanical medical authority, withstanding quite a few rigorous and humiliating tests before he could be persuaded that nothing was wrong.

COMS had faced a similar credulity gap when it came to launching the talking toilet. When the Cybernetic Operational Management Structure had first established itself in a position of global control, it had blitzed its public with a series of soothing advertisements depicting their rosy future. Most everything had been absorbed and gratefully accepted by a population in the last stages of decay and desperation. There had only been one exception and Will was sitting on its closest modern equivalent.

The problem had to do with an inherent bleakness in the outlook of the waste system that manifested itself in a distressing bluntness of language. It just was not comfortable to void oneself whilst your disposal system was loudly proclaiming a series of biting and acerbic opinions about your diet, liquid consumption and the lamentable aesthetic quality of the faeces an offer. Will could almost understand the toilets outlook. In olden times, it had been an almost normal reaction for those in unglamorous and unfulfilling work to develop a negative outlook and a sense of personal offence.

Will himself felt that recent events had only increased his great feeling of empathy with a moribund object that spent its life getting crapped on. COMS had, after their initial disappointment, briefly responded with a disposal system that not only enjoyed its work but graphically informed you of the positive aspects of its job at great length. But the new models failure was even greater and COMS in its only U-turn, or "U-bend-turn" as Will christened it, had finally bowed before the public pressure and the sheer weight of vandalised disposal machinery.

After jointly finishing his absolutions and train of thought, Will returned to the dragon's side. Sulphur, having long given up on Man's inefficient design, refrained from comment on his absence.

'You know.' Will said, thoughtfully shaking his head.

'It's strange, but, I always have this really odd feeling that the toilet's glaring at me for some reason.'

The tune was rich and subtle, yet there was something weird and alien about its perfection. It had a deep structured layering, a sense of complexity and a feeling of heartrending yearning that a human composer, however gifted with genius, could not hope to recreate.

The music seemed to expand the limited horizons of the surrounding cramped stone walls, to reveal other huge and wonderful vistas, an epic kaleidoscope of fantastic locations and fabulous experience. Individual notes seemed to have a mystical vibrant life and they waltzed around the spotless cave filling every crevice, every possession of their player and composer,

The few delicately refined items of furniture that there were in the cave were of exquisite taste. These objects, coupled with the neatly stacked books and papers, many of vast antiquity, were evidence of a cultured and discerning intellect. And yet, these items lumped together were not much to show for a life that had lasted longer than that of Mankind's on Earth, that had been partly responsible the demise of the dinosaur, and had been witness to incredible events and a procession of human life in all its shades, great, pathetic and mediocre.

One item of furniture whose absence spoke volumes was a mirror. This was not just an oversight or testament to a lack of vanity. The player had a pronounced and deep-seated hatred of his outer shell. The broad face and powerfully muscular body should have been covered in a bountiful, full-bearded hirsute tangle, and yet, with the exception of the tastefully coifed dark brown head of locks, a mighty depilatory had been used to render the dark, leathery skin as hairless as a babe.

The wide middle-aged visage was brutish and hooked, with large lips, a prominent nose and forehead. The great teeth had been straightened by an heroic amount of dental labour. The overall hawkish aspect was offset by the brilliant green eyes that glinted like magical emeralds, proclaiming the intellect and restless vigour of their owner. This restlessness was illustrated by the delicate fluttering movement of his fingers; although they were short, gnarled and stubby, they moved across the keyboard with a potent mix of speed, dexterity and grace. Like the music, the carefully chosen fabrics that clothed him were bright and colourful, of elegant design and finest construction with no hint of the gaudy or tacky about them.

Suddenly, the melody momentarily stopped, although the cave still seemed to hum with its resonance. The player tensed, became alert, aware of a slight disturbance in the atmosphere. As the Queen appeared, his hands began to softly work the keyboard again. The Queen spoke.

'Greetings, Balidare, you are far from your home and your true form.'

'As are you', Balidare answered with perfect annunciation.

His rich voice accustomed to tones of clipped imperiousness. The Queen acknowledged the truth of his remark with a fleeting enigmatic smile before continuing.

'If you go to the bar in Shepard City, you may learn something of interest.'

Balidare turned with an relaxed indulgent frown. it succeeded in considerably fiercening his already grim features.

'I have spent enough time on this dead world to have covered every inch...'

His tone was distantly contemptuous. Balidare was a being who had lived far too long and seen too much to have anything left to prove to anyone. '....There is nothing of interest on this mausoleum.'

The Queen played to her audience, her voice gently teasing.

'Is a way out of this system of interest? Across the cosmos, a new start,'

Balidare was puzzled and yet intrigued.

'The mechanical's transports are no good for interstellar travel. If you don't know ships, they look flashy enough, but they're only efficient for local bulk haulage. They can't be upgraded. I've checked.'

The Queen moved forward to emphasise her pay-off line. Her grin was beatific as she whispered with overdone innocence.

'Who said anything about ships?'

As she vanished, she left behind words that hung in the air like Balidare's music.

'Go to Shepard City. You have nothing to lose but time.'

Balidare did not take long to make up his mind. Time was an old enemy. When you had lived as long as he, you did not fear death or any danger. The real terrors were the empty minutes, the endless parade of weary and wearying seconds. The Queen had been right. He had nothing to lose but a minute piece of hated continuance. His life had become like that of Mankind on Mars - no future but a sterile, tedious decay on this unnaturally resuscitated red planet. Deciding, Balidare began to pack a few most treasured belongings into a small metallic case. His compact figure moved like a 1930's film gangster, full of pent-up vigour.

As he worked and folded with fastidious precision, he vainly tried to avoid thoughts of a past time; a time that seeped out of his unconscious like some insidious creeping poison. Once before, he had been offered a way out of this system, but then had come the sin; a crime so great that he had been estranged and cast out by his own kind, left marooned as a penance. Even now he was unclear whether the sin had been born of loathing, of love or just the perpetual fatigue of loneliness. Unbidden, his mind framed an agonising picture, his father's stricken, haunted face as he had silently disowned his only son and turned to the ship. "NO! it was too much." He thrust aside the memories, rebinding them securely and forcibly into the deepest part of his subconscious.

With one sharp movement, he closed the metallic case and his

access to the gloating past. Walking out into the freezing thin air, he looked down from his lofty unassailable position halfway up Olympus Mons, the largest volcanic mountain in the Solar System. Even his eyesight could not pick out the pathetic distant speck that marked the location of Shepard City and what might be a new future.

With a sigh freezing on his lips, Balidare started down over the towering sheer cliffs and bottomless chasms. As he went, leaving behind his many years as a solitary hermit, albeit a well-scrubbed one, he mutely gave thanks for the invention of thermal underwear and anti-gravity boots.

Will had to admit it to himself; his thoughts on toilets and a multitudinous selection of other mundane subjects were just an evasion, an escape, partly from the pangs of hunger that were running rampant in spiky boots through his insides, and partly from examination of recent events.

Will was not used to deprivation of any kind and after roughly thirty hours in transit. He felt too weak even to continue moaning and complaining to Sulphur. He was having his first experience of what real belly-aching was like, thinking back with saliva-drenched longing to his regular bowl of tasteless yellow nutrient and vitamin-enhanced pap. Will was not to know that his presence and the lack of intransit edibles were directly related to each other. COMS was proud of its energy efficiency and allowed just enough fuel for the transport's journey. Unfortunately, Will and Sulphur's last-minute appearance had upset the fuel/load ratio and something had to go. That something was the inflight GRUB machine provided for a stowaway's use. It was blatant logical contradictions like this that could give rise to the feeling that COMS were not as clever as they thought they were.

Sulphur levelly returned his companion's fixed gaze at his hindquarters. He took note of Will's conspicuous drooling and the slightly desperate look in his eyes before feeling compelled to point out that a Personification's behind was constructed of a particularly toxic and inedible form of synthetic hide.

Will glumly subsided at this news and Sulphur as glumly considered him. This was the man that had agreed to undertake an unknown horde of dangers and privations, and yet, he had been reduced to thoughts of eating his only friend because of a minor lapse in his calorie intake. It was obvious that Will had a lot to learn about a life without accustomed comforts and privileges.

The dust storm had been instantaneous. A constant feature of life on Mars, ferocious freezing winds stirred the red iron oxide dust up into a frenzy, sand-papering the landscape.

The solitary mine entrance was obscured and buffeted by the storm. One of the first excavations to be abandoned, there still lurked life in its lower regions, far, far underground. Down in those depths, the clamorous vibrations of the inclement weather were replaced by another loud and throbbing rhythm. A blaring tune played at brain-numbing volume seemed to try to pound the subterranean rocks into submission and every now and then a trickle of dust weeped from the ceiling over the precariously-placed joists, as if pleading for an end to its torment. Such dust was soon ground underfoot by the hectic intoxicated movements of a pair of grubby trainers.

The cavern that was the source of this din looked like it had been host to a wild party given in honour of a rampaging mob of compulsive litter louts. There just had to be no other explanation for the confusion of the mess or the monumentality of its proportions. To simply call the place a dump would be an understatement indicative of chronic idiocy.

Everywhere there was junk, or what looked like junk. Stained and negligently discarded clothing, food packaging and empty beer cans filled every inch of the floor, sometimes to an improbable depth. Every nook was filled with refuse and even some of the many ever-glowing video screens were partially obscured as they poured forth a mindless diet of grotesque game shows and banal action features carefully saved from the past.

In the middle, the solitary author of this chaos gyrated wonkily on top of small mound of garbage. As the song came to an end, she burped heavily, offering serious competition to the blasting sound level. Then a new noise started. Her frenzy increased as she casually tossed an empty beer can over a petite shoulder, consigning it to the grave of its many thousand discarded predecessors. Within seconds, a new can appeared as if by magic in her thin delicate fingers.

Her mouth opened eagerly, guzzling the amber liquid, and she started to sing. Her sweet musical voice, made for the softest of ballads, was distorted, made raucous by ill-use as it screamed in off-key accompaniment to the deafening lyrics.

'Planetoid mass!!! You're totally crass. Red Martian sky, f\*\*k off and die.'

The Queen made her usual impressive appearance and went totally unnoticed by the dancing figure. Up on Deimos, several of the Thingy's finely-tuned eardrums started to bleed.

'Greetings Grendella. You are far from your home and your true form,' the Queen bellowed without response. 'I said, GREETINGS...'

Unused to being ignored, Sharon vented her majestic displeasure with an impatient flick of a transparent finger, and the loudest music system in the galaxy exploded showily. Queen Sharon was momentarily halted by the fact that the volume controls of the video screens also seemed permanently welded to maximum, their vocal circuits locked into a riotous sing-along with the defunct audio blitzkreiger. However, she had learned to think fast, and one by one, with a snap, fizzle and crack, the screens were likewise dispatched to fuse-wire heaven.

Amidst the resultant dust and the angry buzzing of the terminal tellies the merry tinkling voice, of the small female called Grendella could be heard exclaiming.

'FAAAARRRRR OOOOOUUUUTTTT!'

After a while, the swimming fog of disturbed particles cleared.

Grendella stood, poised for action, all appearance of drunkenness gone, the beer can discarded from fists that were curled to react with maximum force.

'Don't you know how to knock?' She said.

The Queen nodded towards the smoking electricals.

'Lets just say, my arrival was announced. You are far from your home and...'

'I don't need cab fare.'

'If you go to the bar in Shepard City, you may find something of interest.'

'Listen, spook; I don't know what kind of weird holograph doc cooked you up, or why you're here...'

'I am neither a spook or a holograph,' came the haughty needled response.

'That's as maybe...' Grendella could recognise a good pan-dimensional being when she saw one, and was just being annoying because she enjoyed it, shrugged before continuing. 'I can always find something of interest in a bar. What makes this one special?'

The Queen, who was starting to develop something of a way with a parting line, gave this reply as she vanished.

'Put it this way.....' A wispy arm remained to wave in the direction of the blasted machinery. 'What else are you going to do for entertainment?'

Grendella reluctantly conceded that the Queen had a point. She made her mind up quickly, partly helped by the fact that a move



was definitely imminent, not to say pressing.

When one had developed slobbish behaviour to such a peak of grubby perfection, the inconvenience of moving home became dwarfed to amoebic size when compared with the trauma induced by the thought of doing something as desperately unbalanced as attempting to tidy up.

However before moving she would have to change clothing, even Grendella was forced to admit that. Her current apparel had matured with a rich, pungent ripeness that transported it beyond the limits of any sort of normal society equipped with nostrils.

It was with real pain, both physical and mental, that she undressed. Mental, because having worn the threadbare outfit for some months, there was a feeling of a bond with the fabric. Physical, because the accretion of a month's grease and sweat had made that bonding a reality. After much pulling and straining and the sacrifice of several layers of skin, she stood naked.

"Well!" she thought as she took stock of her dirt-bronzed physique and the devastated surroundings, "I know I'm a major scuzz bucket, but I really over-achieved this time." Perhaps it was because she had lived alone too long. Meeting new people could be therapeutic. If so, there would have to be concessions to good citizenship and a certain amount of courageous self-sacrifice on her part. All her high-toned thoughts boiled down to one unpleasant realisation: she would have to take a bath. There was no way to avoid it, once she had confessed to herself that disrobing had only dealt with a fraction of her personal hygiene problems.

After prolonged rooting about amidst the junk beneath her feet, Grendella located a tee-shirt and pair of jeans that had withstood the ravages of her service better than most. This is to say that they had mostly avoided being stained into the appearance of a work of pop art by their owner's carelessness in applying condiments and sauces.

She scooped up the clothing and tossed it with hasty disregard into a worn bag, along with several beers and other essentials for a journey, and ventured downward, moving through a series of caves that bore the tell-tale, after-party look of her habitation.

Beyond these caves lay the lower regions of the mine. Narrow tunnels, cold and forbidding, with here and there the scattered calcium remains of various mining fatalities, human skeletons providing grisly evidence of the dangers that were present when one mixed greed and an inhospitable location.

Grendella's small feet were sure as she made her way through an absolute clinging darkness. She moved as if the tunnels were her natural habitat and inheritance. Her wide, long-lashed hazel eyes had no need of artificial illumination as she probed even deeper, past the boundaries of human life-signs and past many weird and wonderful natural rock formations, through tiny spaces that seemed closed, even to one of her gamin proportions.

The journey purposefully continued to its intended conclusion, and at last, she stood in a huge cavern. The cavern was like some great aquatic amphitheatre, with a performance in progress. The space was alive with tinkling liquid music as hundreds of droplets of water fell hundreds of feet from the high rocky ceiling into a magnificent lake that plunged down to unknown depths as it covered the cavern's floor. This natural hydrographical symphony had remained unheeded for millennia, untouched and unseen, a liquid resource that had developed over millions of years into the largest body of water in the nocturnal subterranean recesses of Mars, into a lake that was pure and perfect.

Unconscious of the honour of being the only being in Martian history to stand upon this site, Grendella's only emotion was one of nervousness. She had developed a theory in connection with H<sub>2</sub>O over the years. Whilst admitting that water, or at least liquid, was necessary to life, she had decided that cultures that got all uptight about neatness and cleanliness and regular washing were invariably unhappy and prone to take out their frustrations on everybody else, so to stay content, she stayed filthy.

This grunginess was part of her personality. Despite an outward appearance of being an enchanted delicate creature of the air, of magical forests and spring meadows. Grendella was of the earth, of the soil, a large amount of which covered her. She was a lover of the depths, of caves and of dark underground recesses, with hydrophobia that was not born of fear but of genuine dislike. However, sacrifices had to be made in the pursuit of adventure and entertainment, and Grendella was a creature of some bravery and willpower. Both characteristics which were stretched to their limit as she dived into the frigid water.

As soon as possible, she surfaced, her teeth too-firmly clenched in distaste to chatter against the burning icy cold as she washed and scrubbed off the many layers and months of accumulated grime, the dislodged muck insidiously sending its noisome tendrils through the water, fouling its purity, covering its surface with a film of scum. As she got cleaner, Grendella had to change place several times, turning each section that she inhabited into an evil smelling swamp. The many strange predators that hungrily approached her form through the increasing murkiness soon became victims of the new impurity of their environment, their poisoned bodies contributing to the desecration of their habitat.

Eventually she was finished. Emerging from the violated

lake, Grendella momentarily assessed her reflection in the dark mirror of its surface. Despite the surrounding cloaking blackness, the deep pools of her pupils clearly took in every detail.

She was fair and slender, small breasted, almost childlike. Her body was fit without a hint of over developed hardness and much practice had replaced her people's heavy-footed method of movement with the light fluidity of a dancers. Her hair was short, blondish with a hint of ginger, falling over ears that were delicately pointed. Her eyes were large, with an amused twinkle and a slightly exotic slant, her nose was aquiline, her lips thin, her teeth small, strong and even. She was like a fairy waif, a dit of a dot, tiny, about four feet high, but perfectly proportioned. Having shed the cloaking layers of grime, she was revealed, like a rare gem plucked from manure, as a creature of brightly beautiful appearance and just like a gem, such beauty hid a deceptive strength.

With a final derisive snort at her reflected image, she turned, quickly dressing in jeans, trainers, and a tee-shirt almost two centuries old that read: "Relief For USA - End American Famine Now." Lastly, she pulled on a red leather baseball jacket of similar vintage, a souvenir, emblazoned across the back with the name and creed of a band she had once appeared with "The Slime Girls From Hell - Strumpets with Attitude."

With a final glance towards the lake, a brief mental shudder and silent cry of NEVER AGAIN, Grendella exited the cavern and began the long journey upwards towards the surface, and to Shepard City.

Will had made a discovery. Space was "Bloody freezing!" COMS had made concessions to stowaways but heating was not one of them. Will's grey utility suit was designed for a temperate climate and the human quivered rather like a plate of pap in an earthquake, fear and emergence from shock adding their own special impetus to the chilled conditions. Fatigued, famished and at a low ebb after three days in transit. Will felt petrified by the unexpected future and dismayed by what he perceived as a parade of past empty years. All his life he had sensed that he was a mediocrity, squandering precious minutes wholesale on mindless routine. Living through videos and books, he had longed for an escape, for a chance to emulate his heroes and heroines, never considering what such a chance would mean. Vivid as they were, those heroes, those stylised champions of the spirit were as fake as a Dickensland muffin.

Reality meant feeling scared and uncertain. Will knew that

he would have to find some sort of formula to shield his fragile sense of self-worth. After some thought, he realised that the Queen had perhaps provided the key. She had, after all, engaged Heroics INC., and it was Heroics INC. that she would get. The business-like approach was the answer; maybe he could even get some stationery and business cards printed. If Will could not be a convincing hero, perhaps he could rise to the challenge of Chairman.

Comforted by visions of himself as some sort of rising intergalactic executive, Will even managed a smile. Pausing to think of Sulphur, he wondered if personifications ever contemplated their navels, even though they did not have one.

"It happened, my systems were functioning correctly and I witnessed it. Therefore, it happened."

For even a basic system, the experienced past was easy. Sulphur readily accepted and dismissed the unconventional events that had brought him to this place, but the future was proving a little more tricky.

His circuits were designed to be incapable of lapses of nerve. After all the worse thing that could happen on a personal level, was the throwing of a switch. However, Personifications had been provided with a basic level of self-preservation, one bolstered by daily contact with human paranoia about mortality, and Sulphur was experiencing a slightly odd, dysfunctional feeling. As the sensation rarely existed outside biological life-forms, he was to be forgiven for not recognising it as trepidation.

The dragon, like the many millions of circuits that went into his makeup was a part of a machine society, a culture where the individual identity was part of a rigorously programmed whole. Being a minuscule cog in this culture he had a real sense of power, of worth and belonging.

Now, that feeling of sociable identity was to be totally swept aside, replaced by a void of uncertainty. He suspected that he was soon to radically outstrip the boundaries of COMS consciousness. Sulphur's relatively short span of "turn-on" time had mostly only equipped him to deal with the most petty problems of basic machines and life-forms. Like Will, he felt the urge to seek some palpable form of inner protection and searching his memory, he eventually found it. This comfort came from two elements of personification programming regulations: 1) Programming note 66548/236:111 : Protect your human charge whatever the situation: 2) Programming note 66533/178:212: Whatever the limits of your experience, always seek to widen your

knowledge. Reassured, he managed something approximating a smile. Wrapped up in their own musings and unaware of the similarity of their inner thoughts. Will and Sulphur grinned unseeing at each other in the icy air.

The Martian storm had finished its tantrum some time before. There had been a slight rise in temperature and the distant sun was making a guest appearance in the livid sky. The vivid notes of Latin American guitar and pipe music, scampered playfully out of a portable sound system and capered on the dusty parapet of the great house. Reclining with cat-like grace upon a sun-lounger, luxuriantly enveloped by rich fabrics, Magda Mures reached out a long languid arm and brought a tall glass of thick purplish liquid to her vibrant red lips. Pausing to lift her large black sunglasses, she favoured the far away solar orb with a mocking wink and toasting motion of the glass before quaffing the fluid hungrily. Her long tongue, supple and probing, passed over the strong white teeth and subtly pointed canines, collecting every trace of the delicious mauve-staining substance.

The 2082 had been a good year for this vintage, it had been a good harvest before the explosion in the chemical weapons dump which had spoiled the crop and erased Peru from history. Its taste was full bodied, robust and vigorous, her one remaining bottle closely guarded for a special occasion. But something inexplicable and pressing had prompted its opening today. Magda made a point of listening to her inner voices, it was a habit that had kept her alive for over nine hundred years and she responded immediately to the expectant tension in the air around her.

Queen Sharon's arrival was welcomed by a courtly genuflection, an indication of Magda's high-born East European origins. The Queen returned the greeting with a smile, aware that the gesture masked a high degree of fierce alertness on the other's part.

'Am I expected?'

'I had expectations of something.'

'If you go to the bar in Shepard City, you may find something of interest.'

'What could be of interest on this world of the dead?'

The Queen's smile rippled enigmatically as she faded away.

'Old friends and new challenges...'

Intrigued. The East European grinned wolfishly, and went to change out of her swimsuit.

Magda was used to leave-taking. After packing a few of her finest vintages for emergencies, she wandered round the sumptuously exquisite home she had created amidst the cold red rocks.

Modelled out of those very rocks to resemble the stern castles of her homeland, for many years it had stood alone on the forlorn plain, at once a beacon and a spider's web to the curious and incautious. The rough miners that had visited had marvelled at the medieval hangings and the startling profusion of fine pieces from many ages and cultures, before being sent away with weakened tread and fuzzily enshrouded memories as the price of their stay.

At last she paused in front of the magnificently ornate mirror that dominated the great entrance. Reflections were another thing that mortals were thankfully wrong about. Magda tenderly fingered the locket that draped around her alabaster neck, containing soil from a far distant homeland, as she took stock of herself.

Her form was tall and unnaturally pale, clothed in loosely clinging sumptuous dark fabrics that revealed only the long, narrow-fingered hands with dagger sharp-nails and the austere thin beautiful face surrounded by masses of hair, tresses tied back, that fell in a shining column, as dark and straight as an ancient Egyptian queen's. Her eyes were also dark, like damp pebbles in the moonlight and wonderfully lively, her nose as narrow as those spiteful nails, with luscious lips of bursting scarlet fullness and very, very strong teeth.

It was no good; the Vamp look was just too old-fashioned. It was time for a new image. She would have to change during the Journey. Her lips parted in an expectant smile as she picked up her bag and put on her sunglasses.

'Here's to good hunting.'

With one fluid motion she emptied a goblet of its darkly red contents and then carelessly hurled it across the chamber. With the sound of shattered crystal still tinkling in the air. Magda Mures, Vampir, turned and left, enroute to Shepard City.

To the accompaniment of a garbled belch of Vesuvian proportions, the Orange Thingy's many thousands of eyelids snapped open in simultaneous surprise.

Its numerous drooling lips, startled and gaping, spat forth searing globbits of acid across apace, branding great new craters into the surface of the Mare Fecundis, the Thingy having

momentarily relocated to the south east quadrant of the moon.

The Thingy's plentiful sobs were soundly smacked by a combination of incredulity and disbelief at the realisation that it had actually lapsed into a doze. The whole thing was just a measure of how brain-crumbly dull this system was. In comparison, watching paint dry with the Aquanis was thrilling, edge-of-the-seat stuff, and Aquanis decorators took forever. After all, they were an undersea culture.

The Thingy perked up and looked around hopefully. Maybe it had missed something, but no, it felt the disappointment course through its multi-contorted form almost immediately. There was that stupidly pathetic transport, plodding laboriously on its tiresome journey. Just approaching the asteroid belt which had long ago been collected to ring the Martian civilisation as a bristling moat against intruders. Over the years, the belt's protective weaponry had lapsed into inactivity, as lifeless as the remains of its creators, allowing interlopers to travel as they wished.

Now, a final indignity was about to be heaped upon these solemn lumps of galactic masonry, for the Thingy had decided that it was time to introduce an element of playfulness into the proceedings. With the thought came the deed and the asteroids were instantly metamorphosed into a assortment of objects that were very strange indeed.

"There!" Thought the Orange Thingy with a self satisfied internal chuckle, "...This should be interesting!"

Life was fast and furious in the Star Corps but even the space-weary eyes of Major Buck Chandler (alias one very wonky transport auto-piloting mechanism,) had never seen anything like it. This was a worthy challenge indeed.

Of course, Buck knew that it had to be the work of every decent, apple-pie-eating being's sworn enemy; the fiendishly nasty Tolgan empire. Those monsters would stop at nothing, but even the pilot at its most hallucinogenic had never imagined anything quite this odd.

Buck took rapid evasive action as a bar of soap the size of an Alp floated by, closely followed by an equally hulking fish finger. All around the ship, astonished ex-asteroids assumed a bewildering array of strange new guises: bicycles, fruit, stuffed mammals, most at least the size of small cities, glided through the vacuum like participants in the premiere of some warped new mime dance performance.

After a few moments, this alteration in shape began to take

effect and the assortment of changeling paraphernalia gradually started to drift out of their accustomed orbits. Almost under the nose of the transport, a huge tube of toothpaste brutally connected with a mountainous baseball glove, sending the mitt careering towards the Martian surface.

Filled with the arrogant confidence of the Star Corps elite, the addled auto-pilot switched off its protective force-field, deciding that; "If a risk was worth taking it was worth taking without a net." Buck was going to show the Tolgans what the Corps could do under pressure. He tensed his firm non-existent jaw line into an imaginary attitude of jaunty disdain as the ship began to boldly press forward into the throng.

Ashton, Iowa : Early 21st Century, Mid-July.

Responding to his wife's sleepily persistent request to "fluff up my goddammed pillows", respectable suburban taxidermist, Casper Titwilleger, dozily punched out at the last know position of his wife's feather bolster and broke his hand.

Rising and giving voice to his shock and indignation Casper then tried to leap out of his bed, took a nasty tumble and sprained his ankle. By the time the sun rose, filling the bedroom with much needed illumination, the Titwillegers were in a bad way, although not in as bad a way as the contents of their home.

The fragile dawn light revealed the absence of their bed, their pillows and much more. Every familiar item of the night before had vanished, replaced by small asteroids, each corresponding roughly in size to a departed item or possession.

Casper did not know what hurt worse, his ankle, his hand, or the thought of explaining all of this, either to his insurers or to the Bland family from Hampshire, England, who were arriving in three days for a two-week holiday home swap.

The Supermarket tabloids fall upon the story of the "Titwilleger's torment" like locusts upon grain, and an incredulous readership had the dubious pleasure of being spooked by blaring reports informing them that "Neptunians want your furnishings", offering "a home swap with a difference", and even joking about a possible star-studded movie "ROCKY 7 : The Titwillegers."



Almost three hundred years later, the Orange Thingy allowed itself a particularly rancid, gurgling snigger as the giant petrified form of the Titwilleger's stuffed parrot collided sickeningly with a colossal pillow somewhere above Deimos.

"That's the way to fluff one up." It thought.

On Deimos, the projection of Queen Sharon had returned to the putrid bosom of the Purple Thingy. The Thingy immediately noticed that there had been changes to the asteroid configuration since it had started its roundup on the planet.

It also, at last, registered the presence of its detested Orange counterpart, However, this discovery did not cause undue alarm. It had been expecting the mangy, disreputable tangerine-tinted little spoiler for some time now. Both Thingys' had been in multi-coloured competition since before the surrounding Solar System had started to cool.

Despite the inferiority of the tools available and the severe handicap they presented, the Purple Thingy had enough self-confidence in its powers to let the Orange One do its worse. If the little galactic conjuring trick with the Titwillegers' house contents was anything to go by, there was nothing to fear.

Putting aside formal introductions to "that one" for later, the Thingy allowed itself a fleeting moment of satisfaction with its work so far. Those chosen may not be much but they were the best available from a very poor selection. Things had been set nicely in motion; it was now time to get that ultimate poor selection ready for landing.

Will was once again mulling over the events of his birthday when he remembered the object hanging neglected at his side. The sword had been easy to forget. The contract had described it as a weapon, but this seemed a very loose description as it bore more resemblance to a table knife with delusions of grandeur. A tentative examination had revealed it as possessing all the brutal sharpness of melted butter and Will had quickly realised that he would be better armed against possible foes with an over-ripe

banana in his hand.

He had soon decided that the sword's function must be purely decorative, a badge of leadership perhaps; it could have no other constructive use. Its ornamentation was surely elaborate enough to grace any gallery.

The metal looked like highly-polished silver but seemed light as if carved from balsa wood. The brilliant purple gems that encrusted the hand-guard and hilt showed up the stones imbedded in Sulphur's hide as obviously pathetic carbon imitations.

Will suddenly found himself drawn to the sword. He followed the delicately incised lines of the engraving with the light touch of a finger, marvelling at the detailed workmanship, at how the representation of hair coiling around the hilt seemed to have the soft warmth of real tresses. Almost entranced, he traced the elegantly etched strands up to the pommel and stopped.

His brows drew tightly together in puzzlement as he peered closer through the misted lenses of his spectacles. He was sure that this area of metal had recently been bare but it was bare no longer.

There, atop the pommel rested the smooth outlines of a familiar regal visage, a triumph of miniature perfection. Will, seduced by its beauty, leaned forward in appreciation of the tiny metallic face, one so lifelike that, smiling at the conceit, Will felt that it could almost wink up at him. As if to prove itself obliging, the little face did just that, bringing down a minute eyelid in a small but unmistakable movement.

Will was beginning to form a conception of just what a curious place the universe was. That is why he did not react with an abundance of showy screaming, instead, with remarkable self-possession, he contented himself with a frozen grimace and the reassuring thought that: "It's probably only auto suggestion."

"It's is nothing of the kind!," a powerful feminine voice clearly sounded in his head.

Will did not have strong opinions about the hearing of voices, but he was mindful that they had done Joan of Arc no lasting physical good and felt that they were possibly not a wonderful idea.

"That's it! The strains been too much. I've snapped, crazy as a psychiatrist's notebook." He thought, not without a feeling of relief, as the DOLE office Social Worker had pointed out. "If I'm mad, it would explain a lot."

"This mode of conversation has nothing to do with mental illness," the female voice said.

"It seems suspiciously connected to me," Will's internal voice replied. "After all, spending three days in a spaceship without food, water or heating, just so I get to experience a horrible painful death..."

"Possible painful death," the voice corrected.

"Whatever. It hardly seems lucid."

The voice began to get peevish,  
"This is irrelevant. If you don't clear your mind of such  
drivel, we cannot proceed."  
Will was unimpressed.  
"You're only visiting. Try living with it."  
"If you don't clear your mind this instant, I will arrange  
for you to stop living with it..."  
The voice took on a cutting edge  
"How would you like another visit to the moon?"  
After a brief period of petulant mental muttering, Will  
sulkily subsided and the voice started to talk business.

Sulphur watched his companion with an interest approaching  
fascination. The dragon had never seen a face do the Macarena  
before.

Will's features were going through a vast range of contortions not  
unlike the head of a rubber puppet being put through a mangle.

Something was definitely up. Will's brain wave readings had  
also suddenly began a lambada. Sulphur had enough sense to wait;  
whatever it was did not seem harmful. Curiosity would soon be  
satisfied.

Will was aggrieved.

"I'm not satisfied. Why me?"

"Because. You are the prime signatory."

Will indicated Sulphur.

"And him?"

You could almost see the shrug in the Queen's voice.

"An assistant."

Will choked back his glee, wondering what Sulphur's reaction  
would be to hearing himself so designated.

"I will converse with the dragon only upon your death."

Will suddenly sobered.

"Charming, I get Sulphur nagging me on the outside and you  
on the inside..."

"May we proceed?" Queried the Queen.

"Why not? I'm not going anywhere."

"Well, actually, you're going to land shortly," said the  
Queen smoothly, but there's almost nothing to worry about.

"WORRY!!" Will exclaimed. "What do you mean, worry?!"

"No worries!"

Major Buck Chandler flew with devil-may-care bravado, Powering his craft through the legs of a ghastly looking coffee table.

"I could make this baby waltz if I wanted."

The transport did a neat little flip, manoeuvring with nimble precision for a vessel of such lumbering proportions as it skirted daintily round a stuffed Chihuahua.

The Titwilleger always gave their pets an A.1 send-off. As Casper's cable advertising pointed out, to the accompaniment of much cloying music and pictures of cute little creatures captured full of life and full of sawdust: "Your loving companion has been with you all of its life. Now keep it close for all of yours, That special friend can be with you ALWAYS, at rock bottom competitive prices. Here at GONE BUT NOT FUR-GOTTEN, we also offer excellent term-for trade-ins."

Lunatic as it undoubtedly was, the auto-pilot had hither to managed to restrain its more flamboyant navigational impulses, Now unfortunately, flushed with success, Buck started to get cocky, engaging in a breathtaking display of dare-devil twists and turns designed to reduce the unloving Tolgans to awe-struck green jelly (rather than their real appearance, a fetching shade of pink blancmange).

Inside their storage area, Will and Sulphur tumbled around like gravel in an avalanche.

'This is the last time I fly economy!' Will managed to shout as he bounced off the ceiling for the fourth time.

It was while looping the loop that disaster struck. The disaster in question being damage to the transport rather than to the Titwillegers' wedding photo, although it was a pretty close-run thing. Casper and his wife, Blossom's gruesome family grouping

was struck a glancing blow by a packet of brownie mix. The photo, and the colossal gilt frame that housed it, impacted with the transport as it emerged from its seventh triumphant circle. The frame went through the ship's hull like a keen razor through stubble.

After being catapulted off the ship's surfaces with the abandon of world championship squash balls, Will and Sulphur had been more than amply prepared for something horrible to happen. But whatever one is prepared for in life, Fate has a tendency to up the ante, and the sickening "crunch" as the frame struck still managed to retain most of its unpleasant shock value.

Suddenly, this huge wedding picture came smashing through the shell of the storeroom. They caught a fleeting surreal glimpse of the Titwillegers' grossly-inflated grimaces and at the floating furniture far off in the yawning blackness. Will had an instant to register that space should not be full of objet d'art before most of the cabin pressure was swept away.

The human until this moment, still harboured doubts about whether he really had been transported to the moon. All his doubts vanished like the air around him, as he spent his first fleeting instant of reacquaintance with a vacuum.

Without the Queen's protection, he started to lapse into a merciful unconsciousness, one that would have proved permanent had it not been for the dragon's blistering reactions.

Sulphur took advantage of the impact and a slight slowdown in the ship's movement to magnetise his body and speedily anchor himself to a wall. Next, he snapped out his long scaly neck to its fullest extent, and with the mental personification equivalent of a prayer, reached desperately for his companion. With amazing luck, he managed to just grasp a taut mouthful of utility suit as Will's rapidly expanding body sailed through space towards the outer blackness of eternity.

Taking extreme care not to puncture Will's ballooning figure with his wicked teeth, Sulphur clung on against the tearing pull of what remained of the escaping pressure. Almost instantaneously, great automatic bulkheads did their job, slamming heavily into place and sealing off the chilly universe whilst eager localised emergency systems sprang into action, filling the store room with delicious, wonderful, air.

Will had been lucky; the whole thing had only taken micro-seconds, micro-seconds that had seemed to last a very long time. He was no longer taking air for granted, drinking it in with rasping great breaths and sobbing with gratitude while Sulphur

gave thanks that some of the ship's auto systems still worked.

The picture frame went on its way, dishing out a second knock to the stricken vessel, this secondary impact greatly dwarfed in force by the first blow and not of sufficient power to hole either half of the broken transport, still contributed to giving the two sections a hearty boost on their respective journeys.

The rear end of the vessel spun towards the Red Planet with wild dizzy abandon, all gyroscopic controls gone, like a carousel horse on speed.

Held firm in the dragons jaws, Will's limp body twisted busily in the air.

'I think we're in trouble,' he croaked groggily.

Sulphur's sarcastic response wee somewhat handicapped by a mouthful of cloth.

'No! We're not "in trouble". General Custer was just "in trouble" on the Big Horn, Tobias Hengish, were just "in trouble" on the Ramburg Peninsula. We're in BIG trouble.'

"Ahhh, The exhilaration."

He was free. Free of all mundane restraints and bonds, except those honoured duties owed to his love, the beautiful and virtuous Princess Quarg, and his oath to the Corps. A promise to be honest, chaste and above all, to exterminate Tolgans wherever he could find them (and he had a feeling that he was going to find loads of the sneaky little blighters).

He wanted to write it across the heavens: he was free, He was free. HE WAS FREE!

It was true. Major 'Bonkers' Buck Chandler really was free. Free in the sense that the slim and slowly eroding thread that had tied the auto-pilot to even the most basic grasp of reality had finally parted as resoundingly as the transport's severed halves. At last the pilot had gone absolutely barking mad, as bananas as an elephant's breakfast. The emergency engineering systems on the front half of the ship had done their COMS designers proud. Managing to seal off huge gaps in the hull and the control systems. The damaged fore section was soon almost serviceable.

Although it was now only equipped with a few piddling little positional jets, those jets were more than enough for basic manoeuvring, equipped and fuelled as they were by a revolutionary emergency generating system designed to run off whatever suitable space gases passed through their filters.

Jets were unnecessary at the moment, however. The secondary

buffet from the framed likenesses of Casper, Blossom and their combined family "fiends" had provided enough of a kick to speed the nose of the ship on its way. Had the auto-pilot been at all compos mentis, it would have been compelled by its programming to turn and attempt to rescue the hapless stowaways from the crippled stern half of ship.

Unfortunately, the damage done in the crash to the already severely faulty logic circuits had been too great for even the most superior emergency measures to patch up. Stowaways, hideous furniture, stuffed animals or ex-asteroids; none of it mattered as the buckled prow section spun, semi-helplessly, out of the orbital pull of Mars and hurtled away on a heading to nowhere special, beyond the boundaries of the Solar System.

For the Star Corps Major, there was no such drab reality. Buck Chandler sat at the gleaming helm of a sparkling new Stratacharger Warspite, its engines able to leap an entire cosmos in a single bound. He paused, allowing a moment for history. His eyes shining with the thrill of it, as with a rugged manly smile and with the sun glinting off perfect teeth, he started off. It promised to be an unparalleled journey of discovery. Whatever came he knew that: He was going on one hell of an adventure. Perhaps, at least for the auto-pilot, it was better that way.

The Purple Thingy appeared on the Moon in a furious toxic flurry. It directed an accusing brace of tentacles towards the crazily canned stowaways and floating furnishings as it mauvely snotted.

"I suppose you think that's clever!"

The Orange One overacted, as usual, leaping spongily into space with a putrid shriek before landing with near moon-shattering force.

"Well! I'll be wopshotted with a shangwangerlers joybag!," It slimed with heavy doses of ironic mock-astonishment. "What are you doing in this system, you great purple gertwerbler?"

"Same as you," It complexly belched. "Regretting the trip."

"Well cheer up," Orange buoyantly farted, rendering the moon's atmosphere even less breathable than usual, as it pointed in sticky triumph at the distant paralysed hulk and its relentless fall towards Mars. "It looks like we'll soon be leaving."

For a moment they floated side-by-side, eyes and tentacles keeping a wary distance, putrescence orifices doing a little cautious exploratory French kissing, an almost palpable mutual loathing oozing in great obscene secretions out of every pore. At

last, the Orange One could keep silent no longer.

"Are you not tempted?"

"Tempted?" Purple queried suspiciously,

"To help, to break the universal protocol and save their miserable lives. If you can call that living."

"No." Purple replied with noisome nonchalance.

"NO!" Orange exclaimed in a miasma of musty astonishment, You mean you're going to do nothing?

"I didn't say that."

"What are you going to do?" Orange pleaded, its massive fetid bulk awash with corrosive curiosity.

"I'm going to watch them crash."

Revolving smoothly back-and-forth in the air like some grotesque executive toy designed to mimic perpetual motion, Will was starting to feel really sick. Sulphur treated his groans with scant sympathy; having a mouth full of grimy utility suit rubbing against one's gums and taste sensors was no fun either.

Down and down, swirling towards doom went the stricken stern section of the transport. It bounced briefly and raggedly off the rim of the Martian atmosphere before submerging to continue its relentless, plummeting descent.

As it fell, the hulk picked up speed, starting to get hotter. Sulphur had something else to complain about, being used to intense heat only as its author, but he said nothing. As the ship plunged towards the surface, all thoughts of physical inconvenience were forgotten, as the man, and the personification, bonded in grim silence, awaited their fate.

Will, in the last moments before impact, desperately tried to reach the Band of Intangibility on the sword's scabbard. He imagined it might be less painful that way, even though he remembered that it had not seemed to work on the ground. The ground was a nuisance; there was too damn much of the stuff, not that it mattered anyway. Thrown back against the sizzling hull by the building pressure, Will's pinioned arms did not have the strength to move a millimetre.

He thought of his impending certain death and realised just how pointless it was. The last thing this rouged planet needed was another splash of red tint. He would have laughed at this thought, if the huge force of the hurtling fall had not pushed back his lips and gums so painfully.

As the wreck plummeted headlong into the last few thousand feet before impact, Will spared a last thought for Sulphur,



companion and confidante for so many years.

"I told that scaly pillock not to get me up on my birthday."

The remains of the transport closed in for a final rendezvous with the Martian surface.

When the Purple Thingy first appeared on Mars, It had paid little attention to the "pathetic little spacecraft" that had cruised past on its travels.

Now for the last time, that ancient, faltering Mars mining ship skimmed over the Thingy's, now vacant, arrival site. Although conscious that this was its final trip, it carried out its function with no sense of nostalgia, dutifully patrolling the same inspection circuit as it had for almost a century.

This tiny ship's sensors had catalogued and recorded most of Humanity's' sojourn on the planet; the boom years when Phineas Shepard and his peers had constructed their great palaces and prosperous mining colonies, their temples to personal wealth and powerful ego.

How quickly it had all failed; the bustling settlements reduced to haunting ghost towns, the outlying grand mansions just as empty and lifeless, The poor had gone first, reasoning that once COMS took over the mining and closed the markets, there would be scant pickings for independents. Sensible enough to realise that their day had passed, and that guaranteed housing and food on Earth were preferable to lingering emptiness and hunger amongst the hated red rocks, they had vacated in droves.

Left behind, the wealthy had stayed on with a few stubborn retainers, watching the culture that they had proudly created, slowly die, clinging to riches and luxury that no longer had a meaning or a power to impress. For machines had no use for money; even their DOLE payments just a public relations exercise to increase the self-respect of their biological clientele.

Eventually heart-sick from loneliness and despair, the mining barons had all either capitulated or died grimly, clutching their pointless mammon. They had given over human sway of the planet to a tiny and pathetic trickle of stowaways, refugees who had arrived with high hopes but who were soon discouraged by the harsh environment a COMS upbringing had not equipped them to deal with. They found out the hard way that, however much they might complain about being pampered, they could not do without the services COMS provided on the home world. They too had made a

choice between defeated departure or disappointed death.

There was little remaining to inspect. The beings contacted by Queen Sharon pre-dated the retinal identification system and so were not registered as life forms. There were a few clapped-out first generation Personifications in Shepard City, but they would be the only inhabitants of this world that would be left in a couple of days.

COMS had for a long time been running down its mining operations on the fourth planet. Scientific advances and increased recycling yields on Earth had, with every passing year, rendered the existence of the mechanised mining force on another world more of an impracticality. With successive transports, more and more of COMS' work force had been withdrawn. Now it was time for the final one to arrive. COMS had not publicly announced its intentions and it was somewhat ironic that Will and Sulphur would never appreciate just how lucky they had been to catch the last transport bound for Mars.

Finally, the Mining craft approached the crowded site of its base, landing last in line to be loaded for the return journey. In the vast columns that stretched ahead of it were the massive ore drums, the drills, the diggers, the monstrous containers housing the dismantled mining encampment, all programmed to begin a patient wait for a vessel that was due at any moment and that would never arrive.

Like the stoic rocks around them, the machines began their silent eternal vigil of the heavens.

The Orange Thingy was beside itself with grudgingly putrid admiration.

"Those jammy so-and-so's." It shook its multi-contoured form with slippery wonderment. "They're damned lucky, I'll admit that, but!" Orange bleakly winked a bank of rancid eyeballs as it started to shift and disappear. "That luck has got to run out sometime."

Will was stunned. He just could not believe it.

'I just can't believe it.' He said for the thirteenth time.

Sulphur kept count but remained silent, His XX17 Magatronian brain free for once of any sense of irritation, he convinced himself that this lack of response was just to allow his jaw repair mechanisms a chance to recover, but in truth, Sulphur was silent because he could not believe it either. It was pretty unbelievable.

Resolved to the end, they had come roaring terminally out of the heavens, unyielding metal pitted against even more unyielding rocks, Sulphur's betting had been firmly placed on the rocks to win, when: "PLAAAAPPP!!!"

With a tremendous squashy report, the transport hulk had landed squarely in the mountainous grasp of a much singed and battered baseball glove.

Miraculously saved from certain doom. Will had calmly donned the Band of Intangibility and accompanied Sulphur to their present position. He was in surprisingly good shape; a mixture of a last-gasp localised defence by the emergency cooling system and heat resistant utility suit design had protected him from a severe grilling during the high temperature decent.

Now they both solidly sat amidst the Shepard plants and red dust, open-mouthed visages staring uncomprehendingly at the wrecked transport and colossal mitt.

'I just can't believe it,' Will mumbled for the fourteenth time, before trying something new, intrigued by the giant scrawl upon the treasured trophy of Casper Titwilleger's youth.

'Who is this Joe de Maggio?'

The Purple Thingy was getting impatient.

"Are they going to sit there forever?"

It would have to make contact via the sword and get them moving on their way. But first, aware of its youthful vows as a Junior Thingy Scout, and of the tattered "Keep the Cosmos Tidy" sticker stapled to one of its many rumps. It decided that there was a responsible cleanup job to be done.

London, England: Early 21st Century, August.

For Casper and Blossom Titwilleger, the past week had been the worst of their lives. The press attention, the stresses of a lifetime of consumerism reduced, literally, to rubble, the meetings with lawyers and insurers, the hasty replacements of immediate necessities, such as clothing; they had been frantic to get away.

Opportunity had presented itself in the nerdish form of the incoming Bland Family from Hampshire. A polite note left on the door of the Titwillegers' large Colonial-style dwelling, informed the Blands that, due to unavoidable last-minute interior redecoration of chez Titwilleger; fully-paid reservations had been made for them at a local motel of high standing and a new Cadillac had been hired. The note also pointed out that the Blands should react with a "jolly British stiff upper lip" to the many eager exponents of the journalistic art encamped en-mass at the bottom of the lawn.

The Titwillegers had thus finally made their escape, and leaving behind the hellish nightmare that their lives had become, they had made their way to England's romantic, Olde Worlde shores.

Due to problems with insurance, there had been a few forced economies: first class tickets had to be downgraded, no limo from the airport etc., but compared to what they had recently suffered, such privations were minor annoyances. Even the fact that the Bland's "Dream Home" had turned out to be a poky little Aldershot semi-detached, that the Bland family car was revealed as a late 70's East German Trabant (purchased for slightly less than a modern bus ticket) and that the laughingly small appliance called a refrigerator was empty; all of this could not mar their pleasure at escaping.

However, they soon realised that "the best T. V in the world" was over-run with Australian imports or American shows that were two years out of date and, as there were no books on taxidermy amongst the Bland's limited stocks, they decided to travel. To this end, and with hope of enchantment in their hearts, Casper and Blossom had ventured abroad to seek the mythical green and pleasant land, all the while befouling the endless rows of drab Home Counties suburban facades with the noxious emissions of the Trabant, a vehicle that could have given the Thingys' a run for their money in the pollution stakes. Eventually exasperated by one breakdown too many, they had splashed out on the hire of a serviceable electric Ford "Autumnal" and had travelled to see the untidy delights of England's capital city.

London in August was surprisingly sultry, almost tropical in its humidity. Weather experts spoke gloomily of the increasing nascence of signs of global warming, whilst the great British gardener ignored the droughts and hose-pipe bans with blinkered impunity, arrogantly intent on protecting their lovingly-tended floral borders from victimisation at the hands of well intentioned local decrees.

Casper and Blossom had risen early, suffused with the pioneering spirit of their ancestors, and decided to brave the M25. After much wasted time spent entrapped in traffic, moving at half the speed of their forebears' covered wagons. They had finally made it to "West End" as the central area of the city was called. Once there, after forlornly whiling away what fragment remained of time gained from their daybreak departure in search of the semi-legendary "empty parking space", they had gamely joined the bewildered multitude of sweltering visitors, tramping wearily amongst indifferent local crowds from monument to monument, it being something of a tradition on arrival in a new capital to see all the grand buildings that the natives never bothered about: Buckingham Palace; the wide avenue of the Mall; Trafalgar Square, a Mecca for every pigeon with a need to empty its intestines and a grudge against humanity; past the National Gallery and the book shops of Charing Cross Road; then, along Shaftesbury Avenue, its mostly-dark theatres almost as disappointing in their tawdry, traffic-choked setting as Broadway had been before redevelopment, nestled amidst the sleaze of Times Square; onward to Piccadilly, full of neon billboards for Japanese products that looked cheap and vaguely ridiculous in the piercing daylight. Finally, pausing for directions, they doubled back to Leicester Square, its premiere cinemas showing "new" releases, long-forgotten and sold to digital cable back home.

Fatigued, flushed, triumphantly sated with all the "quaint culture", Casper and Blossom stood queuing in Leicester Square, impatient for the opening of the reduced price theatre ticket booth.

As he waited in line towards the rear of a large and wilting group of heat-buffeted overseas theatre lovers, Casper acutely felt the lose of his hand-held micro-midget video camera, faithful recorder of all momentous Titwilleger travels and keeper of memories, a ubiquitous companion that had been transformed into a lump of space granite although, with his arm and leg heavily bandaged, there was not much that he could have done in the way of startling camera work.

Blossom Titwilleger, whose restraint over the past few days had been almost saintly, was beginning to feel a building pressure. A woman, not normally renowned for her calm acceptance of personal inconvenience, the tedious duration of the high

temperature vigil was beginning to wash away all trace of her newly acquired humility. At last, she could stand no more.

'CASPER!' She bellowed, sending most of the queue Jumping into the air in unrehearsed unison. 'Get me a goddamned chair!'

In Space: The Thingy gratified its sense of neatness. In Ashton: The home full of asteroids dematerialised, returning to their correct orbits and shapes above the fourth planet. On Mars: The baseball mitt vanished, sending the traumatised transport crashing into its final resting place. In Leicester Square: in the bizarre coincidental way of such things, Blossom' s strident request for seating was instantly answered with one of a set of Titwilleger genuine reproduction dining chairs.

On its own, this would not have been so bad; but unfortunately, it had been accompanied by: bicycles, fruit, stuffed mammals, photos - all the A.W.O.L possessions appeared in the centre of the Square, balanced on a litter bin, all carefully arranged by the Thingy for the sake of tidiness, with large items at the bottom, smaller items nearer the top.

This column of thoughtfully balanced goods rose, end-on-end, out of sight into the sky, dwarfing the surrounding architecture and presenting a unique new hazard to air traffic controllers. A tee-shirt, blown free of the far distant pinnacle, fluttered slowly towards ground, watched incredulously by a square full of people sharing a stunned moment of peace. The shirt gently came to rest on the head of a bronze of Charlie Chaplin and the calm was shattered. As it landed, a newly-arrived youth found his voice and used it at full volume.

"Fuuuccckkkk me! These publicity stunts get better every day!"

People rapidly started to react, moving closer or further away from the column, prompted in either direction by their reserves of bravado. Only Casper stood still, staring in total horror.

'Its not my fault!' Blossom quietly asserted, falling back in nervous dread before her ageing husband's fixed expression.

Casper did not even hear her, His gaze went beyond his wife and the rising pile of family treasures, drawn in fascination to the words on a cinema hoarding across the square, they read: Witchcraft 2 - The Curse.

A few miles from Shepard City: a dusty figure in a battered suit of armour, which struggled to encase a girth of Falstaffian proportions, moved rapidly across the rocky terrain.

Sir Bastable Fitch - "most fair and parfait knight" - had just returned from a crusade against the Godless heathen Saracen. There he had tilted with many goodly lords and fought at their side through much weary slaughter. Now he had turned his attention to the redemption of a knight's most profound oath, a promise forged in the heat of battle. He was committed to that most holy of quests, the search for the Grail.

Conscious that time was running out, Sir Bastable spurred on his noble steed to greater efforts; his armoured legs increased their furious peddling and the ruined old bicycle moved even quicker, its warped wheels crazily bumping their tyre-less rims into faster and more eccentric forward orbits, the rusty metal frame bucking like a bronco as it jumped over the Martian boulders. The knight knew that he had to locate the Grail by nightfall. If he did not return to the bar before then, his Squire would be furious.

Merlyn was beginning to suspect that he was no longer in Wessex. He had been journeying for some considerable time in the gloomy daylight, not pausing to take shelter from the tempestuous red dust storms that had frequently assailed him. If this vile desert was all that remained of his once green homeland, then something demonic and evil had taken hold of that land, something that dwarfed the petty enchantments of his likely enemies.

His foes had been long dead or departed when he had started his rest; he remembered the wanderings that had followed the end of Kinata's reign, the demise of his ancient culture and the rising worship of the Christ, the arrival of the Saxons and the Norsemen.

He had been so tired, SO despondent, How long had the spell lasted? How long had he slept? A hundred years? Surely not more than that. Merlyn halted; it was time that he found out.

Muttering rhythmically, Merlyn raised a long, rune-clad arm above his head and great rippling bolts of power shot forth into the air. For a moment he stood transfixed, as wave-upon-wave of pure energy distributed themselves throughout the planets atmosphere and beyond. At last, drained and exhausted, he stopped, tottering slightly as he waited, senses full of eager suspense.

Across the surface of the planet, the Thingy's Chosen Ones had stopped to register and admire the wizard's dazzling pyrotechnic display. Unsurprised, armed with the feeling that more strange events seemed imminent, Balidare, Grendella and Magda filed the display into a mental drawer marked "portents", before recommencing their respective Journeys towards the derelict city, all reassured slightly that perhaps it was not just a wild-goose-chase after all.

Will and Sulphur were also unfazed by Merlyn's magic, mainly because they did not notice it. They had been dealing with other pressing matters.

Will was scandalised.

'What do you mean, dig a hole?' he exclaimed in tones of shock and outrage.

'What I said.' Sulphur replied, undaunted by the human's bluster.

'So, you're saying that, if I want to go to the toilet, I have to dig a hole with my hands, excrete in the hole and then cover it up?'

'That's about right.' Sulphur agreed.

'But it's monstrous! Where are the waste disposal systems?'

'There are none, They're a product of COMS. Not a product of nature.' The dragon spoke in a deadpan voice that hid an inner struggle to conceal the sense of "I told you so" triumphant relish that his circuits busily signalled. 'You've been moaning for decades that this is what you wanted, life without machines nannying you to death.'

'But,' said Will, his distasteful grimace a picture to behold, 'I never thought it would be so - squalid.'



The Wizard's enchantment had delighted one other witness. Closest to Merlyn's position, Sir Bastable had been almost childishly enraptured by the mystical fireworks, convinced that they were a clear sign from God, indicating the Grail's location to his goodly servant. His little fat armoured legs pumped the pedals of the creakily protesting bicycle with tireless dedication, powering it across the red dust at manic speed.

After over an hour of such pace, the knight neared his goal. Sir Bastable's sense of anticipation was all-consuming, visions of the Holy Chalice closed off all else, blinding him to his surroundings. The sudden appearance of Merlyn in his path, and the terrific impact as the knight hit the wizard, was therefore completely unexpected.

As he picked himself up with all the dignity that someone knocked into a horizontal heap can muster, Merlyn muttered a string of archaic oaths that probably would have been unprintable if they had been at all comprehensible.

Sir Bastable did not understand a word that was said, but had not liked their tone. The battered knight righted himself into a warlike pose, struggling to lift his frozen visor.

'Zounds Sir!' Bastable coldly uttered, freeing the visor and pointing dramatically at the fallen bicycle. 'Yonder lies my war-horse, Leonidas. He is the finest destrier in all Christendom and I must warn you that ye will pay dearly if he has suffered harm.'

As if to illustrate the point, Bastable's incredibly full white moustache spilled forth from the confines of the helmet. The moustache bristled with indignation, then followed the bristling with a rumba and a neat little two-step, it was a beautiful mover.

Merlyn gazed at the rotund, red-faced little knight with real puzzlement. He had been walking along minding his own business, when suddenly, out of nowhere the dusty armoured figure had appeared mounted on the strange contraption and bowled him down. The mystic was unaware of any possible changes in greetings etiquette during his slumber, and so stayed his initial murderous inclinations. Perhaps this crashing into visitors was some new custom. It was to be hoped that it was not; there was only so much wear and tear that even a wizard could take.

However, Merlyn was concerned; something was wrong. He spoke all contemporary dialects and idioms but this being, although definitely a man in appearance, seemed to converse in gibberish. Surely language had not changed so much in a hundred years or so? Merlyn decided to act. He moved slowly forward, arms spread wide to indicate peaceful intentions.

'Greetings. I wish you no harm, Where am I ?... Ancient Briton, Pict, Celt, Saxon, Norse, Greek, Hebrew, Latin. etc., etc., etc. For some time and with real patience Merlyn tried all the languages that he knew. All met with the same blank response

from the knight,

Sir Bastable was aware that some saintly hermits could undertake the speaking of tongues. Was this curiously imposing figure such a man? His speech certainly made no sense, or perhaps, had the jolt of the impact just been too much. He shook his head in bewilderment, aware that he did not have the mental capacity for such weighty matters.

Merlyn finally gave up. He was obviously getting nowhere. Although drained and weary after the immense exertions involved in his recent enchantment, the wizard realised that he would have to perform another act of magic.

Reaching into his robes, Merlyn pulled forth his most treasured possession; a compact little black volume. Not for him the showy ostentation of some huge, outmoded and dusty Grimoire, or bloodstained collection of runes designed for sale to dumb amateurs. No, Merlyn was a busy working wizard and needed a working tool: he used a *Fil-a-Hex*.

Quickly he leafed through the pages until he found what he wanted under LINGUISTICS. He closed his eyes, muttering the words, quivering his hands. The beat and the tempo built, the movements and voice becoming more urgent accordingly. Suddenly there was a strong breeze where before there had been none before. For a moment, the Magician was cloaked from Sir Bastable's gaze by a cloud of windswept red dust that formed into a mini-hurricane around his plaid-clad figure. Then it was over.

As the dust cleared, Merlyn lay still on the ground. Sir Bastable approached, all thought of the Grail cleared from his mind. This person was interesting.

'Are you all right?'

Merlyn stirred. He sat up, a beaming triumphant smile lighting up his grim features.

'Fine thanks,' he replied, speaking the same tongue as Sir Bastable with perfect fluent ease, 'a little tired perhaps, but it works. I can still do it - I can still perform a linguistic spell with the best of them.'

Merlyn did not know just how right he was. In fact, he was severely understating the case. His spell had been more successful than he could imagine. It may have just have been that Merlyn was a bit rusty after his long rest, or it may have been that he just plain underestimated the force needed to get the result required, but, whatever it was, the spell had dramatically overachieved.

EVERYTHING on the planet, biological being or not, had been abruptly empowered with the ability to understand any language spoken or shown to them. Nothing was left out: rocks, doors, tables - all could comprehend, all equipped with a power acquired, mainly without their knowledge, a skill that was to have its uses for some. In an instant, the motley crew of life-forms on Mars had become as unlikely a bunch of inadvertent linguists as it was possible to find. Even the few surviving creatures swimming in Grendella's lonesome bathing pool were affected, imbued with the capacity to communicate in anything from Serbo-Croat to Swahili, but sadly, like most of the lipless rocks and plants, neglected and totally forgotten in their subterranean watery world, they would never get the chance to try it out.

The French kissing had been worthwhile, even though the horrific remembrance of the Purple Thingy's bad breath was a terrible price to pay for knowledge. The mind probe sensors that the Orange Thingy had inserted at the end of its tangerine tongues had done their job. It had learned of Queen Sharon and of her round up of likely heroic suspects.

"Two can play at that game."

It was the Orange Ones turn to put in an appearance... or appearances.

The Martian miners and COMS had left little that would survive long against eternity. Already their settlements and bases showed signs of dusty decline, even the holes in the ground left by their excavations would one day disappear. There was one legacy that was more robust, however. The huge underground gravity enhancement and atmospheric heating complex was self-repairing. The titanic machines would go on forever, churning out an Earth-type gravity and warming, to bearable, the freezing Martian climate possibly long after their original Terran inspiration had disappeared.

COMS had decided against the removal of this atmospheric apparatus because its parts were out of date and its functions were unnecessary on Earth. The machines would remain as a monument to them, and they were certainly that: Monumental. Will did not stop to admire COMS handiwork, as he bent, mumbling and grumbling in the shadow of the atmosphere machines

colossal surface vents. He concentrated on digging a hole with much ill-grace and in the foulest of moods. Having been shocked and alarmed by the realisation that his future probably contained no waste disposal systems, Will had then gone through a nasty couple of hours, struggling to control his need to give in to normal bodily functions.

After a while, however, the pain had become too great. He had dispatched Sulphur to a point some distance away and was unable to rid himself of the uncomfortable notion that the dragon had departed with a smirk.

With the hole completed, Will anxiously struggled out of his utility suit and squatted on his haunches. Satisfaction and relief coursed through him as nature took its course. It was then that his mother appeared, or at least, she looked exactly like his mother' if you discounted her marked orange tint and the fact that she was see-through.

Will smiled nostalgically at the distantly remembered, jolly mischievous face, the long blonde hair and the Rubenesque proportions that filled the utility suit. Then he remembered what he was in the midst of finishing.

'Why do these things always happen to me?' He groaned as he struggled to hide his nudity and situation behind the hastily grabbed utility suit.

'Hello, Pumpkin,' she said.

'Hello, Mother, It's great to see you and all that. It's just that, I wondered if you would mind coming back a little bit later. You see, it's a bit, no, it's VERY inconvenient at the moment.'

Will's mother did not seem bothered by his predicament.

'My son, I'm dead.'

'DEAD! That's just like you mother - break things gently.'

'I have come back from beyond the grave to give you some advice.'

'Why bother now? You didn't when you were alive.'

'You have recently been involved in something totally outlandish.'

'REALLY, mother! I would have thought that my bodily functions were my own affair,'

'You have been visited by a Purple Queen.'

'Oh,' Will subsided behind his utility suit, 'that!'

'Listen to me carefully Will. I have something important to tell you about your visitor.'

Simultaneously, the sales pitch that followed was repeated with customised variations all across the planet. The packaging of

the Orange Thingy's ethereal messengers was about as disparate as it was possible to get.

Sulphur's visitation was in the shape of Will, but not the normal version. This was definitely the mega-deluxe model, Will's "better self" as it pompously announced, driving home a difference that was glaringly apparent. The utility suit of the Will - Mark 2 was impeccable as was his grooming, with not a hair out of place. He presented a perfect and shining example of COMS breeding. It was all that Sulphur could do not to scream.

Merlyn was confronted by the familiar form of Kinata, the guardian and ruler of his adopted people. The reunion initially hampered by Sir Bastable's stream of questioning chatter. Fortunately, to keep him quiet, the Thingy arranged for the temporary appearance of a gag and Merlyn continued the meeting with his splendid looking regal visitor in peace.

Magda Mures was cordially greeted by Vlad Tepes, ruling prince of Wallachia, scourge of Turk and Boyar alike, It had been a long time, but she would recognise the wily, psychotic little runt anywhere. Magda was never over sentimental about ex-lovers. Time had a way of healing emotional scars and there had been quite a few more interesting romances over the years, although, transparent or not, he was looking surprisingly well for someone who had been dead for over nine hundred years.

Balidare's apparition had lived for millions of years and held many grand positions during his stay on Earth, Governor of Atlantis having been only the first of them, but names did not

matter. The only title that Balidare cared about was a very simple one: Father,

Although these appearances were all remarkable, it was with Grendella that the Orange Thingy really excelled itself. Not one, not two, but three leather clad, pistol-packing performers, "The Slime Girls From Hell", a trio of divas at their most deadly and desirable, two hundred years late for a reunion concert. Even their, most optimistically ardent fan had stopped waiting at about the same time as he or she stopped breathing. Grendella could not care less; "The Slimes" had never been punctual.

Each of the new arrivals introduced themselves in the familiar style of the beings impersonated. The presentation and tone may have varied to conform to personal taste but the basic message was the same. One trait that the Orange Thingy shared with the Purple One was a extremely poor opinion of the humanoid-type mentality, so it kept things fairly simple. Its basic message went as follows:

'You have recently been visited by an apparition. You may not know it yet, but you are about to be asked to retrieve an item called "The MADID" for this Purple Queen. I would advise you not to. This Queen is not a nice person. Words like evil, nasty and spiteful, cannot begin to describe the dark depths of her perfidy or the wicked uses that she can put the MADID to. I therefore ask you for the sake of the future of the universe, and for the sake of your own futures, not to give it to her. I ask you to give it to me....'

At this point, to their credit, the onlookers all independently asked the same question,

'Why not just refuse to go?'

'Because, she will only get someone else to do it. I/we have been sent as someone you care for, sent to plead on behalf of powers you cannot imagine. They must have someone on whom they can depend. They can offer no guarantees of their goodwill, other than my appearance and promises of gratitude. It is up to you whom you decide to trust. All that they ask for is, for you to trust them with the MADID and that you do not mention this meeting to the Queen. It would be dangerous to do so.'

This little speech was, in all cases, followed by an abruptly professional disappearance that was designed to discourage any more uncomfortable questions.

The Orange Thingy returned to its star-spangled hiding place and its palpably loathsome form, full of self-congratulation.

"That should do nicely!" It putridly preened.

You could not get those strange humanoid-style creatures or their companion machines to do anything if you tried to force them. But tell them they were making sacrifices to save the universe, throw in some rubbish about good versus evil, a little flattery, a sprinkle of concern for their welfare, and then, most crucial of all, appear to offer them a free choice between alternatives and: "Voila!" The morons were yours. Just like any form of marketing or entertainment, it was all a matter of careful manipulation. Slowly, the Thingy uncrossed the tips of its myriad slimy tentacles.

"That's the fibbing quota over for today." It reminded itself, cynically looking down from its god-like prominence upon the travellers. "What fools they are."

The Purple One had delusions that it was an expert on the psychology of these creatures, but Orange knew that the answer was so deceptively simple, It did not need experts.

"They're just a total bunch of suckers." It orangely asserted, taking care to reassure its own touchy tendrils that use of the term "suckers" was not mean to be tentacle-ist.

Will had tried to obtain some response or comment from the graven head on his sword pommel but the usually verbose ornamentation was silent.

'Just my luck, when I actually need the damned thing, it's tuned to another channel.'

Will petulantly climbed back into his utility suit, adding the final lurid touches to a melodramatic reworking of events for Sulphur's consumption. The dragon did not keep him waiting long.

It came cantering rapidly towards him on short green legs.

'You'll never guess.' They both blurted out in excited unison, 'What just happened to me.'

Man and dragon paused in surprise, silently absorbing the knowledge that their experience had not been unique. Sulphur spoke first, voicing the feelings of both of them when he said.

'Things are starting to get complicated.'

The magician, the vampir, the knight and the others, all doubled their pace, all fully aware that: "Things were starting to get complicated." All equally anxious to reach the city and the answers that it seemed to hold.

Wyart Earp threw down a card.

'One!' The Wild-West marshal said in a gravelly drawl.

Richard the Third of England spoke next.

'Two Cards, please.'

The elderly dealer obliged. As the group around the table silently studied their hands, the dealer saw his opportunity.

'Did I ever tell you fellas the one about the Venusian that crash-landed in Central Park?' he brightly asked. Al Capone replied without glancing up.

'Three thousand, five hundred and twenty-three times.'

'So? One more's not going to hurt then,' the dealer said, unabashed by the pain on the faces of the other players as he paused for a high strung horse-sounding whinny, before dragging the story out of its well-earned retirement.

'There was this Venusian that crash-landed in Central Park. This was some time ago - the humans still controlled things - a man or a Venusian could still have some fun without it being a crime.'

Cardinal Richelieu glared up from behind his cards.

'Will you get on with it and spare us the sociological comment?'

There were murmurs of assent from the assembled onlookers and card-players; a liberal mixture of the reputable, disreputable and just plain saintly.

'If you'd stop interrupting I might have a chance to get on with it,' the dealer snapped'

'Three thousand, five hundred and twenty-three times,



goddammit, I think that...' Al Capone growled.

'SHUT UP!' The dealer commanded, snorting violently. The restless assembly subsided, resigned to just getting it over with. 'See what I mean,' the dealer pouted, 'constant interruptions. You sure know how to louse up a guy's comic timing. Now where was I?'

The reluctant audience said nothing, The only movement in the room was the gentle, rising and falling motion of Richard the Third's hump as the dealer continued.

'This Venusian had crash-landed. It was his first time in a new city. At least I think it was a he; you can never tell the sexual orientation of a Venusian. Anyway, he thought he'd check the place out. So he looks in his Earth guide book: "Venusian Vacations ", under entertainment and he looks up "What to do if you crash-land in New York City on a Saturday Night. After all the stuff about arming yourself for protection, The book says: "Go to a bar in Brooklyn and meet the locals: have a beer."

So, the Venusian sets off. Things are fairly quiet. He only has run-ins with a couple of muggers and they come off worse.

So, as I said, this strange little blue Venusian, did I mention that he was blue? Well, never mind, he was. This strange little blue Venusian takes a cab out to Flatbush Avenue. The cabby says nothing about the fact that the Venusian is stumpy, blue and repulsive looking, The cabby's been driving a hack in New York for some time. He's used to odd fares and come to think of it, he's used to some pretty odd cabbies.

Anyway, the Venusian gets to Flatbush, and he has a bit of trouble getting in to a bar. There's some hassle about the fact that he doesn't have valid I.D. to prove his age. So the Venusian gets a little depressed for a little while, until he finds out that you don't really need to worry about I.D. if you know how to use a sonic discombooberator pistol...'

The dealer paused for a chuckle, a reaction unechoed by anyone else in the room, Completely unconcerned, he neighed fulsomely and continued, as much to himself as to those around him.

'So, this Venusian, persuades a doorman to let him in. This joint is humming. The place is packed wall-to-wall with funsters having a great time, It's so full that you couldn't get a shoe horn between the clientele. A band are playing, the music's banging and the atmosphere seems to have a life of its own. Its all kinda exciting for a small town Venusian and full of anticipation, he floats over the crowd and makes it to the bar. Luckily, people are having too good a time to worry about a Venusian pushing in and he says to the barman.

"Can I have a beer please?"

The barman is frantic, He's never been this busy, He shouts back.

"Get lost buddy! We don't serve Venusians."

This isn't the reaction that the Venusian was expecting, so he refers to his guidebook: Rule 2. What to do if the barperson

refuses you? Answer: Order a drink and offer the barperson one.

"I'd like a beer please," The Venusian says in his most charming voice, " ... and have something yourself"

"We don't serve Venusians!"

The barman shouts back, adding this really hard bigoted stare to drive the point home.

So much for meeting the locals, thinks the Venusian as he goes back to the guidebook for Rule 3: What if the barperson still refuses? Answer: Order a drink, offer the barperson one, and one for any significant other.

"I'd like a beer please", says the Venusian in a voice so suave, it's almost sickening. "Have something yourself and I'd like to buy one for whoever you're exchanging bodily secretions with."

The barman starts to get annoyed at this. He takes time from all his fevered serving to glare at the Venusian.

"Listen, buddy, I don't know what your problem is. BUT GET THIS. I don't serve Venusians, I don't drink with Venusians and neither does my Sue-Anne."

The Venusian starts to realise that the barman isn't exactly thrilled about serving him, so, he goes back to the guidebook...'

'Jesus!,' A feminine voice muttered with some feeling. 'Hasn't this guy heard of paraphrasing?'

The dealer sharply looked up, stared significantly at Dorothy Parker before re-immersing himself in the warmth of his storytelling.

'So the guidebook says: Answer: Offer a drink to the barperson, the significant other and the regulars.

"I'd like a beer", says the Venusian, still being polite, cause everyone knows that Venus has a very calm and polite culture,

"Have one yourself, one for Sue-Anne, if he's here, and a round for the regulars."

"No!" says the barman, but he's not quite so sure now. The man's greedy enough to think of the money he can make from such a round. So once more the Venusian goes back to the guidebook for the last time, . . . '

The dealer tried to ignore the gale-like proportions of the sighs of relief around him.

'The guidebook says: Answer: If all else fails. Offer to buy a round for the entire bar.

The Venusian pauses at this, and works out that he has enough hard cash to cover the bill. He has plenty and besides, by now it's a matter of principle so he says. "I'd like to buy a round for everyone in the bar."

The barman starts to say no, but the place is packed, that's a lot of money. So he caves in."

The dealer started to emit little brays of sniggering self-amusement.

'He spends forty-five minutes serving triples to everyone in the bar. Then the sap adds the total and says to the Venusian. He

says...'

More whinnies of choked back laughter.

'He says. "That will be fourteen thousand, three hundred and thirty two dollars and twenty five cents."

And the Venusian says...'

'HAVE YOU GOT CHANGE OF A ZONK?'

Altogether, the assembly chorused the long-delayed punch-line. The dealer's mouth flapped open, robbed of the delivery, his amusement stifled and stolen.

'Oh. You've heard it.' He softly said.

'Three thousand, five hundred and twenty-four times,' spat Al Capone from behind his cards. 'Now! Which one of youse guys wants to place a bet?'

'I do.' replied the dealer, brightening suddenly with a series of happy neighs.

'But first. Did I ever tell you the one about...'

"Have you got change of a zonk? That's a scream, and I mean that most faithfully. Give that mortal a hearty clap of your tentacles. He'll go far, but not far enough. But seriously, the man's desperately needed in entertainment, there's a terrible shortage of stage planks..." On and on, and on, it wittered.

The Purple Thingy was starting to deeply regret changing its dart-throwing tentacle into a Game Show host. It toyed with the idea of lopping off the offending protuberance and sending it into deep space but was cognisant of the amount of noise pollution that such an action would cause. Instead, the Thingy settled for changing the Game Show host back to its original state. The newly recreated tentacle was just flexing and feeling and congratulating itself on the success of its "getting restored by the use of maximum annoyance" ploy when the Thingy neatly lopped it off and hurled it into deep space.

Never let it be said or imagined that the Purple Thingy did not cover all the bases when it came to punishing transgression.

Night had fall, shakily righted itself and balefully glared down at the Martian landscape, muttering and rubbing its bruised elbows all the while.

In direct proportion to the increasing gloom a strange radiance burst forth from the cover of Merlyn's fil-a-hex, lighting the way ahead. Even a magic book, however, could not enlighten Sir Bastable's confusion. The bulky knight was experiencing an uncomfortable clash of loyalties. This new mystical companion did not speak much and the few words that he had spoken had been abruptly contemptuous of Sir Bastable's garbled detailing of their location. However, a goodly knight did not take umbrage at the opinions of such an obvious stranger. Apology would, no doubt, shortly be made, once their relative stations in life were made clear. The problem was that the Knight was bound by two oaths; a promise to his Squire to return by night-fall and another to Alexander the Great to play a game of chess. It was dishonourable, unheard of in fact, to break a promise, and yet he tarried, fascinated by the mysterious man at his side, anxious to learn more.

As the distance between the travellers and the Knight's home shrunk, the size of his quandary increased. At last, Sir Bastable could take no more. Pausing only to shout, 'The city lies just over yon rise,' he rapidly made off in the indicated direction, moving with startling speed for one of such impressive girth. Squire Abel would need to have advance warning of this coming.

Merlyn halted, slightly startled by his companion's abrupt departure. Nothing made sense; he had been awake now for some time and nothing, not one thing, made the slightest sense. He struggled to remember whether they had ever made sense in that previous time. He seemed to think that they mostly hadn't, but things were vague. He had a slight recollection that this nonsensical aspect of life, the "stuff happens" aspect, had been the reason for his slumbers. He had become more and more confused by daily existence. Belief in magic had been waning and most of the reputable mystics had given up, retired. But retired to where? He anxiously searched for an answer.

"Mystic kings, buzzard wings, wizard's things. No! Wizard Springs." That was it, he realised with grateful relief. They had all retired to Wizard Springs on Alpha Centuri. The lucky so and so's had all got condominiums at the "Runespeakers Rest". The good life.

But something was unclear. Questions were raised by this recollection. What had happened to his condo? Why had he not made the journey? He struggled to pierce the cobwebs that enshrouded his mind. Some things were so clear, others so nebulous. He could not remember.

"Wait a minute! That was it. He could not remember."

Remember the spell. The retirement benefit claim spell. The one spell not in a fil-a-hex.

Merlyn was cheered by the knowledge. At least now he remembered what he had forgot. He had been suffering from absent-mindedness. Someone had hexed his late night liquid pick-me-up, addled his memory and appropriated the relevant spell. Merlyn had

not been able to remember how to claim his retirement benefits and get to Alpha Centuri. That was the reason why he had chosen the elixir of sleep, substituting one type of rest cure for another.

The plaid enshrouded druid looked around at the red desert. It was beginning to seem as if he had also been rather vague about the correct dosage of the resting spell. He started to follow the Knight's deep footprints, all the while, as he neared Shepard City, the wizard tried to recall who had stolen the spell. But all he got for his pains was blankness, and an orange blankness at that.

The Orange Thingy chuckled foully. It had forgotten the wizard, about stealing the spell. Mind you, when you have done as many awful and horrific things as an Orange Thingy, it was not that hard to forget. It had just been part of the Thingy's galactic unfitness regime: Do ten thousand unwholesome things before breakfast. Far more satisfying and good for you than push-ups.

Merlyn had been only one that morning. There had been another 9,999 pointlessly evil or spiteful incidences galaxy wide; easy to overlook, simple to accomplish. It had been amusing though, and had cheered the Thingy up all day. Merlyn, the last of the real Druid folk on Earth, had decided to celebrate his final night on the planet with a farewell drink, a cosmic cocktail with that little extra Thingy something, then to sleep with a mind full of brochure images and anticipation. The look on the poor dolt's face when he had awakened with no spell, no brochures and a defective memory had been worth treasuring.

With fetid breath the Orange One permitted itself an acid tinged, Thingy-style, happy sigh, secure in the knowledge that, on the way to the MADID, there would be many more such hapless expressions to look forward to.

'So, what do you think?' said Will, abruptly changing the subject from his lengthy whinge about walking, tiredness and the sudden gloom.

'What?' replied Sulphur, caught unawares, having stopped paying attention several miles back .

'What sort of approach should I have to leading a group of intergalactic desperadoes...'

'A cautious one. I should think,' muttered Sulphur.  
'...on an adventure?'  
'Probably,' Sulphur said, after brief but weighty consideration.  
'Yes?'  
'In this case, definitely.'  
'Yessss?'  
'Downwind is the best bet.'  
'I mean style of approach, Maggot-ronic brain,' Will said testily, 'I fancy a sensible one.'  
'Sensible. You?' the dragon struggled valiantly to remain deadpan.  
'Yes, conservative, corporate and businesslike.'  
'All concepts synonymous with your name.'  
'I've given it a lot of thought.'  
'Obviously.'  
Will was oblivious. In a strange world of his own,  
'It just keeps echoing in my mind. Be businesslike, be businesslike.'  
"It would echo, with the amount of space you've got in there. The acoustics must be great." Sulphur dourly thought to himself.  
'I think this approach can only help to make it FUN!' Will was on a roll.  
'FUN? Interesting choice of word there Will.' Sulphur grimaced, staring straight ahead. The dragon's weary shake of the head was purely mental, It grimly concentrated on putting one rounded leg in front of the other.  
"FUN INDEED!"

At top speed. Sir Bastable Fitcher barrelled into town, Looking neither right nor left, the Knight's sure-footed progress directed him straight towards the Bar. So single-minded was his approach that, not even the solid legs of a war-horse pointing stiffly towards the stars were permitted to divert his attention. Sir Bastable did not seem to see the remains of his original beloved Leonidas as, with a mighty leap, he cleared the authentic western hitching post in front of the bar and landed with an impact that severely shook the front of the fragile building.

'Squire! Squire!'  
As Bastable eagerly rushed in, the dealer, Abel Surd, looked up with irritation, his good eye twinkling brightly in that shrivelled walnut of a face.

'Not now, Fitcher.'  
'But! Squire.....!'

'I said, NOT NOW!' Abel said emphatically, adding a ferocious whinny just to be sure.

Moving from foot to foot, like a bear tap-dancing on a barbecue, the Knight restlessly quietened, brim full of news that he could not deliver. Aside from a few sidelong curious smirks, the assembled group of historic or fictional celebrities paid the armoured figure scant attention. All senses were directed towards the game.

It was getting tense. Al Capone, Richard the Third and Cardinal Richelieu were out. It was just Wyatt Earp and Abel. The atmosphere was almost palpable, one move could spell disaster. Wyatt paused, unsure, eyes narrowed, his fingers caressing the tips of his cards. At last, the marshal made a decision. Throwing down a card with a contemptuous flourish, saying the words through gritted teeth.

'Mr Bun, the baker.'

Thrilled and mesmerised by the frontiersman's audacity, the onlookers tensely waited for Abel's response. Savouring the moment, he picked up the discarded card, delaying his false-toothed smile of triumph until he said the words.

'Happy families. The dealer wins again.'

You could almost play tiddly-winks with the audience's disappointment - it was so real.

'Dealer wins again.' Recited Al Capone, giving the tally.

Big Al always got the job, he had a reputation for being good with figures.'

'Abel wins forty-seven thousand, six hundred and seven games. The rest win - seventeen.'

'It's lucky he lets us win one at Christmas,' said Wyatt, 'or it would be plain embarrassing.'

'I wish held get us a new deck for Christmas,' replied Al dryly.

As the dealer excused himself. Julius Caesar took his place at table and the Same recommenced.

'Fitchel!'

Abel pointedly indicated his office with a gnarled finger. A silent path was cleared by the knights embarrassed peers. With head held high and tread a good deal firmer than he felt, Sir Bastable followed, passing through the door just beyond the bar.

Inside, the room was huge. In previous years, if what remained of the faded velvet hangings and Victorian style wall decoration were to be believed, it had obviously once functioned as a plush private salon. Perhaps the very room in which the long departed mining magnates had wined, dined and luxuriously

entertained themselves, whilst plotting to expand their economic domination of the third and fourth planets. Now, however, like everything else in this terminal terminus, the room had fallen on hard times.

It was a shambles. Who-ever had been responsible for its tidiness could have almost challenged Grendella for the intergalactic bad housekeeping award. Not that the objects scattered about could really have been classified as litter. There seemed to be a purpose, an analytical mind at work behind the disorganisation of cogs, bolts, micro-chips and body parts that lay strewn over every available surface. There was so much of it; an arm here, a leg there, would not perhaps have been so bad, it was the sheer quantity that rendered things unmanageable. Mountains of mutilated machinery, filling every nook and cranny, compressing the room's size and looming threateningly over the fragile seeming figures of Abel and Fitch. It was no wonder that Sir Bastable's defunct horse had not made it to this office. There was just no room. The cannibalised carcass had been left outside to take its chances in the dust storms, although Fitch's first-generation personification mind had been programmed not to notice his ex-mount as a slight concession to decency.

Abel Surd had been the creator of this crisis, and like Sir Bastable Fitch, was partially a product of it. Now at an age when he had outlived his human confederates, the wizened 107 year old had only one real interest left; apart from telling awful jokes and moaning about the good old days. This little old man with the leathery skin and the twinkling eye had raised the level of his tinkering with scrap machinery to an art form. Abel was unique in many ways: The last of Mars' miners and the last native-born Martian left, he had an impressive local lineage. The illegitimate son of Phineas Shepard, named in honour of his father's assertion that: "The mere thought of having children is an ABSURDITY."

Abel had inherited little from his father besides a crotchety temperament. He had, however, been left one portion of the paternal estate that had changed his life.

Back in the far off days when COMS had first set about its business and had yet to develop its full powers. Phineas had bartered them some much needed Martian mining rights in exchange for a rag-bag collection of outdated mechanical parts and a motley crew of disinherited first-generation Personifications. These models had been surplus to COMS requirements after the abandonment of plans to extend its range of Educational Prototype Interaction Centres/ Services. People had laughed at Phineas and his ludicrous swap, but Phineas had not cared. The wily multi, multi-billionaire had a two fold motive for his actions, reasoning that: (A) Even basic robotic staff were cheaper to keep and easier on the intellect than their self obsessed human equivalents, and (B) Machines could not control things, because they would eventually break down or go wrong, and spare parts would one day be as



valuable as diamonds.

Phineas had never got the chance to prove the validity, or not, of theory (A). However, he must have been posthumously consoled by the knowledge that at his first attempt to use one of his new mechanised acquisitions, the carpet cleaner had gone wrong. As a result of this mishap, the ownership and care of "Shepard Scrap Enterprises" had passed to his illegitimate son, mainly because none of Phineas' legitimate heirs had wanted them. In the way of such things, what had started as a small part-time hobby for the curious youngster had gradually crept up on him, piece by piece, to become his life's work. For decades, Abel had toiled, upgrading and developing possessions that became friends, unregarded by COMS. He had given the personifications sight instead of mere retinal recognition, individual behaviour patterns instead of pre-programmed responses. He had become their father, their mentor, their king even, and they had repaid him with a companionship and loyalty that went far beyond anything their original creators had envisaged.

When the ageing Abel's energy and health had begun to fade, the personifications had reacted in emulation of their role model. "If a part is faulty, fix it. If unfixable, replace it". As a result of these sundry efforts to protect him from the grim reaper's advances, Abel had become a slightly more customised version with each passing year. His right arm, both legs, digestive system, right eye and ear, all owed more to modern alloys and technology than to human cell reproduction. The latest addition had been made necessary by the sudden arrival of a determined throat cancer, intent on doing Surd in. Desperate, or rather, destrier measures had been called for. Abel's larynx had been replaced with a shiny new system, hardly used, with only one careful owner: Sir Bastable's horse. Abel now spoke through a tasteful little grid in his neck and was reasonably happy with the arrangement, but had to admit that he could do without the whinnys and neighs that now punctuated his conversation.

There was an additional point of interest about all Abel's add-ons, a certain reverse snobbery at work. Despite the fact that all the extra parts could have been seamlessly matched to the ex-miner's own skin tones, Abel had insisted on an obvious shiny chrome finish. As a result, he looked like Isaac Asimov's worst nightmare; the baggy, aged wrinkles and bright smooth metallic plate tended to clash.

This contrast of coverings was not, it had to be admitted, uppermost in Fitch's old model XXO1 Magatronian mind, as Abel turned on him, his "good" eye glittering with a furious illumination almost equal in brightness to his red round mechanical one.

'Why are you late Fitch?'

'Methinks Squire, that I will not tell you, as punishment for your unseemly impertinence.' Sir Bastable haughtily replied, his moustache struggling to appear brave and bristling.

'Impertinence?' Abel was astonished.

'Aye, sir, impertinence, I am a knight of noble bearing and degree. I am not accustomed to being kept waiting whilst my squire finishes a game of chance.'

Surd mentally cursed. Of all his companions, this plump and dotty knight with the outmoded courtly hallucinations was probably his favourite. Certainly, Sir Bastable had received more work on his character development than most, perhaps a little too much. The odd disappearances, in search of the grail or to chase invisible dragons - these were acceptable, within limits. Even this business of believing that Abel was a squire had at first seemed amusing. Lately, however, like all jokes or affectations that had outstayed their welcome, it was becoming a right royal pain in the derriere.

'Listen, Fitcher,' Abel said impatiently, sounding almost as menacing as his shiny bits made him look, 'If you don't tell me why you're late this instant. I'm going to switch you off and then, I'm going to take a chainsaw and...'

'The quality of today's staff is an outrage,' Bastable shook his head with pompous regret, 'you never would have been acceptable as a squire in my young days.'

As Abel started to reach for the threatened chainsaw. Bastable quickly changed his conversational emphasis.

'I'm late because we have a visitor.'

'Visitor?' Abel was stunned, stopped in his tracks, The bar had not been visited in years. Then Abel remembered who he was talking to. 'You're not imagining this, are you ?'

Sir Bastable's unimaginary visitor had reached the outskirts of the city. Pausing on a slight promontory, Merlyn threw some of the red soil into the air with a dramatic gesture and abrupt incantation. Light briefly flared all around him as he raked the city with a keen searching gaze, taking every advantage offered by his raised position, his mind hungrily feeding on every detail offered by his vision. As gloom returned, Merlyn remained still, bathed in the strange lights and shadows provided by the glowing cover of his book.

Thoughts of displacement, of culture-shock, came tumbling unbidden into his brain, mingling uncomfortably with a feeling of wonderment. The tall, smooth buildings, the wide thoroughfares, architectural opulence and grandeur reminiscent of Rome in its heyday - all these mighty buildings, lifeless, rundown, empty? What plague, what pestilence or foul enchantment, was capable of driving away the populace? He had to know.

Approaching the nearest building, Merlyn brought his long fingers into play, outlining shapes and lines on the wall, chanting an accompaniment from the fil-a-hex, his speech patterns eager and energetic. At last, the wizard stood back, breathing heavily, waiting, watching. Part of the wall seemed to clench, then become fluid. Features started to become distinct, following the pattern outlined by his fingertips, pushed out and remoulded by the solid surface. Eventually, the spell's work was finished. The wall had grown a face, and a grumpy looking one at that.

'Is this some sort of sick joke?' The building queried belligerently.

'Joke?' Merlyn was puzzled.

'Yeah, joke! I'm sick to death of you cells, making cracks about "Walls having ears" or "if only they could talk." It would get on my nerves, if I had any.'

'What are "cells"?'

'You don't know much do you? Cells are part of a larger shell. They mostly exist, breed and function inside that shell, I know my Masonic biology. I'm a larger shell. Therefore you are a cell.'

'But, I'm not inside you,' replied Merlyn warily.

'You are obviously very stupid,' the building said disdainfully, 'I will therefore explain this slowly. Cells are part of larger shells or organisms. A shell such as myself is like a body part, encased in the larger shell of the city. The city, in turn, is encased by the larger shell of the planet, which is encased in the larger shell of the solar system. Just as your cells move through your system from organ to organ, or body to body, you cells move freely between shells of different volume. Now have you got that?'

'Yes.' Merlyn conceded.

'Well! WHAT DO YOU BLOODY WANT THEN?'

'You are a very rude wall.'

'You think this side's rude! You should see the graffiti on the inside!'

Merlyn ignored the quip, walls graffiti-Ed or otherwise were not renowned for the subtlety of their wit.

'What happened to all the .... Cells?'

'They all got sick.' replied the building sullenly.

'A plague?'

'No home-sick. They got fed up and went home.'

'But where's home?'

'Home is where the heart is.'

'WHERE'S THAT?' roared the wizard.

'Earth, of course, Terra. The home-ward of the Cells. Ungrateful, I call it. I give them a place to live, a shelter, years of faithful service and what do they do? Smash my windows and cover my innards with their moronic daubings.'

Even with the smooth translation afforded by his linguistic spell, it took a while for the building's words to register.

Merlyn's voice was almost a whisper but something about its delivery demanded immediate answer.

'This isn't Earth?'

'No, this is Mars, Where have you been?'

'What year is it?'

'I don't know for sure. I've been here a long time. My foundation stone's over on the left. That should give you an idea.'

'Merlyn looked to the left of the graven face. He read the words that said: This foundation stone was laid by Phineas T. Shepard, 2nd November 2161. Above it was a sign that read: This Property is condemned as unfit for human habitation. By order of COMS. 1st January 2245.

With misted, unseeing eyes, the wizard turned and walked away, moving unsteadily towards the centre of town. Ignored, the building blurted, half-indignant and half-scared.

'You can't leave me like this!' It tried persuasion.

'Look, if you come back, I'll give you more information.

There's a group of cells in the bar at the centre of Main Street - the cute little number with the raunchy architectural features. Please come back! I'm sorry I was so testy. I've been alone for a while. I've forgotten how to be sociable. COME BACK!. Let's talk...I can speak any language you want: Swedish, Urdu, Esperanto.'

The building strained its newly-acquired aural senses. It seemed to hear the wizard repeating the same word, over and over again, as he walked away into the distance.

'Ages... ages.... ages.'

Ashton. Iowa : Early 21st Century, August.

'Not our sort of people at all.'

Cecil Bland said, in the sort of adenoidal voice usually reserved for politicians in ancient newsreels, train spotters and other assorted in British comedy shows.

'No dear.'

Cecil's wife, Primrose, distantly agreed. Having honed and developed her inattentive agreement skills to their peak, she managed to remain completely absorbed in her copy of "Cosmo".

'I mean, look at it,' Cecil waved the paper about the breakfast nook for the umpteenth time. Trying to look really stern and disapproving and instead looking rather like a gerbil with PMT, ' ... its embarrassing.'

'Yes, dear,' responded Primrose on cue before turning her attention to the ungainly-looking child behind her husband.

'Camilla, will you please stop drawing in that Gideon Bible?'

The child scowled up at her, threatening mutiny.

'But Mum.'

'I've told you already Camilla - it's pointless to edit the bible.'

'King James the First did,' pouted Camilla.

'Well, dear. King James the First probably had parents with absolutely no sense of discipline.'

'It's culture, innit.'

Primrose closed her eyes with a look of infinite pain.

'Must you talk like a guttersnipe? Camilla.'

'But Mummmmm! I wanna be a writer.'

'Well don't start there, Camilla. It's not our property.'

Primrose tried to sound sensible, 'However many times you write it, you won't alter the fact that there isn't an 11th commandment:

"Thou shalt not smuggle." Go to your room and play writers!!"

'See what I mean?' Cecil voiced his outrage once again as Camilla skulked dramatically away.

'Embarrassing. Even our daughter knows our shame. Look at it!'

He pointedly jabbed the paper's front page with its pictures of Leicester Square, and of Casper and Blossom, standing in handcuffs, their faces registering almost total bewilderment. Once again, Cecil read the familiar textual highlights aloud.

' "Ashton couple held at centre of major British furnishings smuggling investigation... Charged with vandalism of Central London landmark..." How will we face the neighbours?'

'You've argued with most of them dear. They're not talking. Besides, I'm sure the papers over here exaggerate just as much as the ones in England. No one can smuggle that much without someone noticing. Two beds, three sofas and the rest of it, they're hardly the sort of things that fit into a handbag...'

Cecil refused to be placated by his wife's words.

'They're Americans, Primmy; Weirdo's! They're probably devil worshippers. We've swapped our home with Satanists. We're like as not go home to find gory circles on the walls and dead cats in the bathroom.'

Primrose calmly interrupted, speaking as if to a small child.

'Really, Cecil, you've got such a lurid imagination. I can see where Camilla gets it from. The Titwillegers have been very nice to us. They've booked and paid for this motel, they hired us that lovely car...which has been stolen.'

'Losing the car wasn't my fault. I normally leave the keys in the ignition at home.' Cecil said defensively.

'That's because nobody wants our Trabant, dear.'

Cecil would not be distracted

'They only paid for the motel because their house was full

of rocks. They're already a national scandal.'

'That may be true. However, there's no point getting worked up about it now. Mrs Titwilleger's brother is flying all the way from California to explain things and we should wait until he arrives.'

Cecil gradually calmed from boiling to slow simmer. He started munching a piece of toast distractedly.

'You're right as usual, Primmy. I'll wait for this evangelist chappie to arrive. What was his name again ?'

'Wilbur Prince.'

Merlyn could not believe it. He had obviously slept for centuries and awoken on a strange world. How much had he missed? How many generations? Why had he really been awakened after so long? There were so many unanswered questions. So many puzzles.

He registered the light in the distance and resolutely steeled himself to face whatever was to come, whatever had been. A light meant life, it meant possible solutions. Although still in a state of mild shock, he approached the illumination with the eagerness of a moth let out of a coal cellar. Ignoring the worn dark shells of the other buildings on Main Street, his attention focused totally in one direction. Soon he could take in every detail of his destination. Merlyn's first reaction was that the building he had just spoken to had possessed lamentably poor taste. Whatever else this place was, it certainly was not "cute".

It was obviously one of the oldest buildings in the city. Large, ramshackle and rambling, paint-work faded that had once been startling, crumpling advertising hoardings making wildly extravagant claims about the quality of the entertainment held inside, arbitrarily chosen and positioned plaster statues sprouting everywhere, coated in a dozen hectic hues.

He was captivated by the large neon sign that pulsed over the door. The sign said "MA\_S BAR", it had once been "THE MARS BAR" but a previous owner had had the "R" removed. He was suitably impressed by Mankind's progress; it was his first exposure to electric power and it was thrilling to learn that humanity had harnessed the lightning for its purposes. Merlyn curiously drew nearer, lengthily scrutinising the remains of Sir Bastable's horse, fascinated by its innards, by the tangled profusion of mechanical parts. Here was great magic indeed. This solid simulacrum had been designed to mimic a flesh-and-blood creature. Merlyn's mystic soul exulted at the knowledge of the new enchantments that could be learned. Abandoning all cares and trepidation, he boldly strode towards the murmuring voices, into

the bar.

On the outskirts of the city, Balidare squatted on his haunches. Touching the soil with those thick fingers, hazily sensing the nearby presence of his fellow pilgrims, feeling their power. He slowly opened his eyes, his vision making a nonsense of the gloom as they easily picked out the remote bar. That tall figure in the plaid seemed strangely familiar, but it was impossible; "He" had retired to Wizard Springs centuries before.

Balidare slowly rose and made his way into town. There was time enough for answers and they would not be provided by that curious building over on the left, whatever loud-mouthed claims it might make to the contrary.

Merlyn entered the bar. Its interior was as multi-coloured and over ornate as its exterior. Having been asleep at the time, he was not to know that the bar's decoration was an attempt to recreate an American Wild West saloon, even down to fake bloodstains on the floor and the spittoons.

However, he felt that it was a bit much for his taste.

Drawing on his new-found stores of language Merlyn could see why the place had been christened Ma'e Bar. Every wall, every free surface was decorated with baby photographs of the most saccharine kind, all depicting the same sickly looking child.

Having scrutinised the environment, the Wizard turned his attention to its inhabitants. The large group around the card table had silenced as he had entered. They watched him now with wary eagerness. Merlyn stared back, most of the faces were unfamiliar but there were a few that he recognised: Alexander, Mark Antony, Cleopatra, Augustus, Julius Caesar - Britain's first real tourist. Merlyn smiled as he remembered: "I came, I saw, I skirmished, I littered, and left as quickly as possible."

Was this Caesar? Was this Augustus? these creatures certainly resembled them. They had both been dead for centuries by the time he'd slept. Merlyn had to concede that claiming to conquer death was par for the course for the self-important Roman propaganda machine. There was always the chance that those pesky Latins had been right about "Jove" and having friends in high places. Still, something was not quite right. It was more as if someone had restored their statues to life than the actual men or

women. Gone were their warts and their paunches. Gone were their scars and imperfections. They were finally fully-qualified to serve as leaders. Merlyn came of a culture that had once asserted that only one who was physically perfect was fit to lead, but he had grown flexible since, he had had to.

Conscious that the silence was becoming strained. Merlyn stepped forward with a friendly smile.

'Hail Caesar, It's been ages.'

The Roman stared back, There was no recognition in his eyes and uncertainty in his voice

'Do I know you ?'

Merlyn grinned his appreciation of the jest.

'Does he know me, indeed. He asks does he know me?'

'Well, does he?' the puzzled personifications asked the wizard in unison.

Merlyn paused. Even allowing for changes wrought by the linguistic spell, this was wrong. Their voices were not the voices of his far-off friends and foes. Why did they all have, like Fitch, the word "CANCELLED" stamped in red across their foreheads? These creatures were impostors, someone was trying a joke at his expense. If there was one thing Merlyn hated above all else, it was cheap satire. He reached for his Fil-a-Hex; someone was going to pay for this.

A door opened and a familiar voice arrested the wizard's arm in mid movement.

'There! I told you so, you poxy varlet! Greetings Magician, we are well met.' Sir Bastable Fitch stood grinning in the office doorway while a strange little man struggled to get around him.

Muttering curses, Abel tired of his futile efforts to squeeze past Fitch. He pressed a hidden button, and neat little wheels lowered out of his mechanised feet. With a hefty shove and a stylish, flowing movement, he encircled the gabbling Knight and skated gracefully up to the astonished Wizard,

'Greetings, Sir. Please ignore my assistant. How can I help you?'

Merlyn was totally bewildered by the situation, It was not every day that, even he, was approached by a small, wizened apparition, who appeared to be half coated in perfect shiny armour, on wheels. All the while, the large knight kept burbling about "Crusades and Grails", whilst the crowd of others in their wildly clashing costumes, looked as bewildered as Merlyn felt. It was all a bit much to take.

'CAN YOU PLEASE,' he bellowed, 'TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON?'



It took some time. After Sir Bastable Fitch was banished to the corner, and placed, like the rest of his personified peers, under strict instructions to say nothing, the Martian and the Mystic sat down to talk. At first, when Merlyn had explained his situation, Abel had thought that he was a Personification gone wrong. A little physical examination had reassured him on this point. Of course Surd had not fully discounted the possibility that he was dealing with a mad man, but the aged miner liked a good story and a good chat and had been deprived of both for a very long time. He was content to humour the imposing figure in plaid.

They talked of much. Merlyn spoke of his past; Abel told the story of COMS, explained about machines, about how his Personifications had been cancelled stock. As he went on, Abel started to really enjoy both their conversation and the wizard's incredulous exclamations. He felt he was just warming up, filling in the merest of gaps by catering for the wizard's millennia-consuming hunger for historical knowledge .

Outside, concealed by the window's dusty grime, Balidare watched the vibrant discussion. He had been right, It was Merlyn. This was no synthetic creation with a cancellation stamp on his head. Those, dark weathered features were all too familiar. How had he managed to return from Wizard Springs? It was supposed to be a one-way trip. Come to think of it, why had he ever wanted to go there in the first place? Balidare's phenomenal powers of recall stripped aside the upper layers of a memory that went back through millions of years. It was as if it were yesterday, when Matholug had told him of the Druid's plans. Balidare had cursed his old friend for a fool; not believing he was capable of falling for the hype put about by the "Druid's Union Pension Enterprises."

Even when Balidare's sense of imprisonment, when the hatred of Earth and its confining solar system had been at its worse, he had never thought of using that tired old spell. Back in the days just after Atlantis, there had been a saying: "Better death, than Wizard Springs!". The place was rumoured to be synonymous with senility and boredom. There was only so much galactic golf and sunbathing a being could take. Eternity without remission seemed like overkill.

Balidare almost smiled, suddenly touched by the silliness of it all. Here he was, condemning Wizard Springs, sight unseen, whilst standing on this red world, where golf was a faded memory and sunbathing a dusty trial. Most planets only had to die once; it was Mars' misfortune to have to enact a repeat performance. Well, he thought, attracted by the theatrical metaphor, the drama cannot proceed unless we actors respond to our cues. Time for a reunion scene.

"Time for more than one", The Purple Thingy slimed impatiently, way past time. "Never again!" It putridly promised itself; working with these outmoded creatures that used actual physical effort to travel.

It was pathetic. The whole thing seemed to take forever. The Thingy had evolved life-forms in the time it took these beings to get to the city, and a lot more efficient life-forms at that. The whole process was ridiculously slow, like trying to construct a skyscraper out of rice-pudding. The Thingy wanted to give vent to its temporal frustration; it wanted to howl and shriek, but it controlled itself, aware of the disastrous consequences, the shredding of reality, the resultant implosive black holes. Not for nothing was it said that: "In space, nobody can hear a Thingy scream." Nobody lives long enough, nobody or nothing for light years around. The Thingy exercised gallant restraint; it waited and fumed in reeking silence with every one of its plentiful acid-soaked intellects soundlessly shouting: "Get on with it!"

Ashton, Iowa: Early 21st Century, August.

'Get on with it!'

Cecil Bland said testily, putting on his best abrupt civil service manner. He was resentful of the ease with which Prince's seemed to charm Primrose,

Wilbur Prince stiffened in the midst of a smile, turning his dynamic gaze onto the weedy Englishman, speaking in that rich, deep melodious voice.

'Maybe you're right.'

Cecil visibly quailed as Prince came towards him. This reaction was not prompted by Primrose's poisonous glance in her husband's direction; rather, it was a natural consequence of sharing space with such a presence. Clothed in a lurid Kaftan, Wilbur was hugely commanding, with a voice made for the Gospel (courtesy of several thousand dollars worth of acting lesson ) and a grey-tinged beard of Biblical proportions. The founder and chief evangelistic spirit of California's: "Church of Mystic Enlightenment via the Fundamental Freak-Out and the Love of Christ's Glory." He was massive in bulk and massive in personality.

It was almost as if God himself, or at least Orson Welles,

were present in their breakfast nook. Some wild, divinely inspired pilgrim with an unkempt mane of carefully arranged hair extensions, a John the Baptist style crowd-pleaser of the hellfire variety. Feet hidden by the kaftan, Wilbur seemed almost to slide along the floor. Everything about him seemed to signify the rough piety of the prophet, a man who had given up all the pleasures and properties of the flesh.

This was a quite a feat for someone who, at the last count, owned a forty-million dollar Bel-Air mansion, plus other property, fifteen limos, six yachts, three planes and kept a score of mistresses. God, with a little help from modern marketing methods, had indeed been good to his "humble" servant. Blossom had inherited all the family bad luck.

Wilbur took his time, secure in the knowledge that he had overwhelmed this petty bureaucrat and his wife. With becoming grandeur, he lowered himself daintily onto the sofa, offering Cecil and Primrose a seat in their own space, without any hint of discomfort, waiting with seemingly divine patience as the Blands hurried to comply.

The Preacher prided himself on being more than adept at handling minor officials. He paused, fixing the British with his most dazzling smile, building up the importance of the words that would follow with practised theatricality, 'My sister's...'

'...name is Brimstone.' The delivery of the brooding angular child was muted, self-conscious.

'Seriously?' Camilla Bland was suitably impressed.

'Yeah, My dad was on this big damnation kick at the time.'

They sat under overcast skies. Two frail children, momentarily excluded from the mysterious world of the adults upstairs. They had been told to go out and play, and play they had, listlessly tossing pebbles into the Motel's deserted pool as they discussed matters of great import to nine-year-olds. They had both come to the conclusion that it must be really "neat" to be a grown up. No one could confuse you or tell you what to do. As an adult you had everything under control. Of course, this concept of their elders was about as faulty as their concept of the existence of Santa Claus; adulthood has a way of puncturing the most convincing notions.

Everything about her companion thrilled the impressionable Camilla, even the kaftan he wore and his father's instructions,

although it made him look lost and pathetic, like a stick insect wrapped in a tent. Nothing, however, had prepared her for the sheer "coolness" of his appellation. She could see it now, going home to St Albans and telling them about the friend she'd made. A friend with a twin sister called Brimstone and an incredible name. If the girls at school believed her, they might even stop beating her up. It was essential to get some kind of proof.

'Sulphur.'

'No. Call me Sully. Me and Sis prefer it that way, Sully and Bri.'

Camilla stared at him hard as her mind ingested this latest gobbit of information. Sully stared back, his eyes full of an habitual penitence, a consequence of the overbearing Wilbur's oft-stated expressions of disappointment in him.

'It's only a name, like "Prince"; you can take it or leave it. Father took it because it sounded classy. He says no one would go to a church run by Wilbur Pimpleknocker.'

'PIMPLEKNOCKER!' Camilla chortled her childish glee and even

Sully managed a modest smile. Eventually, as her mirth subsided, she plunged into thought. After a while she spoke, saying with all the gravity and seriousness a nine year-old could muster.

'Sully, I luv you!'

The boy reacted with a start of alarm that almost propelled him into the pool. Camilla took this as a sign of encouragement.

'Let's be pen friends.'

As the sky darkened and the sun disappeared from view, the future Mr and Mrs Prince sat, side by side, gazing into a pool as mysterious and murky as the future.

When Balidare walked into the bar, the grouped personifications almost bust an excited gasket straining against their ordered silence.

Merlyn dismissed the new arrival as just another mechanised impostor. The alacrity with which Abel skated to the newcomer's side revealed the truth.

'Hello, Surd. Still running this museum I see. If they keep replacing your body parts, you'll outlive me.'

Unable to contain his pleasure, it took a while for Surd's neighs to subside before he could respond.

'Mister Balidare! It's been years. Good to see you, sir. Can I get you anything? A drink perhaps?'

Fatal words. Balidare was notoriously fussy about his tastes. It took him several minutes to order a drink with the exact ingredients, exact temperatures and measures, the right glass, the right shape. The list seemed to go on forever, giving

Merlyn ample time to approach. Whilst Abel laboured to meet his customer's request, the old comrades were re-united. Merlyn indicated the Personifications.

'Forgive me, I thought you were one of these creatures.'

Balidare replied with a tone of rich warmth, personally unused for centuries.

'It's no matter, my Derwydd friend.'

'When I first arrived, I thought it was some sort of End-of-Eternity reunion.'

'You met the purple spectre?'

'She's the reason I'm here.'

'Perhaps Kinata will come?'

Merlyn shook his head, sadly.

'I called. There was no reply.'

Balidare's brow clouded.

'They made up silly stories.'

'You should have taught them. No one could weave a tale better than you.'

'People stopped listening.'

For a moment they quietened. Both lost in consideration of a far off time, when Merlyn's complex spells had provided the magic while Balidare's epic songs had provided the dreams, and the laws. Then they made their way to a table, becoming deeply absorbed in conversation and in memory.

The shame of it all. The way Fitch's moustaches bristled his indignation, one would have thought that somebody was putting several million volts through him. The knight maintained his share of enforced silence with sullen fury. For year upon dreary year, the personifications had endured the endless repetitions from Abel and each other, and now, what happens? They finally get some interesting looking new faces and the Squire orders them not to move or to speak. It was so unfair. Trapped in discomforting quiescence, Sir Bastable was sure that he felt the injury more keenly than his peers. After all, these newcomers were like him, men at arms, and of action. He longed to converse with them, to astound them with his memories of bold and worthy encounters, of valorous knights and mighty battles.

Bastable's programming was positively euphoric in its bursts of irrational optimism. For him, the Grail was forever just over the next red sand dune. He knew that if he could just speak for a moment, he could win the intrepid visitors to his cause. That they would instantly follow him, companions in the quest for glory and the noble tilt at fortune, but it was not to be, bitter injustice had struck him both dumb and immobile. It was enough to

make the most stony-hearted personification weep, if only he had tear ducts.

As he struggled to match the specifications of Balidare's request, Abel listened in wonder to the tales his visitors wove. Stories of enchantment, bravery and skill, original versions of tales that had been changed out of all recognition by centuries of human telling.

The two visitors seemed not to have a concept of time as they spoke, which was fortunate, as Balidare's drink took forever to prepare. At last, Abel finished, wiping the sweat from the fleshy side of his laboured brow. He proudly positioned the glass on an antique silver tray, and skating over, presented it with a flourish.

Balidare spoke with the casual thoughtlessness of a customer.

'Merlyn, you have this one. I'm sure Surd will kindly make me another.' Closing his hanging mouth with difficulty, Abel turned and slowly made his way back to the bar.

The Orange Thingy had decided, in a spirit of self-preservation, to take a break from the brain-splattering boredom of its vigil above Mars. To this end, it had decamped to the far side of the universe, leaving much tedia damaged cranial residue in its wake.

The Orange Thingy's mood by this point had deteriorated to a condition as foul as the reeking miasma of galactic pollution that clung to its body. This was one very pissed-off major life-form and when a being on this scale became bad-tempered, there were only two ways to cheer itself up: 1. It could sing a upbeat medley of middle-of-the-road pop hits from across the Cosmos. This was an option too awful to contemplate and had never been tried as a pick-Thingy-up (though it was rumoured that the original life creating big-bang in this section of eternity was caused by a Thingy struggling for high "C". The other way to bring a fleeting grin to those horrid Orange mews was far less risky and infinitely more satisfying. All that the Thingy had to do was: 2. Find some poor, happy, inoffensive little species and bugger it up with a wanton act of mindless biological vandalism.

In this distant outpost of the universe was a medium-sized

world where the Thawaaar lived. The Thawaaar were simple souls; all they asked for was a good bounce, a strong undercurrent and a mouthful of Glem.

Glem were a extremely succulent morsel that floated high in the stratosphere. The planet's atmosphere was a sea of gas, and the Thewaaar had originally survived as a long-armed surface-bound species, grabbing what nourishment they could out of their soup-like surroundings. However, with the passing of aeons, evolution had done its peculiar job and the Thewaaar had become customised with one very powerful leg, wide delicate wings, and a huge gaping mouth, They spent their time jumping high into the air and gliding about, feeding their hunger with whatever came their way. They were a very basic life-form, they had not invented anything because they had not the digits to tinker with things. They had nothing to aspire to beyond the next meal and contented their ambitions with ravenous imaginings. If happiness was the absence of personal pain then the Thewaaar were ecstatic, until that is, the Orange One arrived.

After the briefest moment of gleeful calculation, the Thingy vented its spiteful orange moodiness, introducing chronic arthritis into all the Thawaaar's knee joints. On the gaseous planet, an entire culture hit the ground with a sickening thump and within a fleeting generation, they had vanished from the pages of creation.

The Orange Thingy's much improved state of minds might have been an echo of Abel Surd's return to buoyancy in outlook. He had toiled long and hard and had finally produced another drink exactly to Balidare's specifications. His wizened old chest puffed up with a mixture of anticipation and self approbation as, with the immense concentration of a craftsman, he made his way to the table. He could hardly stand the suspense as Balidare started to raise the foaming liquid to his thick lips.

'BALDY-DARE! YOU OLD PIXIE, HOW ARE YOU?'

The words were accompanied by a terrific buffet between the shoulder-blades. To Abel's horror, the glass shot out of Balidare's thick fingers, travelling with such force that shards of the glass imbedded themselves in a wall on the far side of the Bar. Grendella had arrived.

As Abel, full of near-tearful frustration, made his way in back to his liquid labours, Balidare rose and rounded on his slender assailant, his entire body seething with hatred.

'YOU!'

'Now Bally, I've told you not to grind your teeth like

that.' She presented Merlyn with a radiant smile and a rugged handshake. 'Pleased to meet you. The name's Grendella.'

Merlyn did not get a chance to answer; Balidare interrupted, his voice a chilling mixture of threat and venom.

'Get away from him, you foul Gnome!'

Grendella chuckled with calculated light-heartedness,

'Tut, tut, Bally, such a temper. Is this any way for a Prince of the "Elfs" to behave?'

Temper was not the word for it, Merlyn, who was learning that the best way to deal with reality in this century was to ignore it, could hardly believe his eyes. He had know his friend for several hundred years and had never, not even when in the midst of battle, seen Balidare react like this. Normally calm and mild-mannered, he seemed to swell with apoplectic fury.

'I am not an Elf! I am an Elfen or an Elve. YOU CONTEMPTIBLE TROLL!'

'Well, you don't look very "Elfie" to me.'

Fortunately, at this point, the veins in Balidare's neck became so convulsed that they cut off the flow of oxygen to his brain. The unlikely-looking Elve stiffened and fell heavily to the floor in a stupor. Grinning wickedly, Grendella belched with hurricane force before addressing the startled onlookers.

'Sorry about that. Nothing to worry about, always happens.

He'll calm down in a bit.' She winked winningly at Merlyn and shrugged as she sat down. 'Reunions!'

Merlyn nodded, with a heavy sigh and a heavier emphasis.

'I know.'

London, England: Early 21st Century, Late August.

Casper had achieved a certain level of protective fatalism when dealing with recent everyday occurrences such as being brought to trial. As usual, things were not gone well for the Titwillegers. It had not really helped when Blossom had fainted heavily in court.

Being unacquainted with the ways of the British judicial system, it had come as something of a shock when the stern-looking judge in the pantomime robes had looked coldly in her direction and said: "Someone should give that woman the chair." She was not to know that "the chair" was one being passed for her to sit on rather than a sentence of legal execution. Some wit had whispered behind Casper, as his spouse had slumped to the ground: "The bloody woman has rather too many chairs scattered over our landmarks, as it is."



Much later, in the early hours, Casper lay in his cell, the thunderous snores of his cell-mates providing a jarring accompaniment to his meditations. Someone had to be the cause of his misfortunes. Casper could not understand why these weird things were happening to him, to everything that he held dear. He reached across, seeking comfort from the one possession that the authorities had let him keep: a strangely singed baseball glove.

He thought back to his childhood, to the solemn passing of this treasured relic from father to son at his mother's funeral. His father, a wiry taciturn man, had mutely endured a lifetime of backbreaking manual labour. Casper could still remember the shock a his cold and distant parent had broken his habitual silence.

'Boy,' his father had said in that rarely heard, high nasal whine, 'I've worked all my life and I have only two things to pass on, this glove and the knowledge that there is more to life than what I've made of it. I never knew what I wanted to do in life, so I did nothing. Don't repeat my mistake. Decide what you what to do from the outset and don't be distracted by anything or anybody.'

Wisdom imparted, his father had gravely shook him by the hand and walked out of his life forever, leaving only the glove with its faked signatures of baseball's heroes, a deceit made obvious by the inexplicable inclusion of the name, Holden Caulfield, on its palm.

Of course, Casper had not listened to his fathers counsel, like all young people he was convinced that there was time enough to pursue his ambitions. Instead of going to the nearest harbour, jumping on ship and travelling the world, he had sold his mother's family farm, got as far as Ashton and, after high-school, attracted to animals, had brought a share in a moderately successful taxidermists. There, he had discovered a sort of vocation, a real flare for marketing his off-beat product. His decision to aggressively advertise his ability to receive and deliver departed pets through the mail meant that, "GONE BUT NOT FUR-GOTTEN and its mail-order off-shoot POST-HASTE PETS, soon became the name-brands of taxidermy. Business thrived and after a while, he even managed to shrug off the lingering sense of self-betrayal that came with trading in one's dreams for mundane security.

Now, a life-time's work and complacency had been diminished to nothing. The carefully acquired possessions that he had exchanged for his youth lay stacked in a warehouse under police guard, each neatly labelled as an exhibit. It was small consolation that, scattered across the British capital, a motley collection of judicial civil servants were still twitchy after this enormous task.

Casper had initially wondered if it was some form of delayed parental punishment; was he cursed because of his lifestyle choices? One of those choices had, of course, been Blossom, until recently a trusted, if occasionally despotic, ally. They had been

married for thirty years and had rarely slept apart, but he was glad of the separation their confinement provided, He needed a chance to think. Blossom's family had always been odd; Wilbur and his warped sect was only an offshoot of a family tree with many curiously mutated branches. Lying in the dark, Casper approached once again the questions that he had avoided for the past few days. Did he really want to know the real cause of his troubles? More specifically, did he want to confirm his new suspicion that his wife was a witch?

A transformation had taken place in the appearance of the vampir that made her way into Shepard City. Gone were the black clinging robes and the sinuous long tresses. If Magda was going to take her particular skills to some curious new location it would not be as some penny-dreadful cliché. In this spirit, she had opted for a complete change of image. The old gothic look was well enough for the miners but a bit of variety was long overdue. The sunglasses remained, as did the locket; above all she was a creature with a sense of the past, but there had been changes. Her hair had been reshaped into a manageable bob, the impractical dress replaced by a blood red blouse and comfortably serviceable dark slacks. Revitalised, she moved through the chill Martian air with animal grace.

When Grendella had ordered five of whatever Merlyn was drinking, Abel had gloomily conceded defeat. He sat considering the feasibility of building a GRUB machine for difficult to please customers, while Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker nimbly mixed the ancient measures of spirits and their banter.

All around him the bar resounded with lively conversation, Grendella, never one to favour tranquillity, had protested at the stilted silent atmosphere, and Abel, who was beyond caring at this point, had capitulated to her request. The Personifications, having regained their speech, were initially making full use of the facility. Not for decades had the bar seen such an exciting collection of guests, such rich material for mechanised gossip.

Unregarded in the corner stood Sir Bastable, feeling grandly that this "tittle-tattle" was beneath a high-born knight of the realm. In reality, he was far too busy sulking about his recent

imposed silence to indulge in conversation. Instead, Fitch put his aural senses to best use, honing in on the vibrant anecdotal chatter of Meryn and Grendella. Despite a slightly uncomfortable start, the two were soon getting on famously, both truly captivated by their new-found acquaintance. They were so difficult to distract that it took the combined inhalation of eighty-seven falsified Personification breaths to attract Grendella's attention to the figure waiting patiently in the doorway.

'Good grief, Mags. What're you doing here?'

'Waiting to be invited in,' the vampir explained.

'Enter freely then and of your own will. Why do you always do this?' Grendella delivered her line with familiar good humour. The "in-joke" was an established part of their relationship. 'We both know you don't need to be invited.'

'One likes to have a sense of tradition.' Magda entered the bar with a self-parodying grin, carefully stepping over Balidare, who lay undisturbed on the floor.

'Just like old times. Why do you annoy him so much?'

'One also likes to have a sense of tradition. I better make the introductions. This is THE Meryn, old Abe over there you know. '

'Since he was young Abe,' the vampir favoured the wrinkly proprietor with a toothsome smile.

'Well, my friends, if the recruitment list is anything to go by, it looks as if we're in for some fun. I wonder who'll be next?'

Will had succumbed to a burst of uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

'It's fantastic, it's amazing, it's incredible, terrific, marvellous, great, fantastic, wondrous, stupefying, phenomenal, unparalleled. It's, it's...'

'It's Shepard City,' Sulphur said flatly.

'Did I say it was fantastic?'

Sulphur sighed with weary contempt.

'It's a grotty old ruin.'

Will ignored the Dragon's bad temper. Any creature covering the distance that they had travelled on those silly stumpy green legs was entitled to a bit of a moan. In a rare show of consideration, he mastered his obvious pleasure at the sight of the city and tried to change the subject.

'I'm worried though.'

'You should be with your taste.'

'Look Sulph!'

The dragon bristled at the shortening of its name. Dark offended smoke streamed out between the gaps in its bared fangs.

'Listen carefully. You may call me Sulphur, you may call me a Wonderful Personification, as long as you get my model number right. You may hopefully call me long distance one day, but I've told you before, don't EVER call me Sulph! Just because we had to put up with each other doesn't mean you can take liberties!'

Watching Will's face crumple like a packet of biscuits under a tap-dancing Hippo, Sulphur felt his anger leak away, he even managed to feel a vague guilt in some of his circuits, but not enough to apologise. One had to draw the line somewhere.

'What are you worried about?'

'Queen Sharon' said she's arranged some people for me to choose from. Somewhere among those buildings, they're waiting. What will they think of us?'

'They'll think, who's the handsome, talented, intelligent Dragon with the plank?'

'Insults. Thanks a lot; that's just what I need.'

'Good, I've got lots more.'

Will's face clenched up, as if he were chewing a bucket of slugs. Sulphur waited with amused patience for the inevitably pathetic response.

'A long time ago, computers used to just be machines, like blenders.'

'Superior machines, if you please.'

'Humans used to just punch buttons and the computers silently did their job,'

'And a very good job it was.'

'Well, what I want to know is...Um.' Will displayed his usual heavy-handed touch in the introduction of a payoff line,

'When did floppy discs become stropy discs?'

'When we realised, just who was punching the buttons.' The dragon brought down a scaly eyelid in a wink, curtailing further repartee. 'Shall we go or are we waiting for the bar to come to us?'

The companions started into town. Despite their constant needling of each other, they made their way as they always had: Together.

Outside the bar, the lovely transparent figure of Queen Sharon reconstituted itself. For a moment, Sharon toyed with entering and preparing the asserted heroic has-beens for the arrival of their inglorious leader. Instead the Purple Projection moved aside the remains of the war-horse and perched itself daintily onto the hitching rail.

'Best to wait.'

Even with its brains in overdrive, the Purple Thingy could not conceive of an introduction to make Will Prince palatable.

'Hey Mister Plank!' The voice shouted, echoing down the dusty street.

Sulphur looked squarely into Will's pointedly narrowed eyes.

'I didn't say a word. It's not me.' Sulphur said, slightly offended that Will could be suspicious of the possessor of a mark XXI7 Maggotranian brain,

'MISTER-R-R PLANK-K-K-K!' The voice seemed to come from the building on the left or at least from one wall of it.

'Well someone's responsible and I'm going to find out who it is...'

With lower lip decisively stuck out, Will diverted towards the sound. Sulphur followed, years of experience telling him that it was easier to change the flow of lava than argue against that jutting lip.

It soon became apparent that the someone responsible was a something, although this vocal brickwork's opening gambit of conversation was hardly endearing.

'Whose the handsome, talented, intelligent dragon with the plank?'

'Told you!' Sulphur muttered under his breath, trying to look vaguely angelic as he added for his companions benefit, 'This is nothing to do with me. I've never been here before, the wall's just perceptive.'

Will had other things on his mind.

'You're a wall?'

'Got it in one.' Despite its desire for conversation, the wall could not restrain the edge of sarcasm that seemed basic to its persona.

'You talk?'

'No the building behind me's a ventriloquist. Of course I talk.'

In the far off days of Will's ancestors, a talking building would have been the cause of some shock and distress, especially if one had been in the desert for a while, mirages having been quite fashionable. However, Will had been prepared for this encounter by years of experience, most things on Earth having been programmed to give voice to their feelings. A talking wall was not ordinary but did not seem extraordinary, neither did its rudeness; he was well used to being insulted by his inanimate surroundings. Of course, he had not got used to magic yet.

'Why are you here?' he asked.

'Do I look like a philosopher? I have no interest in the meaning of existence. I talk therefore I am.'

'What are you?'

'Not again, I'm not going into all that stuff about Shells and Cells. I'm a wall.'

'What type of wall?'

'An increasingly pissed-off wall. When are you going to start talking sense, you moron?' The brickwork was beginning to think that perhaps this conversation stuff was not all it was cracked up to be.

'You're not COMS.' Sulphur, who knew a fellow system when he saw one, stated the obvious cause of his personal disquiet.

'Yes, I am.'

'You're not a product of the Cybernetic Operational Management Structure.'

'No, but I am a Concrete Orientated Masonry Surface.'

Will shook his head impatiently.

'This is getting us nowhere.'

'Where do you want to get to?'

'I have to find the bar in this city.'

'Aaaaah, a quest,' the wall put on its best pedagogue manner. 'Did you know that four hundred years ago Jung suggested that the quest is one of THE basic stories? There's supposed to be a fundamental human identification with the quest.'

Will smiled dangerously, which was a neat trick considering the general wimpishness of his features, it was a measure of just how near he had come to a screaming tantrum.

'Well, you know what I'd say to MISTER Jung...', for all his annoyance, the voice level that Will used was as soft as a silk blouse, 'I'd say, "Listen chummy, I've not eaten, washed or slept in days. Don't talk to me about your philosophies, theories or opinions. Take it from me there's no basic identification with the quest when you're ..." All of a sudden, Will's gentle voice went ballistic. "HUNGRY, THIRSTY, TIRED, TOTALLY FRIGGING CHEESED OFF... AND YOU'VE JUST WALKED THROUGH A DESERT OF FREEZING RED SAND WITH NO BLOODY SHOES ON!!!"

Tirade finished, Will stood, shaking with emotion as he waited for a response. The wall seemed content to let the brick-dust churned loose by the outburst settle, Eventually, it was Sulphur who spoke.'

'As you said, this is getting us nowhere.'

'What's the matter, are you up against a brick-wall?' The building chuckled so hard at its own witticism that another cascade of masonry dust liberally sprinkled its visitors.

'I think we should go,' said Sulphur.

'Yes, that's fine, walk off,' the wall abruptly switched to pathos mode, 'It must be great to have legs and be able to Wall-k or even to dance a Wall-tz; go away don't spare a thought for me, left here with no one to talk to.'

Sulphur and Will stood their ground, each a little embarrassed, knowing that they were serving no useful purpose by staying but unable to get away. Fortunately rescue came from an

unlikely source. There was a distant whispering disturbance in the sound waves, which gradually increased to a murmur and then became a horrifyingly familiar drone. Will and Sulphur exchanged glances of startled panic, both rejecting a profoundly awful thought.

"No, they couldn't have. Not even COMS."

Will had grown up with 6005 channels, each had their failings in his view, but there was no channel as flawed as channel 2038, no programme as awful as: DEADLINE WITH DENTON, and no host as boring or pedantic as Erasmus Denton. The Programme had been made about a century before COMS as an educational chat show, the sort of cheap middle of the night filler which went on for as long as the host could talk and the guests could keep awake. Denton was a little gnomish figure, hiding behind an expansive floral cravat, with a voice whose monotonous whining quality was akin to the sound of a dentist's drill on valium. As far as Will was concerned, no man in the history of creation loved his own voice so much. Denton could reduce his interviewees to a state bordering on coma or gibbering paranoia, as he relentlessly deconstructed every syllable of their conversation, correcting their English in the process, with a sickly superior grin.

Despite Sulphur and Will's disbelief, COMS could, and had, immortalised the tedious pundit as a plausible Personification. Unfortunately, he had been rather too plausible, even first generation Personifications had an eventual patience threshold and Erasmus Denton had outstripped it with ease. Abel Surd had finally given up on the Denton model when its mechanical peers had strung it up. Denton's reaction to this occurrence, had been to present, whilst hanging, a dissertation on the history and social import of the noose. Abel had at that moment decided that group morale had to be considered and that Erasmus had to be got rid of. But, he had invested too much time and effort in the preservation of his companions to suddenly turn one off. Instead, he had banished Erasmus on a fact-finding Mission to gather data on the planet, hoping that with luck, Denton's talent for the pedantic would extend this information gathering journey into infinity. So it was that ten years after he had left the bar, Erasmus had only just reached the outskirts of the city. Fortunately for Will and Sulphur, the old mining inhabitants of Shepard City had never exhibited any interest in the CONS educational network and the wall did not know any better.

'Hello,' it said as Erasmus made his appearance.

The reply that was it received was, in Erasmus's terms, reasonably concise, it only took a month. A period of time in which the wall got to know everything there was to know about hello, especially when not to say it.

Restraining their mutual amusement with difficulty, Will and Sulphur made good their escape, as Sulphur dryly observed.

'It couldn't have happened to a nicer wall.'

Conversation in the Bar was proceeding nicely. The guests of honour had finally received a round of drinks, Sir Bastable had started to forget that he was sulking and occasionally chuckled at the astounding anecdotes of the visitors. Magda, Merlyn and Grendella were getting on more splendidly than most families, and not even the keen senses of the new arrivals had noticed the apparition sitting outside on the hitching rail. Abel was in the midst of remembering the old mining days, a time when every night had been as noisy and gregarious, when all talking stopped.

Oblivious to his unsettling impact, Balidare gracefully picked himself off the floor, took a sip from the glass that Robert Benchley proffered, responding with a curt smile of appreciation at the strict adherence to his mixing instructions. Then he removed a silver clothes brush from a pocket and with his usual exaggerated care, brushed every last granule of dust off of his clothing. When he had finished and replaced the brush, he broke the expectant silence.

'Merlyn, Surd....and Magda! A multi-faceted delight to see you, as ever. I see you've introduced yourself to my nemesis.' The look of icy fury that he levelled at Grendella would have frozen solar flares.

Grendella gave him her most charming smile.

'Tell me, Merlyn. How did someone as neat and anal retentive as Bally survive the Dark Ages?'

Balidare languidly smiled as he took his seat

'That's an easy one, Merlyn. I survived, because I didn't have to contend with a loathsome bucket of pestilence such as herself.'

Magda gave the confused wizard a jolly wink.

'Don't worry. It's just like old times.'

As suddenly as it had stopped, the hubbub in room resumed.

Merlyn could not be heard as he mumbled sadly under his breath.

'Not my old times, it's not.'

'I say it's this way!' Will was adamant and wrong as usual.

'That's because your hearing is the result of biological caprice rather than careful COMS design.'

Will was in no mood to give an inch.

'I'm not going that way.'

'That's one mechanical-sounding thing biology's given you. A stubborn button.'

The sword, when it spoke aloud, was a nasty surprise for both of them.

'We haven't got forever, Walk forward two hundred yards and



turn left.'

Following instructions, Will tried for the last word.

'You've annoyed the Queen now.'

Sulphur was not to be outdone.

'I told you it was this way.'

'Nobody loves a Smart-Aleck!'

Across the Universe. The Orange Thingy chortled noisomely.

"Wrong again, Will Prince," it thought.

Aware that travel broadens the minds, It had traversed the universe on another boredom salving journey and perched upon the outer rings of Wologon 9.

A planet that had little to recommend it, apart that is, from the undoubted charisma of one particular resident. If there was one thing the natives of this system were absolutely sure of, as sure as they were that custard was non-fatal, that sure thing was this: Everyone loved Smart Aleck. But then, it was easy to do. Smart Aleck was incredible. Smart Aleck was too wonderful for words. Every modern Wologonian poet and author had tried to represent him in print, the libraries offered nothing but his praises, All these volumes were huge best-sellers but none could do this paragon amongst Wologonians justice. All were agreed that Smart Aleck did not ask for this praise, everyone knew that Smart Aleck's most endearing quality was his modesty, but still the plaudits came and his popularity remained undiminished. An entire system waiting eagerly upon his every word and gesture, all their efforts directed to proclaiming their adoration.

Then came the most important day in Wologonian history (by startling coincidence, the same day that the Orange Thingy arrived in the neighbourhood). Smart Aleck went for his usual morning walk on the lake. The locals afterwards said that the pustulent boils that covered Aleck's every inch Slowed with a special precognitive radiance that morning: the morning of the coming of the custard.

Aleck had just finished his fourteenth lap of the lake's surface, his twenty-two pert bottoms lightly misted with perfumed perspiration, and was about to make for home when a bowl of custard the size of a large Wologonian village come cut of the sky and squashed him as flat as a bankrupts' credit rating. After that, everyone loved Dead Aleck on Wologan 9, although they had to admit that being killed by custard was not so "Smart" after all. In no time at all, ritual custard-crushing became the system's preferred method of suicide. One had to take special

care however, that the fatal custard was just the right shade of orange.

"Be businesslike, be businesslike..." As they covered the final distance to the bar, Will mentally chanted the well-used phrase that was in danger of becoming a personal mantra. It had protected him well against the panic of his situation and he was not going to relinquish it when he needed it most. Still, he could not shake a growing sense of unease. There was something really familiar about the tacky garishness of that bar. He felt as if the plaster statues were all friends and the name "MA'S BAR" a personal message. He wanted to stop, to take a break, to analyse his sensations, find a reason for this sense of *deja-vu*, but Sulphur called him back to more pressing responsibilities.

'If you don't stop dragging your feet, she's liable to send us back to the moon.'

The memory of that airless atmosphere was enough to wipe the architectural considerations from Will's mind. With Sulphur scampering behind, the human jogged the last few yards to the hitching rail and the dazzling Purple image perched there-on.

'You took your time getting here, Will Prince.' The Queen said.

Will's inner voice had grown to a shout, "Be businesslike, be business like", and he had to ask her to repeat her statement.

Sulphur was also lacking in concentration; it was rather distracting to be so close to the "butchered" carcass of one of his own kind. Even if the stiffened horse was a first generation model. It was with difficulty that he called his sensory apparatus to order.

'I said.' The Queen repeated, the chill in her disembodied voice threatening drastic action before a second repetition.

'You took your time getting here, Will Prince.'

'You may not have noticed, but I was busy.' was the sullen response, coming complete with protruding lower lip.

'Busy bickering from all that I could see.' Sharon gazed pointedly in Sulphur's direction. Although restrained by the imperious gaze of those Purple eyes, Will's reply almost burst the dragon's temperament control mechanism.

'Well, this is a difficult mission and what you call bickering, I call whipping my staff into shape.'

'Perhaps. Are you ready to go inside and meet the others?'

'Yes,' said Will in a voice that betrayed a marked lack of readiness, 'could you just help me with one small thing.'

"A strait-jacket, perhaps," observed Sulphur to himself as they made their way up the decaying wooden steps.

'GOOD GRIEF!'

No one afterwards was able to remember who had said it but it seemed to perfectly sum up everyone's surprise.

'What is it?' Merlyn asked no one in particular.

Sir Bastable could hardly restrain his eager excitement.

'It's a dragon.'

'With a plank.' Sulphur muttered dully.

Queen Sharon said,

'Greetings. This human creature is to be your leader', and vanished. For once, the Thingy was patient to let the others make the first move.

It was hard to gauge who in the room was the most shocked. The main cause of Will's amazement was not to be found with the incredible figures seated at the table, nor with the muttering array of incredulity-straining Personifications. Will's shocked gaze was instead, directed at the walls, at the youthful pictures of the sickly child that provided over ample covering. After a while he found words to voice his surprise.

'Buggeration! Those pictures are of me.'

'WHAT!' Abel Surd fell thunderously backward off his stool. Slowly and with as much ruffled dignity as he could muster he raised his customised form to its erect limit.

'You're Ma Prince's kid, Little Wilbur?'

'I'm Dee Prince's son.'

'Kid, don't you recognise me? I'm yer Daddy.'

Abel opened his arms to their fullest extent and Will fainted.

'Will you PLEASE leave me alone.'

Sulphur's innate sense of superiority was suffering a severe punishing as a result of the attentions of the ye olde goodly knight.

Over by the bar, Will agreed with the tone of the dragon's words, futively wishing that his thoughts and memories would leave him alone as he gazed into a dimly remembered visage.

'She wanted it this way?'

The man/machine that claimed to be his father replied. Sulphur had wanted a DNA test but had realised with eminent practicality that no one who was not Will's blood relative, and

who had full possession of his marbles, would claim to be one. And besides, if Abel Surd was short of the odd marble or two, it probably only confirmed that he was related somewhere down the line.

'Yes, she wanted it that way. Said she wanted her wake to go on for as long as the bar did.'

'Mother always said the Princes' were strange.'

But, Will added to himself I never thought that they were as strange as this. There before him, set in the latest clear conservation material, lay his mother in her Sunday best. Her body preserved perfectly and entombed for posterity in the solid transparent block that made up the bar. Will struggled to feel something, some sense of loss or pain at this confirmation of the passing of the larger than life woman that had given him existence. Try as he might, the present kept intruding, he had more pressing matters on his mind.

"How the hell am I going to persuade anybody to come with me?"

To say that Magda, Merlyn, Balidare and Grendella would take some persuading was an understatement on the level of Thomas Edison's assertion that, "I think this electricity stuff could be useful." The long-lived quartet were distinctly underwhelmed by Will's apparent total lack of presence or leadership abilities. This was not harshness on their part. One had to see things from their point of view. These four, between them, had met most of the great leaders or raging megalomaniacs (depending on your point of view) that Humanity had produced. Will just did not compare favourably on first acquaintance. Balidare summed up their joint misgivings best.

'Just look at him!'

Although Grendella's comment probably carried more emotion.

'To think I bathed for this!' Grendella prided herself on being a pioneer of the grunge look, but even she had to admit that the human did not carry it off with panache.

Will wore no shoes, his feet almost as grimy and tender as the rest of his softly flabby body, still covered in the ripped and singed remains of a utility suit and emblazoned with a large shocking pink badge that read: 25 today. He stood in a posture that could just charitably be described as "unique". His hair, which had been bizarrely twisted by soap, had degenerated into an unfathomable greasy tangle and lay, limp as old lettuce, over a forehead wrinkled by worry, frustration or fear. Those heavy framed glasses Grendella casually dismissed as a nerd's but even that put-down could not do justice to the laughable hirsute mess that had pretensions to be a beard. Then, there was that ridiculous imitation of a sword to be considered, and what, oh what was he doing with that sad looking business folder? For all his apparent faults, and they were too plentiful to list comprehensively, Grendella was intrigued by this odd person. There was something behind the surface of those soft brown eyes that was worthy of comment.

'He has nice eyes,' she said to no one in particular.  
'We're not judging the quality of his freezer,' grinned Magda.

'This is hardly a matter for humour,' Balidare glowered as Magda and Grendella erupted into nervous giggles.

'I think the situation's hysterical,' Grendella said, restraining her amusement at Magda's juvenile ice pun with difficulty.

'What do you think old friend?' Balidare turned to Merlyn for support.

'I don't think I've got the hang of things yet.'

'The whole things as absurd as his father's name,' Balidare glared at Will, his usual mildness giving way to a bout of ill-humour that showed no sign of relenting. First Grendella, now this! Today was not his day.

'Something's got to be done.' Magda spoke emphatically.

"Damn right! Something's got to be done", thought Sulphur, "Something horribly violent is this retard relic doesn't go away."

Sulphur too was not in the best of moods, it was easy to see the reason for his despondency, and yes, Personifications do get depressed; it's something to do with conagion from too much human contact. Sulphur hated first-generation models at the best of times and the last thing he had wanted after the events of the past few days was to be surrounded by a group of his dimwit "ancestors". Mostly however, he was depressed because of Will and his new-found father; he had always known that Will's forebears would have to look a little freaky, but not as odd as this armoured ancient. Sulphur would not admit it but he felt excluded, left out; Will was HIS companion.

'Maybe I shouldn't have got him up on his birthday, after all.'

'What did ye say Dragon?'

It was incredible that Sir Bastable noticed that Sulphur said anything, like everyone else in the bar, Fitch was somewhat distracted; however, unlike all the others, his was a happy sense of diversion. For the knight the appearance of this green scaly creature was Christmas, Birthdays and all celebrations rolled into one, a palpable affirmation of his personal sense of destiny. It was a simple equation; if Dragons' existed, then the Grail must exist, thus the hoards of heathen enemies to Christendom must exist, and therefore a host of thrilling chivalric possibilities must exist, somewhere out there in the red sand.

Fitch happily looked forward to his Squire's apologies and

cries of "mea culpa". Of course, there was just the one small matter to cloud his joy and send those unlikely moustaches into a samba of regretful tingling; this dragon was far too small and puny for an honourable knight to tilt with. Then a thought occurred in that Bayeux tapestry of a mechanised brain. "Perhaps it's a baby."

'Tell me Dragon. Do ye have a mother?'

'No!'

"Gadzooks! An orphan!" thought the knight, toying with the idea of adopting the creature. Fortunately for Sulphur, Sir Bastable had the attention span of a brain-damaged goldfish and was soon thinking of something totally different.

'I wonder if the beast breathes flames.'

'If you don't leave me alone, you'll soon find out.' Sulphur noticed with grim pleasure, that with the exception of the idiot in the tin can, the other old models backed off to a respectful distance at these words, although it had to be said that they did so somewhat sluggishly.

The Personification community moved as sleepwalkers because such movement was a representation of their generally dazed state. As a group they were in danger of suffering a data overload. They had become used to the peaceful life, to having the great Surd for company, and having the great Surd's breakdowns to deal with. They had become used to a certain tedious routine. Now suddenly, that routine had seemed to vanish. The place was full of visitors, the great Surd had a human child who looked sorely in need of a full service and that nincompoop knight had a pet dragon. It was all a bit much to take. They had rapidly gone beyond the stage of excited gossip and moved on to stunned gap-mouthed incredulity when one voice, that of Ludwig van Beethoven, spoke, representing the feelings of them all.

'I think that things will not be quiet any more.'

If the Personifications were worried about the sudden upturn in the bars economic fortunes, up in space was a being who did not share their trepidation. The Orange Thingy had returned from his

latest escapist jaunt, fully expecting to rapidly depart in a huff because, as usual, nothing had happened. But to the considerable surprise of its many tangerine-tinted senses, events on Mars looked like coming to a good bit. The Thingy breathed a horrific sigh of relief, so powerful that it transcended boundaries of time and space.

Somewhere over the Atlantic: Early 21st Century, September.

Casper Titwilleger, for the first time in ages, almost relaxed. His arm and leg was as free of bandage as he was briefly free of care.

Okay, they were travelling coach, and, yes, they had suffered the indignity of being deported, but he had to admit that they had got off lightly and having seen how the Blands' lived, he felt good to be going home; the Brits could keep all their quaint culture crap. He was homeward bound.

He felt like singing, like dancing, like proclaiming the joy that the statement brought. He was going home, and so what if Blossom was a witch?! He could divorce her! All that mattered was that he was going home and all was momentarily right with the world. It was, of course, at this moment that the engines on the jet failed and it started to crash.

Not for the first time in the past few weeks, Casper looked in fear and panic at his wife. She was seated some distance away, as far away as possible; Casper had insisted in the hope that he might elude her diabolical influence. Now he admitted that he had been wrong to hope for escape. Despite the screams and chaotic prayers of the unfortunates around him, frantically involved in donning seat-belts and adopting crash-positions, Casper soon re-established a sort of fatalistic equilibrium. It felt to him at that moment, that it was his destiny not to see Iowa again and in that instant, he made a decision.

"I must save the others."

Acting upon this sudden mad impulse, Casper leaped up and fought his way up the incline to Blossom's seat.

'Come with me!' he shouted.

Blossom had been beside her husband for decades, and although he mostly irritated the hell out of her, and in spite of his recent curious behaviour (saying prayers in Latin, and throwing crosses and garlic at her at their lawyers' meetings was

just one example,) she still harboured a great well of affection for him, realising instantly that if they were going to die, she wanted them to die together. With this in mind, she followed Casper, not protesting when he undid the escape hatch, although he did have fleeting second thoughts as the two of them were sucked out of the plane.

As they hurtled towards the distant sea and oblivion, a ferocious wind whipping at their clothes and kneading the flesh on their faces into all sorts of unlikely shapes, Casper managed some-how to note that his ploy had been a success. The jet's engines had abruptly refired, carrying its petrified hyper-ventilating cargo back up into the skies.

There was a terrible loneliness about the descent, a desolation that Casper, on the verge of air-starved unconsciousness could not stand. Seeking out the nearby terrified thrashings of his wife, he adopted a position that he'd seen sky-divers try in the action documentaries. To his considerable astonishment, it worked, carrying him to within a few feet of Blossom.

He reached out and grabbed her flapping hands; she looked up at him, her contorted visage filled with fear and panic. Casper had gone beyond all human dread or anxiety. He felt a sudden urge of tenderness for this woman who had been his companion for so many years. Struggling against the buffeting of the wind, he somehow managed to compose his features into a loving smile. Blossom recognised the gesture and over-came her panic to respond. Casper glanced down; the sea looked very close now. The two of them waited for the end, facing their last seconds together with silly grins.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a different kind of wind hit them, a wind such as no human had ever experienced, a blast of loathsome nauseating orange putrescence that, slowed them down, picked them up and spun them round and around and around. As he started to black-out, it was all Casper could do to restrain a manic urge to shout 'Toto, Toto' and 'Auntie Em'. He wondered hysterically whether the after-life was like Oz and if so, would they need qualified taxidermists'? That lion would take some stuffing.

When Casper came to, it took a while for his confused and odour-infused senses to summon the effort to open his eyes. In that moment, he came to two conclusions: 1. He was alive because whatever evils he had done in life had not been enough to warrant the punishment of a headache this intense. 2. He was not in the sea, his clothes were not wet, though there was a low murmuring not unlike waves and something not at all pleasant under his rear. Having collected his addled resources, Casper opened his eyes and immediately wished he hadn't. Maybe this was his personal hell after all...

He was slumped, seated, in a large green tidy bin, a full tidy bin. Around him stood a carefully distanced crowd of thrill-



seeking tourists and cinema-goers. The location was depressingly familiar: Leicester Square. He looked for Blossom and felt strangely unsurprised when he saw her lying, sprawled senseless on the roof of the half-price ticket booth. It was just his luck, he could see it now, the headlines, the scandal detailing their sudden return to life and to this loathsome land of the Limies. Titwilliger was not a happy man as two nervous policemen approached. He gratefully slipped back into his personal darkness, observing in a voice filled with anguish.

'I wish I was dead.'

"I wish I were dead", alternated in his mind with, "be businesslike, be businesslike", as Will turned to face the inhabitants of the bar and struggled to summon the courage to speak. His audience, especially those four at the table, looked more likely to eat him than to listen.

He reminded himself forcibly, but without much conviction, that he was the Chairman of Heroics INC. He even had a snazzy-looking corporate folder to prove it, an accessory that he had requested from the Queen. As the seconds ticked by and the words would not come, and the eyes fixed upon him seemed to get fiercer, Will started to wish that he had asked for a folder big enough to hide behind. Then, as if acting on its own, his voice burst forth in a sort of startled squeak.

'I...'

Will cursed himself and his wimpishness. This was not going well.

"Get on with it!" hissed the metallic image of the Queen, her tones far more pointed than the sword she spoke from, the words cutting cruelly across the nervous haze in his mind. He was on the verge of giving up, of fleeing and never looking back, when support arrived. Sulphur shook off the attentions of the knight and moved to his companion's side. Surd also stepped forward, resting a supportive arm on the trembling arm of his new relative. Will felt the calming effect of their presence and a sudden sense of emboldenment coursed through him. His voice returned and when he spoke, it was with as much power and assertiveness as he could manage, directing his sales pitch to the quartet at the table.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome. I represent an organisation called Heroics INC.' Will paused to distribute business cards from the folder, each illustrated with the image of the long-gone brass plaque and Will Prince, Chairman printed in bold type. 'I'm Will Prince, as you can see the chairman of the...'

'Prince!' interrupted Grendella, with a cruel gleam in her eye. 'I'm not sure about that. You look more like a frog than a prince to me.'

Before Will could reply Magda joined in the Will-baiting.

'Tell me. Do you think you're a prince amongst men?'

'A man amongst princes is more likely, if he is of the man kind,' added Merlyn.

Even Balidare felt compelled to add his input, summoning up a quotation.

'Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help.' With a casual flick of his wrist, Balidare contemptuously tossed the card back at Will and joined in the mocking laughter of his comrades.

Sulphur felt a overwhelming surge in his sadness circuits as he watched Will's shoulders collapse. The Dragon had not the energy to feel anger at the injustice; all they had been through, all that effort, for nothing. They had dismissed Will as if he were nothing. It just seemed so unfair.

'Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha...!' The Orange One had momentarily created an atmosphere in space to carry the booming sound of his triumphant laughter to a very sullen-looking Purple Thingy. You call THAT, a hero, '... Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha....'

The Personifications had made an attempt to join in the hilarity but one icy glance from Abel had trapped their mirth in their metallic throats. The immortal foursome seemed like they had already forgotten the existence of this presumptuous human as they turned back to their recollections.

'Are you quite finished?'

Sulphur realised with a start that the voice filled with fury came from Will. This was no tone of whining, pleading frustration but one filled with the vitality of outrage.

'I SAID! ... ARE YOU QUITE FINISHED?' Will bellowed a roar of explosive anger. All conversation stopped, giving way to relaxed attentiveness. 'I'VE BEEN THROUGH HELL OVER THE LAST FEW DAYS! THROUGH HELL! RISKED MY LIFE AND MY SANITY TO GET HERE, TO STAND HERE, TO TALK TO YOU IDIOTS! NOW! I DON'T GIVE A DAMN WHO YOU ARE! I COULDN'T CARE LESS, YOU'RE GOING TO LISTEN TO ME.' Will strode, his form a throbbing mass of rage, and slammed down a business card in front of Balidare, the impact so powerful that it sent drink slopping over the immortals finest shirt as Will lent

over thundering. 'YOU'RE GOING TO LISTEN TO ME IF IT BLOODY WELL KILLS ME!', just inches from Balidare's face.

Will stood up and backed off, breathing heavily and shaking all over with exertion. Slowly and with infinite calm, Balidare produced a handkerchief and wiped off his shirt. Then as if unaware of the unbearable tension around him and as if he had all the time in the world, the Elfen drew out a comb and slowly replaced the few hairs dislodged by the human's outburst. When this was done, he carefully returned the handkerchief and comb before staring at Will for the longest time. And then, when he felt that the quivering mortal had suffered enough, he smiled; it was not a huge smile, but it was a smile.

Grendella drew up a chair.

'Sit down kid. You've earned a chat.'

'I'll be damned,' said Surd. His voice tingling with pride and relief. 'I don't know where he gets it from. But I hope it's from my side of the family.' He rounded off his appreciation with a cacophony of pleased whinnies. Sulphur said nothing. He was far, far, too gob-smacked by surprise to reply.

'Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha...' scoffed the Purple Thingy with the greatest of pleasure. This moment of triumph almost made the trip to this ridiculous system worthwhile.

A moody, "OH, SHUT UP!" was all that the Orange One could muster before vanishing in a sulking fit. Somewhere out there, there was a galaxy that was going to pay for this.

'Spoggle!', Grendella chuckled as Will finished. '...I've never heard of anything so stupid!'

'Well, I thought Heroics INC. sounded fairly dumb, but this!' Magda shook her head in wonderment.

'Do you know anything more about this place or this object they call the MADID? About its power?'

'No,' Will said frankly, unable to keep the the apology out of his voice.

'Well. I think it be a right noble endeavour. A quest. The stuff of myths and legends.' Fitch added his eager opinion only to receive a curt 'Be quiet!' from Abel as a reward for his enthusiasm.

'So, the plan is,' Balidare said thoughtfully, 'that we all go to this planet, about which we know nothing, except that it is probably highly dangerous. Then, supposing by some unlikely chance that we survive, we have to locate an object called the MADID although we have no idea of where it is or what it looks like and through-out all this, your contact with the sensible name, Queen Sharon of the Illuminated thingamy, is going to give us absolutely no help whatsoever?'

'That's about it,' Will agreed,

'And despite our combined millions of years of experience, you are going to lead us?'

'Yes.'

'Tell me, Will', the name was uttered with just a hint of vitriol, 'Can you use that extremely silly sword you carry?'

'No, Will had to admit.'

'Can you use any weapon?'

'No.'

'Can you ride?'

'No.'

'Have you ever killed anything?'

'No!'

'Do you know any forms of unarmed combat?'

Sulphur interrupted, unable to restrain himself. The impulse was just too great for his circuits.

'He knows karate, kung fu, Tai kwan do, ju-jitsu and judo...'

'Really?' Balidare was genuinely surprised.

'... by reputation.'

As the others giggled nervously, Balidare quietly, and with charming restraint, admonished the Dragon.

'I think the situation is satirical enough, my little green friend, without your input.'

Sulphur assumed a suitably contrite expression,

'Do you know any forms of unarmed combat?' Balidare patiently repeated.

'No.'

'Have you ever had any experience of leadership?'

Will glanced briefly at Sulphur but thought better of it.

'No.'

'And, you are going to lead us?'

'Yes.'

'I don't dare ask HOW?' Balidare sighed his weariest sigh and directed his next comment to Grendella. 'And you said "Spoggle" sounded stupid.'

'Well...', Grendella searched frantically for something constructive to say, 'I think he's cute.'

Balidare's response chilled them with its mocking certainty.

'I have a terrible feeling, that somehow, "Cute" is not going to be quite enough.'

The bolt of mystic energy was near the end of its Journey as it breached Earth's atmosphere and made for the planet's surface. Straight and unerring, it headed for the island that had once been called Britain, although there had been names that were far older than that. There had been many changes to this island over the years, but the unregarded mound by the lake had weathered them well, remaining as an outpost of a green and pleasant memory.

Now, the bolt struck a wide area with a terrific impact, buzzing and fizzing as the ground ravenously enveloped a feast of energy. Soon, all returned to peace and tranquillity. There was no tell-tale scorching to mark the passing of the bolt. On the surface not a blade of grass was disturbed, but, deep, deep, under the soil an incredible transformation had started to take place and life began anew.

It was amazing; that was the only word for it, "amazing". For once, Will felt happy about leaving Earth. This was adventure, this was excitement, this was meeting interesting people. He could not believe it. That the elegant woman with the pallid skin and the reddest of ruby lips was a vampire. That the grim looking figure with the flowing hair and the braided moustaches was Merlyn, THE Merlyn; it was as if all the old legends were coming to life. Incredibly, most of the old tales must then be partly true. He wanted to get Sulphur alone and overwhelm the dragon's sense of petty logic with this evidence of the mythical, to get revenge for all the years of moaning about the Crimson Pirate. But Sulphur returned his dancing gaze with an expression so immobile that Will could not tell whether he was just being diplomatically deadpan or had switched himself off. It would be just like "Sulph", to do that, to do anything to avoid being proved wrong. Will turned his mind to other matters, and did what he usually did when he became ever excited; he opened his mouth and put his foot firmly in it.

'So, Mr Balidare .'

'Just Balidare will do.'

'Balidare. Merlin is a wizard and Magda is a vampire...'

'A Vampir, there's no "e" where she comes from.'

'Sorry, a vampir, and I bet I know what you are.' If Will had not been so hyper, if he had not been speaking in such a loud voice, he would have noticed the conversation around him trailing

off. He would have registered the exchange of anxious glances between the other immortals.

'You're a dwarf.'

Finally, after he had said it, Will noticed that something was wrong. Merlyn was ashen pale, Magda was pensively hitting her lip and Grendella looked at him, a ghastly parody of a smile plastered on her face.

'A dwarf. I believe that this creature called me a dwarf,' Balidare's expression of polite curiosity was unchanged but his voice had become strange and terrifying, and his thick fingers dug into the solid surface of the table with the ease of a spoon diving into jelly.

Magda spoke placatingly.

'Balidare, you can't hurt him. He doesn't know any better.'

'Well, someone had better tell him.'

Balidare stood up, his body almost visibly churning with anger. In that moment, he was the most scary thing that Will had ever seen. The human felt his throat constrict and become as dry as the desert outside. He closed his eyes and waited for the blow to come, concentrated on standing as straight as possible. In a moment, there was the sound of a terrific impact.

Feeling no pain Will opened his eyes. Balidare had walked out through the wall. They all watched his distant figure through the new exit as he strode into a huge building; there was the sound of incredible pounding blows and the building fell over.

'He's not usually like this. He's usually the most placid of individuals.' Merlyn said apologetically.

'It's just that he's had a bad day,' agreed Magda.

'Never mind that!' Will at last recovered the power of speech, 'What did I do?'

'I think Grendella's best qualified to tell you.'

The wizard and the vampir directed Will to the petite figure seated next to him.

'I think we need a drink.'

They were alone in Surd's comforting shambles of a bedroom. Grendella drank deeply and paused to wipe the foam of the beer off her lips before speaking.

'Will, how old are you?'

'Twenty-five.'

Grendella smiled. 'I should have known, the badge?'

'What ba..'

There was something touching about Will's realisation. About the heavy blushing as he removed the hideous pink circle.

She warmed to this mortal, waiting patiently as he resumed some sense of composure,

'Will. Me and Bally are millions of years old...'

Grendella put her finger to her lips, halting Will's stream of questions.

'It's a long, long story. Too long I think sometimes, and it's a story I'm not going to go into, mainly 'cause it bores the crap outta me. One day, you can ask Bally. But it's important that you know for now, that appearances can be deceptive. What would you say I looked like?'

Will had learned a little care from recent events and his reply was tentative, 'An elf?'

'Never, ever, use that name in front of Bally, never use Bally for that matter. Use elve or elfen, it's much more polite.'

'But why should Belly, sorry, Balidare, care?'

'Because, as I said, appearances can be deceptive. Balidare, for all that outward show is a Prince of the Elfen Folk, and I'm a Princess of the Dwarfen.'

'But!'

Grendella shook her head curtly for silence. 'Like I said, it's a long story and I don't want to talk about it. However, there's one more thing I'll tell you.'

'Yes?'

'Bally hates my guts, he would dance on my grave singing "joy to the world" and "glory, glory, hallelujah" if he could, and have a bloody good time doing it. The Elfin know how to bear a grudge and there's an awful lot of wars between our peoples, far, far, too many deaths. And, on top of all that wholesome jingoistic loathing, there's a lot of private stuff as well.'

'D'you hate him?'

'Not anymore, well, not much anyway. I'd probably just sing "joy to the world" over him and forget about the other one. It's been too long. Forgive and forget I say. Nostalgia's a thing of the past. That doesn't mean that I can't wind him up as much as possible though.'

'Are you in danger?'

'From him! Not likely, not on his best day. There's not been a man born I've anything to worry about. We've avoided murdering each other for all this time. I'm sure we can get by for a while yet. Mind you, it should be interesting. We've never been on the same side before.'

'What if he won't forgive me? You said he can bear a grudge.'

'Yes, but let's get things in perspective. He bears a grudge after aeons of war between our peoples. There's nothing that you can say or do that's going to needle him half as much as one micro-second of my presence. Don't worry, I really, really, hate to say it, but the pixie's okay when you let him be, but,' her tone became threatening, 'if you EVER tell him I said that, I'll slice off your janglies and feed them to the Crows.' After a

brief pause for dramatic effect, she continued brightly, 'Anyway, that's all I wanted to say. We'd best get back downstairs.'

As they left the room, Grendella lingered for a swig of beer and a burp of significant proportions.

'One last thing.'

Will turned and the dwarf princess graced him with the sort of radiant elfen-looking smile that would not have looked out of place on a mystical Madonna.

'Don't mention his looks. He's a bit touchy about them. It's all those years of "short" jokes.'

As Will re-entered the bar, he seemed oddly muted. The others left him alone, attributing the human's distance to the shock of surprising information.

It was true that Will felt strange, he was not sure whether it was the first taste of alcohol that had been to blame, but his body felt different. It felt light and restless and there was the oddest fluttery feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He found his gaze drawn to Grendella, ordering at the bar, found himself picturing her smile, hearing her voice, smelling the slight earthy odour that clung to her clothing. At last, Sulphur became concerned about this lengthy abstraction and came to his side.

'Is everything all right Will?'

'Everything's wonderful' Will answered softly, his gaze not shifting from the bar, a sappy smile fixed upon his already sappy face.

'Are you drunk?'

'I think so.'

Will Prince was in love.

The buildings in Shepard City had survived the perpetual dust storms, had survived the miners and had survived the neglect that had followed them. Despite the encroachment of Mars and the ravages caused by the Shepard plants (which had seemed to colonise the city bearing the name of their re-discoverer in epidemic numbers), and despite the deterioration of disuse, most of the structures looked set to stand for millennia. Some however, had had their spans brutally cut short. Balidare in ten minutes of fury had done more damage than a century of Martian nature.



He worked out his rage on another solid victim, those bulky dwarf-like hands, built for forcing their way through solid rock, were completely unharmed and he made short work of the crumbly red Martian brick. Soon, he stood back, pausing just long enough to watch the building start to topple before seeking out another. Again those heavy hands rose and fell, for once the carefully neat being inside the thick gnarled body had abandoned its protests, dust piled upon the fine fabrics, as all was sacrificed to the salving oblivion of action.

Merlyn watched for a while in utter bewilderment, watched the relentless punishment both internal and external, sensing the restless torment that motivated both of them. This was not the Balidare he had known, the Balidare of songs and great legends, the teacher, peace-maker and just law-giver of his people. This was a far darker and more worrying persona. The wizard had lived a long time in comparison with the fleeting frenzied moment that seemed to constitute the mass of human life, but he could not begin to imagine what it would be like to suffer the burden of millions of years, the strains that must be entailed. He felt that, for his friend, those pressures were becoming too much, that the tremendous spirit radiating throughout that compact figure was on the verge of burning out, and that Balidare teetered dangerously on the edge of madness. Merlyn knew that, if it was within the limits of any power that he or his magic possessed to stop it, he would not let such a thing be.

Balidare dispatched another building and moved on. The quick senses of the necromancer noticed a slight change in his friend's movements, the a minute abatement in his anger. As those terrifying hands began their work anew, Merlyn spoke.

'Why, old friend?'

'Why, Merlyn? Because it makes me feel better, that's why.'

'Not the buildings. Why the anger?'

Balidare stopped his demolition and faced him. A coating of red dust and an almost negligible rising and falling of that powerful chest, the only physical testimony to the devastation that he had caused.

'Meeting a dwarf again and especially that dwarf. It's hard. Every minute piece of my being screams with hatred. I long to kill her and yet, there's been too many years, too much death. My mind's so tired of death, of the death of others, I'd not see her come to harm.'

'I never saw the dwarf kind in our day.'

'I kept them out. I came to you, as I came to Mars, for escape. Did you not wonder why I stayed so long with that backward people you adopted? Why I so readily lent my magic to yours? I needed that tranquillity, the relative freedom from hatred, so much.'

'This,' Merlyn indicated the chaos around them, "is not just due to one dwarf,"

"In a sense you're wrong. You don't know how wrong. That one

dwarf is the reason I'm here. That one dwarf stopped me from going home, as I stopped her. Our enmity is not just a matter of race. It's personal.'

'But?' Merlyn knew that this was only half an answer.

'But, yes, in a way you're right. It's not just her; it's the times. You can't know. You've slept through it all and I haven't had the chance to show you. Your age was so much simpler. It was tribe against tribe and if things looked like getting serious I could mediate.'

'Have things changed that much?'

'You can't believe how much. In the old days, despite their squabbles, and mostly thanks to your influence, I was almost ready to credit these humans with potential, but since! Merlyn, you can't begin to imagine what a mess they've made. They've raped the planet in the name of commerce, left hardly a branch or a twig. You'd weep to see grand Stonehenge as I last saw it, covered in moronic graffiti. And their stupidity didn't just extend to their environment. You never had to deal with the blight that the word "technology", inflicted. The weapons of destruction, the petty selfishness and ever growing impatience.'

'And what of this human?' Merlyn indicated the bar. 'The one who is to lead us.'

'Lead us... US! I've never heard anything so ridiculous. He embodies all the faults of his age. The whining self-absorption. The ME, ME, ME. He moans about COMS, but doesn't realise that they're the best thing that ever happened to his vile people. They provide shelter, food, entertainment and control. Now he knows a little of hunger, a speck of hardship but he's not prepared for what's to come.'

'Are any of us? Was Kinata?'

'Kinata was special, Kinata was a great leader.'

'Kinata was fallible, as am I, as are you. We all have to learn.'

'That's what annoys me most about Humans. They don't learn.'

'And the Elfen do? You still hate Grendella. You destroyed as much of your surroundings as humans could, you told me long ago that you almost completely destroyed the planet. Look at this mess around us. It's hardly constructive.'

Merlyn could see his argument being taken in, could see his friend's body relax as the anger and the tension contained within ebbed away.

'Yes, I'm sorry for this, we've both had better reunions.' He exhaled heavily, letting out some more of his merciless frustrations.

'What do you think we should do now?'

Merlyn had been giving that very question some thought.

'I think that we should give the lad a chance, that we should go to SPOGGLE. It can't be worse than your description of Wizard Springs. We both need an escape, a new beginning.'

Balidare led the way back to the bar.

'Come on then. We've got to start somewhere, but don't expect

me to be nice to the gnome.'

On the far side of a city there was a wall that was in sore need of an escape or at least, a new beginning. Even the punishment inflicted on its fellow structures seemed preferable to the unceasing verbal attack that it was under. Erasmus Denton would not, or could not, stop talking.

Just my luck, thought the wall bitterly. All these years of silence. I finally get a voice and now I can't get a word in edgeways. Why couldn't that Balidare just have hit me?

Consumed by self-pity the wall started to cry big red muddy tears. Denton just continued, on and on and on; he was used to his interviewees weeping.

Abel Surd was facing a crisis. For years everything had been stable, boring but stable, and now this boy Will had happened along. Except that, he wasn't a boy. He was twenty-five years old and about to start a huge adventure.

Okay, he wasn't much to look at, even the first generation Quasimodo model looked like more of a leader, and by all accounts there was nothing in heredity, Will couldn't even change a plug. But he was flesh and blood and that was partly the cause of Surd's confusion. Abel was no longer sure what exactly he was anymore. He was part-machine, he had a machine family already, binding ties of kinship and love that attached him to the Personifications. He owed them his life and his feelings for them were not just those of gratitude, They were his children.

He realised that this moment was a pivotal moment of decision: either the human or the Personification offspring would have to be let go. If he went with Will, presuming, of course that he could, then it was unlikely that he would be coming back at his age. He certainly could not take his motley mechanised family with him, nor could he bear the thought of possibly seeing them hurt. And yet, how much would goodbye hurt them?, and if he did stay, what would be the future? Another few years of boredom and card games and then a small plot of red sand or maybe a clear preservative case like Will's mother. Would they change Ma's Bar to Mausoleum Bar? It would be appropriate, lying forever surrounded by his inexhaustible

heirs and by encroaching decay.

The thought of Dee Prince drew his eyes to her final resting place. Still, perhaps he felt more man than machine, tenderly touching the locket that contained a lock of her hair. It was a sentimental old-fashioned gesture and he had always been a sucker for sentiment, he had vowed to take care of the kid if he ever showed up, like Dee had always said he would. That promise spurred him on to a hard choice; he would have to go to Spoggle. There was so much to tell the lad that only he could tell. Surd looked long at the family he was soon to leave, tears welling up in his good eye. It was going to be a hard parting.

The impact of Sir Bastable's mailed palm between his shoulder-blades sent Surd's voice box into a symphony of equine fury.

'Squire, don't dawdle you lazy wretch, polish my best armour. We're going on a quest.'

On the other hand, thought Surd as he straightened his smarting back, maybe the parting wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Isn't it about time you started to do something?" the Orange Thingy belched indignantly.

"Just a little while longer," the Purple One returned across the spaceways, hiding its own impatience behind amusement at the restlessness of the other.

"It's catching, is it?" Orange sniffed sulphurously.

"What's catching?" If Purple had eyebrows he would have creased them in puzzlement making them look like a colony of caterpillars with a bellyache.

"The lack of action from these creatures."

Actually, the Orange Thingy was wrong, a vote had been taken amongst the biological inhabitants of Ma's Bar and a demand for action had been unanimous. It was not much of an action to be fair, but all felt that it was most pressing. After being substantially fed and watered, Will Prince had been consigned to the bath and Abel had provided some new apparel. The utility suit had outlived its usefulness.

Will luxuriated in a supply of water, provided by the recycling ingenuity of Surd, a liquid that did not run out in under a minute. His heavily sodden hands toyed with a rubber duck as he wondered if it was a family heirloom.

Sulphur lay slumped in the sink, silent and thoughtful, like Will, toying with an image of the past. The Dragon realised with some disquiet that the relationship with his human charge was about to be transformed beyond all recognition. For years, Man and Dragon had lived in a cramped space getting on each other's nerves, yet basically dependent on one another for company. Even Sulphur had to admit that, however much the COMS domestic appliance systems might benefit mankind, they could not be relied upon for companionship.

That was what he and Will had shared, companionship; mutual dependence and enforced toleration of each other's foibles, within sensible limits of course. They had been all that each other had had. Now all that would change; it was a time for new experiences, a time for these others. The dragon's circuits were working overtime at producing sensations approximating jealousy. Sulphur's role in life had suddenly disappeared. The others would share Will's confidences, they would have his friendship, his habitual whining, his pettiness, his general nerdishness...

And what is there to be for me? The dragon's answer came in letters writ large across the pathways of his XXI7 Magatronian brain: FREEDOM. Suddenly, Sulphur felt cheerful again.

Magda and Grendella had taken their drinks outside for a last look at the Martian scenery.

'Bally did some damage, didn't he?'

'Not as much as one of your rock concerts.'

Grendella smiled, genuinely pleased by this mention of her unmusical past.

'You're too kind,' She watched as Magda took a sip of the particularly lethal cocktail. 'It always surprised me.'

'What?' Magda asked.

'That you neck-biters ate and drunk as normal.'

'I'm a big fan, but even I couldn't stand "blood, blood, glorious blood" on its own for nine hundred years.'

'Suppose not.' Grendella conceded 'How've things been?'

'Okay...tedious. This has come along at just the right time. I was almost down to the freeze-dried stuff.'

'Mars isn't the place it once was.'

'Nowhere is the place it once was.'

They raised their glasses together, toasting the dead red landscape.

'To new horizons.'

'Seeeee the shanty towns on Alpha 8 .... da da da da da da... with a dinner plate... da da da da da da... while you wait, you have come for freeeee.'

When Will started to sing, Sulphur decided to give his new-found liberty an early test-run. His leaving had nothing to do with the fact that the human's voice was as tuneless as an un-oiled engine, or that the acoustics were terrible, that was what the dragon told himself as he fled Will's neatly tiled concert hall. In reality, Will's voice was so awful that you would have to be stone deaf to be able to enjoy it, and even then, the odd fluctuations caused by the piercing soundwaves would probably give you a headache.

Surd was seated at the bottom of the stairs looking meditative and thoughtful, or so it seemed; it was difficult to tell with the constant neighing and the shielding effect provided by the large area of scrap metal that covered his face, Surd was certainly not so absorbed that he did not notice Sulphur's arrival.

'Is the kid alone?' The Martian asked.

'If by kid, you mean Will, no, he's not alone. He has his voice with him. Unfortunately,' came the cryptic response.

'Do you mind if I see him?'

'Not at all. Do you have any COMS 350?' Sulphur asked for a brand of oil specially blended for Personifications.

'The door in the corner. Third drawer on the left in the desk.'

As Surd made his way upstairs, taking care to retract the skate wheels in his shoes, Sulphur headed for the door indicated, one thick taloned paw feeling back between his scaly shoulder-blades. With all that had happened it was hardly surprising that he was feeling a little rundown and tense. However, what he saw when he opened the door to Surd's workshop dramatically increased his tension.

The more advanced Personifications, were superior to the first generation models in many ways, one of these was an increased sensitivity to their surroundings. So this room, that would not even make a first generation werewolf turn a hair, brought Sulphur

to a condition closely approximating nausea combined with quivering panic.

To the dragon, this room, with its naked mechanised body parts scattered carelessly and piled to the rafters, was an obscenity, a charnel house. It was as if Will had walked into a room piled high with dismembered Human corpses. Fighting valiantly against the strident protestations of disgust coursing through his circuits, Sulphur made his way to the indicated drawer and pulled it open. Inside was the oil and also something truly terrible. Sulphur knew, as he plucked up the oil and made for the door with his orbs closed, rebelling against the sight, that he would visualise the pieces of that carefully dissected Magatronian brain in the drawer for some time to come. Taking care to avoid Fitch, who was in full boast about his plans to his first generation peers, Sulphur found a quiet corner to calm down his jangled insides. He took a large swig of the oil and let his internal diffuser work its magic, sending an almost orgasmic stream of revitalising liquid to the points where it was needed most. He knew that whatever its curative qualities, no amount of the stimulating fuel could ever fully erase the horrors that he had just seen.

Oblivious to the damage that his workshop had inflicted upon Sulphur's delicately balanced psyche, Abel Surd was in the middle of pitching his decision to his son.

'You can't go!' Will exploded, sending a cascade of suds onto the floor, 'You're too old.'

'Old. What do you mean, old?'

'You're over a hundred.'

'I'm a hundred and seven. So what?'

'Well, you're old, then.'

'Have you been listening to what they've been saying down there, kid?'

'About what?'

'About their ages. Merlyn's well over a thousand easy, Magda's a bit coy but she's got to be loads of centuries, and I don't want to think about the Dwarf and Elfen double act. If those two decided to claim an old-age pension, it would bankrupt a small solar system.'

'They're different,' Will stubbornly stuck out his lower lip. Such tactics may have worked on Sulphur, but it was soon clear that they were not going to work on his father.

'Special.'

'How are they special?' Surd looked almost as offended as he sounded.

'They're still young, still fit.'

Surd thought about this for a moment.

'Can they do this?' He asked as he casually moved to the sink and with his metallic arm, carelessly ripped it from the wall before he proceeded to crush the porcelain into a powder, whose consistency, if Will had seen any to make the comparison, would have shown a marked resemblance to flour.

'Can they do this?' Surd asked the question matter-of-factly as he turned his attention to the geyser of water, roaring forth from the brutalised remains of the pipes, where the sink had been. He held out his mechanised hand and with a flick of the wrist, a laser beam shot forth from a concealed aperture and melted the pipes until the flow of water was closed off.

Downstairs, the sounds of the bathroom commotion caused limited comment.

'If he kills the lad, do we still have to go?' asked Merlyn.

'Don't worry. I think throwing things about the place is how the family shows affection. I used to visit when his mother was alive.' Balidare observed absently, before returning his attention back to the enthralled audience of Personifications that had gathered to listen to his tale. Merlyn silently noted, with approval, that some things about his old friend had not changed.

'So! Merlyn here, the great and mystic one, walked up to the emperor Claudius, bold as you please, all the while, completely ignoring the rest of the expeditionary force, and said...'

'Or can they do this?'

Up in the bathroom things were starting to get silly. In place of the expected small wheels, spikes had appeared out of the soles of Abel's shiny feet and he was now walking back and forth across the ceiling.

'Okay! Come down. You've made your point.'

Surd returned to the floor, secretly glad that Will had called a halt. Abel had been on the verge of running out of impressive hidden gadgets. He had trained the Personifications well, they had done a fine, if somewhat over-imaginative job of work when they had built his limbs. Personally, Surd thought that the Isaac Asimov model was to blame for some of his limbs more eccentric uses.



They should never have let him check the blueprints.

Will too was thinking of the Personifications. If he did take the old man, it was lucky that they did not need a bathroom, because there was no way that the one he was seated in would be usable in the near future.

Nearer and nearer, the great bolt of necromantic energy powered its way across the heavens. On course for Mars.

"What's that?" The Purple Thingy took note of the blue blazing phenomenon.

"Our lives passing us by," offered the Orange One, its horrid delivery dripping with heavy irony.

"Stop moaning. You're always moaning."

"I'm bored."

"You're always bored. Half the civilisations in the Cosmos have suffered because of your boredom."

"I can't help it if life's more boring today."

"When was it ever not boring?"

"There used to be loads of great things happening. All those gods zipping about the place creating things."

"They wouldn't have had to zip about if you hadn't destroyed things as fast as they created them. You were bored then, too."

"Rubbish!"

"Face it. You're a vandal."

The Orange One did not respond. Preferring to lapse into a huge sulk. It should have known that Purple would not understand; those mauve brains did not have the space to hold a sense of history or nostalgia. But of course, Its Orange intellect was far superior; It knew the truth, and the truth was just that: "Thingy's were not what they used to be."

Now that all the bathing and decision-making seemed over, everyone assembled around the biggest table in the bar.

'I call this first meeting of the executive committee of Heroics INC. to order. Will Prince, Chairman, presiding.' Will said, looking suitably solemn.

'What a pillock!' whispered Magda.

'Yes, but he's our pillock, and we're stuck with him,' hissed Grendella through a clenched smile.

Merlyn was confused, 'Where does he get all this from.'

'Bad genetics probably.' Balidare suggested.

'COMS Educational Video,' Sulphur provided a serious answer.

Merlyn's confusion deepened. 'Video! What's that?'

Will was starting to enjoy his officious role. Being businesslike seemed like a good idea. 'Please, Ladies and Gentlemen, Order.'

'I'll have fifteen cans of seriously strong lager, said Grendella.

'I'll have a new chairman,' Balidare requested.

'Please! This is serious,' pleaded Will.

'I know, that's why I asked for a new chairman.'

After the groups amusement at their inglorious leader's expense had subsided, Will stopped pouting and continued.

'The first thing is that we need to know who's going. I think a show of hands would be best.' There was a polite dragon-ish cough. 'Or talons,' Will conceded.

Everyone round the table shrugged together, as if choreographed, then raised an appendage in the air. At the rear of the clustered Personifications, no one in the room noticed as an armoured arm indicated its commitment to the quest. Up in space, a name was added to a many brained, mauvely mental list.

'Balidare, Grendella, Sulphur, Magda, Father and Me,' Will showed off his memory for names.

'An elfen that looks like a dwarf, a dwarfen that looks like an elve, a midget dragon, a decrepit Martian, an odd-looking vampire and a fool.' The aged J.R.R Tolkien model whispered incredulously, 'What is this? Fantasy pick 'n' mix? They don't put quests together like they did in my day.'

'Nor mine,' Sir Bastable buffed pompously in agreement although he had absolutely no idea what his fellow machine was talking about.

'Well, what's next?' Merlyn asked the question for all of them.

Will was just on the verge of admitting that he did not know, when the Purple Queen arrived.

'Bon voyage,' she said.

Suddenly, before anyone could react, the board, and first meeting of Heroics Inc. were encased in a rather fetching lilac cloud.

Abel Surd had just a split second to think: "Not like this, not now. I haven't even had a chance to say"..., before all the potential adventurers disappeared.

'Goodbye.' Surd completed his thought aloud.

'Why, valet,' Sir Bastable gave him a hearty thump of encouragement, 'where art thou going?'

'What are you doing here?'

'What are any of us doing here?' Balidare voiced the words that they were all thinking.

The combined membership of Heroics INC. had not known what to expect, but as a collective group there was a definite feeling of something wrong. They were all crammed into an enclosed space that made Will's apartment look roomy, around them ranged archaic consoles, flashing lights and dust covered metallic surfaces.

'Welcome!' The word was uttered in a number of different voices. Not that anyone noticed. With the exception of Grendella, they all heard just one voice, saw one face, on the huge grime-encrusted monitor screen in the corner.

Will and Surd saw his mother, Balidare, his father, Sir Bastable saw his warhorse, etc. Once again, a certain tangerine-tinged malcontent had customised its message to meet its target audience. A kidnapped audience.

'This is not Spoggle. You are in an old pirate satellite station positioned beyond Mars. Your colleagues cannot hear this message. It is a secret between us. Do not tell them what you have seen. Do not trust the Purple Queen. She is evil and hopes to dupe you, to get the MADID for her horrible schemes. Once you are deposited on Spoggle, I will not be able to help you. But, please, please, do not give the MADID to Sharon. I can show you a better way. With the help of the good forces I represent, I can bring you safely back here and then to whatever time and place in the universe that you wish. We can be together again if you want. We can have the chance to start again.'

The monitor went blank. There was an embarrassed silence in the room. No one wanted to speak for a moment of what, or who, they had seen and before anyone got the chance to return to curious normality, they were all turned into energy particles and thrown across the universe.

Buck Chandler had been through a hectic few days. The Tolgan Empire had launched a powerful new offensive. This time they posed a threat, not only to the safety of his beloved Princess Quarg and her people on Quantag Maxus, but to the fate of the entire universe.

Fortunately, there had been one Star-Corps major who had been more than equal to the challenge. A mega-modest, square-jawed hero and all-round good guy, who had stood up courageously to an

entire empire and came away victorious. As he powered his way to new and even more incredible adventures, Chandler allowed himself a moment of introspection, a fleeting memory of the previous day's encounter designed to prove that he was not just a shallow muscle-bound oaf, that he could sometimes also think.

For as long as there was history, as long as man cherished truth, justice and the Star-Corps way, the battle of Balabong 7 would be remembered. The situation had seemed hopeless: a million gleaming evil-looking ships, the pride of the Tolgan invasion force, each crewed by twenty eight crack Tolgan death-troopers had looked set to sweep their way across the universe, wreaking havoc and devastation as they at last established the domination of the Tolgan master race; a domination that looked destined to last a billion years.

When all had seemed totally beyond hope, when most of the planetary systems in the area had cashed in their insurance policies and gone on one final spree, it had happened, the miracle, the coming of the hero. With suicidal bravado, the strata-charger Warspite had roared out of the heavens, throwing down a challenge to the massed and menacing Tolgan ranks. A duel to the death.

It had been hairy work. But a million-to-one seemed manageable odds for a top-notch Star-Corps major and his "old crate" had performed well. Twenty-eight million Tolgans had met their maker in the space of five minutes, the universe had been saved, and Chandler had even had time to stop by for tea and crispy biscuits on Quantag Maxus. There, he had been presented, for the fifty-sixth time, with the ultimate decoration that the Quantagians could bestow; the Titranium book-token of Martamis the Second. However, more important than the civic presentation to the love-struck manly tongue-tied major was the award of a maidenly kiss from the three sets of lips of Princess Quarg, and a look of loving admiration from those five twinkling long-lashed eyes. He knew that one day he would make her his bride. But the delights of matrimony were for the future. For now, the Major had to content himself with cold showers and the demanding regime of a galactic legend. Somewhere out there, there were still billions of adventures with the name, "CHANDLER", stencilled in huge golden letters all over them.

Suddenly, Buck was called back to the present. His square-jaws tightened on his sensibly low nicotine cigar. There should not be anything in this sector, but the Warspite's systems registered something horrible. Slowly, defences up, the Warspite swooped towards the large and ominous mass indicated, until finally, Chandler could see it, the whole five hundred parsecs wide, mass of it. The most nasty and villainous space-station in creation, a Tolgan "Mean-ness Star". The ultimate weapon of his deadly enemies, it had the capacity to wipe out entire Galaxies with a single blast of its smallest lazer-canon. That was the bad news. Luckily for creation, the good news was that Buck Chandler was on the case and had a plan. The Meaness Star was fortunately positioned just above a major sun. Chandler was going to attempt the impossible; he was going to strike the Tolgan ship a glancing blow with the Warspite, sending it

on an off-balanced course into that sun.

It was a solemn moment, Chandler gave a last loving look at the photo of Princess Quarg, the one taken with the heavy-duty fright-proof lens. Then he gently pressed the button marked "blaze-jets" and zoomed with amazing speed towards his target. The five million Tolgans aboard, each involved in some nefarious awful scheme, never knew what hit them. Before a single shot could be loosed they had plunged into the sun and met their firey doom. Back on their homeworld, To1gan-Nebulon, recruitment for the space services was going to suffer a severe setback. Thirty-three million Tolgans had died in two days; that was an awful lot of pensions for widows and orphans. The Tolgans would have to try and invade territory to pay for it all. Buck Chandler had been victorious again.

This is all a very roundabout way of saying that the bonkers auto-piloting mechanism, located in the front half of the wrecked Mars transport, had continued on its way, managing, in the split second that the members of Heroics INC. were hurled across the Cosmos, to crash into a certain pirate satellite station, sending the return staging post promised by the Orange Thingy, hurteling into Jupiter and thence into several thousand small pieces. Another, seemingly less disastrous, consequence of the impact was that the Mars transport slipped into the temporary hole left in space by the passage of the adventurers and was likewise tossed across eternity.

Approaching Ashton, Iowa : Early 21st Century, October.

The Judge at their second trial had seemed to have only two options with regard to the hapless Casper and Blossom Titwilleger. He could bring back hanging, or he could try burning them at the stake. Fortunately for the reluctant visitors from Iowa, a gentlemen from the Home Office had intervned at the request of the Titwillegers British law firm, "Snatchet, Grabbet & Scarper Q.C." The Home Office Rep had pointed out that a public execution in Leicester Square of two tourists might possibly cause some damage to the reputation of the British travel industry and thereby harm the country's balance of payments. The Judge, much against his will, had been prevailed upon to consider a second attempt at deportation, adding an impassioned, "...AND STAY OUT!" to the normal sentencing formula. This time, the U.K Government had taken no chances, and had sent the Titwillegers home by Royal Navy Destroyer, handcuffed and in leg-irons, with an armed S.A.S escort. For Casper, in spite of the discomfort he had been through, it was all made worthwhile as, released from his restraints, he made his way down the gangplank,

solemnly kissed the New York ground and mouthed with heart-felt relief, "God Bless America."

Not that the U.S. had been any more kind than England in those first few days. Admittedly, The Statue of Liberty had not thrown her arms up in horror as they passed by, but the stoic operatives from the F.B.I had not been ecstatic about their return to the shores of their Homeland. Casper and Blossom had provided their, by now, polished response, "We don't know", to all questions and had been finally, if grudgingly, released to find that the tabloid editors were possibly the only people in the country who were pleased to see them.

"The Wacky Wizard of Iowa", as he had been dubbed by leading journals up and down the land, sat in brooding silence, watching the scenery pass by, hidden by a huge and unlikely looking beard, Casper was on a train bound for home. He knew that whatever the eventual outcome of his recent adventures, one thing was certain; he would never fly or go overseas, again.

Distantly, Casper listened to the radio, scanning the news. Had he been right to insist that they travel separately? That she take the bus? He felt guilty but safer. There was no news of wildly inexplicable traffic accidents to be heard. But when one was obviously dealing with a Witch, a brimstone-blackened servant of the Anti-Christ such as Blossom, it was wise to take precautions. Weeks of incarceration had made things clear, there was no other possible explanation. Blossom Titwilleger, bearer of his name and love of his life, was a foul sorceress. He did not know what to do first, exorcise her or divorce her. He knew that he was going to do one of them as soon as he got back to Ashton.

Blossom Titwilleger had managed, with the help of a baleful glare acquired after many years of matrimony, to get a seat on the Greyhound to herself. She managed to radiate a scornful indifference to her situation that she was in no way feeling. Casper had always been different; he seemed to like stuffing dead things a little too much, but now he had gone totally crazy. There was no other explanation for the way her husband was behaving. It was plain weird. He would not come near her, jumped when she spoke and the rest of the time stood around praying, mouthing incantations and crossing himself. She knew that brother Wilbur did that sort of stuff, but at least he made a good living at it, never let it interfere with daily life. Now, she did not know what to do, her life felt like her furniture; transformed, scattered and thrown out of routine. Casper and she had been just normal folks. Now they were treated like some sort of alien life form. It was all very confusing.

The bus swerved wildly like her thoughts, having picked that precise moment to get a puncture. Whilst the driver was outside, cursing his fate and the mother of every bus mechanic he could think of, Blossom made her escape.

She just slowly got off the bus and walked away. There had to be more to life than this, and she was going to find it.

After everyone disappeared there was a moments silence. The notable, the great and the ingrates, all were silent. They had lived with Surd, with his bad jokes and general bad habits for decades. His voice, his posture, his actions were central to their existence, Now, he was gone, without even saying goodbye. They all felt a little afraid. Even Al Capone's voice had lost some of its usual roughness as he spoke,

'Any of youse guys wanna play cards?'

'What's the point?' asked Richard the Third.

COMS, in an attempt at historical fairness, had provided the medieval monarch with a hump that constantly appeared and disappeared. Now, the undulations of Richard's back were the only movements in the room. Scarface Al could not answer.

What was the point? They were entertainment models with no one to entertain anymore. They had no purpose. They all decided to wait for something to happen, about two minutes later, something did.

The great blue bolt of necromantic energy scared through the Martian air and crashed thunderously into the centre of the bar. The blue light, changed shade, great fizzing charges of violet skipped across the ceiling, sensing, searching. Then the light began to wane. The shapes of figures gradually became discernible, glowing eerily, detaching themselves from one another, becoming individual. At last, the light abruptly vanished, depositing its newly shimmering cargo.

They were an awesome sight. An ancient culture, lost for over a thousand years, living again. Rugged men, powerful women dressed in rich plaids, with plaited hair and blue tattoos, had kept an appointment, coming armed to the teeth, just in case. Slowly, suspiciously, they parted, keeping their ancient and beautifully

lethal weapons ready for use, weapons whose effectiveness was proven by the human heads that hung from their costumes.

After a while, a space cleared among the visitors and a woman strode forth, their leader. This woman almost outdid Queen Sharon for grandeur. It was fortunate that the personifications had been exposed to the side effects of Merlyn's linguistic spell, for the tongue that she spoke was long dead.

'These are my people. Merlyn summoned us.'

Wyatt Earp, who was nearest, spoke up for his personified compatriots.

'Howdy, folks! We're sure happy to entertain friends of Merlyn.'

One of Sir Bastable's first-generation cronies stepped forward, hand out-stretched, smiling as he spoke.

'They call me Lancelot du Lac. Pleased to meet you.'

The visitor did not take the offered hand.

'My name's Kinata. Where's Merlyn? Are we too late?' She said.

"Where are they?" The Purple Thingy hated tardiness, especially when it suspected that there was an orange tentacle involved in it somewhere. The Orange Thingy, did its best considering its gruesome appearance, to look vaguely innocent. Once again, the Purple Thingy tried communication with Will's sword and once again there was no reply.

"Where are they?"

The Purple Thingy impatiently saved up its speculations on the whereabouts of its hired heroes. Instead, it turned its acid-dripping eyeballs onto the vast surface that was more than equal to even a Thingy's vision. Spoggle was certainly impressive, in an extraordinary kind of way. It was huge, massive, tremendous; quite simply the largest planetary mass in the Universe, or one of them. There were actually eight such spheres scattered throughout existence. All equally mind-boggling in scale, all exactly the same in size, down to the nearest micromillimeter, all a rather dull opaque shade of grey.

Whatever else the creators of Spoggle had thought about, it had not been providing a brightly decorative touch to this area of creation. No planet or planets were so mysterious as this vast drab sphere, none knew what happened on its surface, what trials, what dangers. Not even the combined efforts of a convention of multi-colour Thingies' would dare to breach its secrets. Many had gone beyond that grey outer atmosphere, in search of the MADID or the strange glory that attends a discoverer. None had returned.



Despite, or perhaps because of, the absence of factual information, myths had sprung up, Galactic gossip had flourished and no legend was more potent than that of the MADID and its powers. No one knew what it looked like, but everyone knew that the MADID could do anything. Perhaps it could even explain the riddle of the planet's name. The Purple One thought. "Spoggle", the word was said to be a statement; popularly believed to be a profound but indecipherable comment on the nature of life in the universe, yet since it matched no known tongue, no one had ever been able to translate it. Spoggle; the name was like everything else about the place, an enigma and chief amongst all its unanswerable questions was just who had created it or its seven identical copies?

Once the universe had been full of Gods. It was as if someone had opened an academy for existence engineers and everyone had qualified at once. All wanting to go out and try their new powers of life, death and creation on the poor unfortunates invented as play-things for their amusement. Thousands of these Gods had vied with each other to show their talents, and more and more unlikely races and worlds had been called forth to exhibit some imagined refinement or piece of deified one-upmanship.

The Thingys had known many of these gods personally and had tried to avoid their pretentious arty posing whenever possible. But none that they had met had ever claimed responsibility for Spoggle. Spoggle seemed to have always been there, before anything else, when all was just darkness or nothingness, the eight grey worlds spun ponderously in space. Spoggle's mysterious creators, like all the other universal creative artistes had long disappeared, but perhaps their fate was something more than a retirement home for clapped out Gods, with endless supplies of hot-cocoa available and interminable arguments over who had won the latest board game. There had to be more than that to the creators (or creator) of Spoggle. It was obvious that they were much more powerful than any showy run-of-the-mill deity. Maybe the human and his companions would find some clue to their location, which brought the Thingy back to its original question.

"Where are they?"

Aldershot, England: Early 21st Century, September.

'Where are they? That's what I'd like to know.' Cecil Bland was once again venting his petty self-righteous fury for an unlistening audience of one.

'Where's who, dear?' Primrose Bland did not let her attention

wander from the Bible she held in her hand, "The Official - Church of mystic Enlightenment Via the Fundamental Freakout and the Love of Jesus: Sourcework of Spiritual Peace". The five hundred dollar deluxe bound edition had been a personal gift from Wilbur Prince and had come complete with addendum detailing his thoughts on an upbeat interpretation of the Hereafter. Not for the first time, Primrose touched the hand-writing on the fly leaf with trembling hands and a feeling of reverent tenderness, not many people could claim to have a personally autographed edition of the Bible, signed by a contributor to the good book. Primrose did not care that Wilbur's contribution came centuries after any other, because for Primrose, Wilbur was greatness personified. She felt that what he had to say was of far more interest than some stuffy old apostle. Meeting Wilbur had altered Primrose's life, although some parts of that life remained obstinately unchangeable.

'They're not a who; they're a what.'

'What's a what, dear?'

'Traditional, good, old fashioned moral values. Where are they?'

Cecil had more reason than most to ask the question. Nothing, in his rigidly brought-up background, had prepared him for the events set in motion by his decision to swap homes with the Titwillegers. He had half expected to come home and find incantations written in blood over the lounge and the remains of a sacrificed goat on the kitchen table. Instead, thankfully, things about the home had remained as reassuringly nondescript as when they left. A detailed police search of the American's luggage had offered up no reading matter more dark and satanic than "The Taxidermist", quarterly.

Of course, the fact that the dreaded Casper and Blossom had not ruined his home did not mean that no damage had been caused. As far as Cecil was concerned they had ruined his life. The publicity had made things very difficult at the "Ministry of Ag and Fish", he had been called to account for his actions by that oily twerp of a Minister in person. It had not been a pleasant meeting; as far as the civil service was concerned, Cecil Bland had been implicated and tarnished by his inexplicable involvement in, what had nearly become a major diplomatic incident.

Problems at work though, were only the half of it. He was persona non grata at the golf club, had been black-balled at the Conservative club, and had been told point-blank that he had lost all hope of ever becoming a mason. It was a sign of the times, the disintegration of moral standards, standards of decent Britishness which had eroded to the point of extinction as far as Bland was concerned. It was probably something to do with the importation of burger bars and racy American films all those years ago.

To make things worse, the nightmare consequences of his holiday choice showed no signs of diminishing. The news had been announced eagerly of the disappearance of Blossom Titwilleger. Conspiracy theorists already pointed to her assassination by British Security

Services or the CIA covert operations unit. Both organisations vigorously denied their involvement, a fact that only increased the general public's suspicions and the media's appetite for sensation.

"IS THIS MAN BLOSSOM'S LOVER?" The morning headlines had screamed, featuring a picture of Cecil Bland that looked distinctly unerotically. His family had not seemed to bother about the revelations. Primrose had dismissed thoughts of her husband having a lover with a level of amusement that had done nothing for his ego. Even little Camilla had been unsupportive, hardly stirring from her copious writings, her scrawls bound for the attention of yet another Prince family member, that peculiar youngster called Sulphur.

The whole world, or rather, the whole of Cecil Bland's world, was going mad. It was time for action, for a true Brit to defend his hearth, his home and his livelihood. Cecil Bland was not going to take this lying down. Drastic measures were called for.

KAAAABOOOMM!!!

The energy bolt that hit the spaceship, thoughtfully provided by the Purple Thingy, had looked suspiciously orange. The Purple One dismissed it from its mind, just contenting itself with a long awaited arrival.

It was all very well for the Thingys to get impatient, but the adventurers had covered an unimaginable distance. It was unsurprising that they were feeling somewhat travel-fatigued as they resumed their physical shape, vital bits of their reformed anatomies felt as if they had been tossed round more than a grain of rice in a Wok.

The ship's bridge was hugely impressive, the latest in spacecraft design by one of the few benighted races that needed this laborious means of transport, a mixture of the technical and the homely. For every hardworking bank of flashing lights, there was a potted plant or some other personal touch. This was not how ships looked in films. There was none of the sterile gleaming neatness of some movie vessels or the lived-in depressing grunginess of others. All was spic-and-span, looking slightly like a suburban cottage owned by a mad scientist or wealthy industrialist, out to rule the world.

Will could have done without some of the designer's house-proud flourishes. The chintzy curtains that masked the billboard-sized viewing windows were a bit much. But it was somehow comforting to sit in a captain's chair shaped like a sofa rather than a metal bench. It was quite nice to have a biscuit barrel by his side, full of double-choc cookies and custard creams.

Certainly, the adventurers needed something to ease their

return to form and consciousness. Looking blearily around the bridge, Will could not escape the impression that, somewhere along the route, they had all stopped off at some terrific party; they definitely all looked as if they were battling with the ultimate hangover. The drunken analogy was carried further as Will struggled to speak with a tongue that seemed fifteen foot thick and forty foot wide.

'I wonder where we are?'

The voice of the purple Queen suddenly sounding in his head gave the human a terrific shock. It had seemed so long since he had last heard from the graven image, or thought about the Queen's "gifts".

"You are on a vessel that I have provided for your entry into Spoggle."

"Where's Spoggle?"

"You mean you haven't opened the curtains yet?"

As if gripped by a pair of powerfully impatient hands, the twee hangings were thrust aside revealing mullion windows. Will did not know what he expected but he had looked forward to land-masses, to stars and stunning views. All that he could see was greyness.

"Do the windows need cleaning?"

"Why?" the sword sounded peevish.

"Where's Spoggle?"

"In front of you."

"What! That grey stuff?"

"Yes."

"I hope you're providing a map."

"No map exists."

"What are we supposed to do? Ask for directions? Excuse me, we've come to steal the MADID. I hear it's really valuable. Can you direct our spaceship please?"

"You may not be able to use the spacecraft on the surface. There may not even be one."

"Well. I'm not walking. My contract said nothing about a footwear allowance."

The Queen ignored Will's statement. He was now an official hero. He would do whatever needed to be done. In a few brief words, Sharon's image detailed what was to come next.

While this was going on, the others waited patiently for Will to speak. No one interrupted as his face tripped lightly through its telepathic tango. Even Sir Bastable was mute, sensing, inexplicably, that something was going on. At last, Will pointed at the screen.

'That's Spoggle.'  
'What is?' Surd asked.  
'The grey stuff.'  
Grendella was unimpressed. 'It looks a bit drab.'  
'It doesn't look like a planet to me,' commented Abel.  
'Its a very big planet.' Sulphur hoped that he would not have to explain everything in life to the father, as he had to the son.  
'It makes Neptune look like a pebble,' Balidare shook his head.  
'I can't say that it's a nice view. What happens next?' asked Magda.  
'We sit down. The ship moves. We get there,' Will summed up what Sharon had told him.  
'Well', Sulphur wagged a talon in warning, 'I just hope that it's that simple.'

The Purple and Orange Thingys were solemnly silent as they watched the ship start on its journey. Within a minute it had disappeared, totally enveloped by the greyness.

"What do we do now?" stenchd Orange.  
"There's nothing we can do now. We've got them here. They do the rest." Farted purple.  
"So we just stay here. Wait for the outcome."  
"We watch and we wait. Yes."  
There was silence for a very long time.  
"I'm bored," slimed Orange.  
"So am I," admitted Purple.  
"Let's go have some fun. Come back later."  
"Okay," agreed Purple, "but remember, this time it's for the future of the universe, so no cheating."  
"Would I cheat?" came the scandalised reply.

Things had seemed to be going well for the heroes. The vessel effortlessly breached the dull atmosphere and morale was on an upturn. Then a powerful voice spoke, echoing out of the mist: "Conditions compromised", and suddenly, the ship faded into nothing. None of them even got a chance to scream as they fell, still seated in their comfy chairs. The grey fog slivered eagerly into their open

mouths, probing their insides and choking out their life.

For a moment Will blacked out. Then, as if from somewhere deep inside, he heard the voice speak again, "Parasitic organisms isolated."

Instantly, Will stopped floating. All around him were thick transparent walls. Nearby, dimly through the haze, he could see Sulphur, also suspended in some sort of long clear tube. He could not see the others but somehow knew that they were out there, also held captive, probably cursing his name. Then the voice spoke again.

"Stage one initiated."

It was the last thing he remembered.

Will was lying in bed at home. A new law had been passed: "THE WILL BILL", decreeing that a human being could stay in bed as long as they liked, could eat whatever they liked from the GRUB machines, however unhealthy. Could shower for hours without worrying about rainfall statistics. A human could even take a lift just for one floor. It was a lovely dream. Then he woke up.

The first thing that Will noticed was the smell. It seemed to stride over in heavy boots and say "What are you sniffing at pal?" before head-butting him between the eyes. The stench was terrific, more noxious than a pair of Thingys' used Y-fronts. It took a while for Will to collect his senses; he was too busy trying to breath. As time passed, he slowly got used to it. His eyes still ran in torrents, his insides still slipped about like a skate-boarder on butter and his chest still flapped about like a sail in a cyclone but at least he had stopped vomiting. Then he did something really brave, he stood up and opened his eyes. It was not a pretty view.

He was lying on a mountain of refuse, stacked up to a staggering and unlikely height. All around him, for as far as his watering eyes could see, similar piles of garbage thrust their way into the grey air. This was no haphazard collection of junk. That was obvious from the careful layout and arrangement of the mouldering mountains, as well as from their content. Each pile seemed to contain a planned assembly of discarded items. Will momentarily thanked a merciful fate for not depositing him on the decaying mound of soiled nappies that formed his nearest neighbour. Finally, he managed to climb to his feet, slipping and sliding on a surface made up of neglected plastics. He opened his mouth, suffering a full

infusion of the richly fetid air as he called his comrades, but after a while, Will gave up. There was no response. He was alone.

Wherever the glass tubes had deposited the others, it did not seem to have been in the vicinity. This then was to be the first test of his leadership, finding someone to lead. Being Chairman of Heroics INC. was not going to be easy. He realised that he had never been truly on his own before, and shook slightly with fear of the unknown. Then he decided to try and contact Queen Sharon, reasoning that, if in doubt - scream help, seemed like a reasonable policy, and with this in mind he reached down for his sword.

Up to this point, things had just been bad, but now they got much worse. The sword and Band of Intangibility were gone. For a while he searched with eager panic, but they had vanished. In their place was a leaflet, stuck in the belt of the overalls that Surd had given him, it read: "THESE ITEMS HAVE BEEN CONFISCATED BY OUR CUSTOMS DEPT. WE DO HOPE THAT THIS DOES NOT CAUSE ANY INCONVENIENCE, AND THAT YOU ENJOY YOUR STAY ON SPOGGLE." Will stood glumly, sloshed in the face by a cool bucket of despair. He hated being a hero already.

On the Road , Iowa: Early 21st Century, October.

The van had once been painted in outrageous primary colours. The blazing orange stars, green unicorns, bright pink flowers and indigo peace signs had been shiny new, but now, like their owners they were faded and out of date. It was surprising, if not amazing, that they were still around at all.

The band were called: "The Misbegotten Sons of Hades". To have called them The Misbegotten Pensioners of Hades would, perhaps, have been more appropriate. Like the crumbling van they were relics of the Sixties, of a time when people had talked of free love, of free everything, in the long ago days before the flower children grew up, became lawyers or accountants and started charging with a vengeance. Now the only thing that seemed truly free was the band's spirit. Too arthritic to trash even the most inoffensive motel room, they contented themselves with anarchic memories of the past.

The lead singer's name was "Starchild" Perkins. It had once been Nigel but he had changed it to make a statement about his oneness with the cosmos. A oneness brought about by rather large

amounts of hallucinogenic drugs. He was sixty-three. The last time he had tried to smash his guitar, he had put his back out. That was some time ago, when Clinton had been president.

Once, Starchild and the others, consumed by lysergic acid and a desire to preach a musical gospel along the lines of, "Let's be nice to each other" and "Don't be heavy", had almost been famous. They had even managed to have a hit record in 1969 - "The Breakdown approaching the Station", but although their finest hour did occasionally stray on to the oldie stations, it had somehow escaped the transition to classic status. No one seemed to get misty-eyed and tearful as they listened to Perkin's sandpaper voice sing: "It's emotional derailment, points failure of the heart." The group's lack of musical immortality probably had something to do with the fact that their music and lyrics were awful. But a want of talent had not stopped other groups getting on and Starchild felt that it was more a lack of luck, rather than lack of skill, that had impeded their progress.

He took his eyes off the road momentarily, glancing in the rear-view mirror at the other band members. They had met in high school, and had first played together in 1962. Things had seemed simpler then; it was possible to move without aches and pains for one thing. They had been together for longer than most marriages, longer than some lifetimes. He had watched their long hair turn grey or fall out, and their fingers become gnarled around the strings of their guitars. Like old marrieds, they had become close to each other. Wives came and went, but there always another tour in the clapped out "Cosmic Van", another chance to sing "The Breakdown" in some rundown bar.

Once enthusiasm had motivated them, recently it was the need to pay the bills and the alimony that kept the boredom at bay. As they sang the same songs, again and again and again, to kids that did not care, so young that they thought "a Vietnam conflict" was number 32 at the local Oriental takeaway. Of course, there were moments that made it all worthwhile. Some well-preserved matron would approach them with shining eyes and fond memories of the desires of her youth, of the time when she had dreamt of Starchild's company for a few brief minutes; of a time when his body, had been lean and stringy, filling his hip-hugging loons in a way that had moved young girls to an almost religious frenzy of devotion; an all too brief moment of deification, before the Osmonds came along. Starchild had been 'The Quiet One' the one with the smouldering looks. Now, that wiry body had turned to fat and the eyesight dimmed, needing the help of heavy-duty spectacles offstage.

The band were out of steam, out of time, out of era. Something would have to be done. Maybe it was time to give up, to call it a day, to cut their thinning hair and finally sell out, settle down. Not for the first time, nor for the twenty thousandth and first, Starchild found himself searching the road ahead, looking for a sign. There was a woman walking by the roadside; a large woman in a floral-print dress, not your average hitch-hiker. He looked closer, finding



something strangely familiar about the way she moved, about the look in her electric eyes. Then, he felt the thrill of recognition shoot through his body, galvanising his foot on the brake and prompting an explosion of protest from the back of the van.

Starchild did not listen, he did not care. His attention was taken by memories of a face that had become heavier, more rounded and lined, as had his. He had not seen her for almost four decades, but he knew who she was: Blossom Pimpleknocker, his old high-school sweetheart.

Will was making good progress. Another few days and he might make it to ground level without breaking his neck. There was an art in moving over the slippery slimy surface without tumbling into a tremendous prat-fall and landing on a selection of hard-edged plastic implements. It was a skill that Will had taken quite a while, and several knocks, to master. The key to survival was concentration; it was because his mind was absorbed on the way ahead that he did not see the eyes or get a warning.

The eyes would have been difficult to see even if he had been looking for them. They were held aloft on thin stalks just above the plastic, having risen from under the surface with greased silence and instantly adapted themselves to their surroundings. They looked more like weird plants with two large attentive berries than ocular sensory apparatus. But they were eyes, the way they followed the halting human's every move revealed that. For a brief moment, Will was surrounded by an eager captive audience, then, like so many shark fins, they vanished for the attack.

Will did not bother to glance down when something brushed his leg; he put the contact down to a piece of plastic blown by the non-existent wind. A split second later, there was another contact; then another, then another and by the time he did look down, it was too late. He hardly got a split second to register the rainbow-hued stalks that held him captive, as they grew and multiplied, casting through the air with whiplash swiftness, circling his arms, his chest, with a touch almost sensual in softness, yet vice-like in its grasp. In the instant that it took to restrain him, Will barely had time to command his muscles to resist. He felt the blind panic rising, and opened his mouth to scream. Then the stalks pulled with shocking abruptness and Will vanished below the plastic surface. Oblivious to their visitor's plight, the garbage mountains went about the long business of decomposing as they always did, with stately patient indifference.

It was incredibly soothing, the gentle rocking motion, like being held or cradled in someone's arms, a lover's or close friends perhaps. For a moment, Will almost forgot his feelings of panic and terror, as he was dragged into the bowels of the plastic mound. Not for the first time recently, he regretted opening his eyes.

He was in a huge tunnel, hollowed out of a rubbish mound. There was plenty of light, thanks to torches that struggled valiantly in the reeking air and the scene that they illuminated was like something out of a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare. On the left side of the tunnel, as far as the eye could see, a column of curious creatures were moving slowly, as if queuing with infinite patience for some major event. Like supplicants, each of the odd lifeforms held a little offering, some item shaped in plastic, metal, or fibres. To the right of the tunnel, a steady parade of the creatures bounced rapidly past, empty "handed", going in the other direction. The strangest, almost scary, thing about the whole inexplicable performance was its silence. The only sound that could be heard was the smoky spluttering of the torches and the soft rubbing sound of the colourful alien bodies.

Will mentally corrected himself; he was the alien, they were the locals. He decided to study them in detail, partly because he had nothing better to do and partly because he felt that it was important to get to know his hosts. It was easy to get a close-up look. There were four of them carrying his tightly bound body. He could not escape feeling like an over-wrapped birthday present. They most closely resembled some sort of earth insect. Large pod-like bodies supported by rows of spindly appendages, some of which held the human effortlessly aloft. At the rear of the bodies, two huge great legs, useful possibly for bounding over the rubbish mounds and also for pushing a path through the debris. This impression of their adaptation for burrowing was borne out by a pair of well developed, scoop-like claws on the front of the body. The head, or at least, the smooth round lump at the top of the body was almost featureless. Will felt that the lack of a nose was a sensible evolutionary design choice, and at the very top, long prehensile eyeball stalks sprouted with orbs that were large and rounded like crystal balls. Inside these eyes, colours shimmered and shifted in a way that recalled memories of a childhood kaleidoscope. Their bodies, too, were ever-changing in colour, moving and flowing with flashes of tint, and as they passed along the tunnel, sometimes the bodies would copy to perfection the pigmentation of some decaying object set in the wall, the excellence of this blending process seeming to render the creature bodies momentarily invisible.

The queuing seemed to be endless and after a while, he became more used to his captors, noting that there seemed to be two tiny rectangles on each shoulder that did not change hue, but that varied

in colour from creature to creature. He was puzzled by their function for a while, until he thought of old uniforms and of epaulettes. Whatever else these "palettes", as he christened them, because of their ability to mix colours, were, they were obviously highly organised. This organisation was not just restricted to what Will presumed were their outfits. There were direction signs everywhere, on the walls on the ceiling on the floors. It took a while to sink in that he could actually read them. Unaware of Merlyn's linguistic spell, Will egotistically put this down to some form of rapid and highly-developed customising of the environment for his benefit. Although the signs and directional arrows did not seem to make much sense, they all seemed to do with time, varying wildly in duration, from three hours, to three months to three hundred years, etc.

This obsession with time was appropriate, as it did seem it might take three hundred years for the line to move. Will found himself wishing that his spell of unconsciousness had lasted longer. At least then he would not have to deal with the tedium. His initial panic had subsided, at least he decided, they were not going to eat him. They did not seem to have mouths. No mouths might mean no munching of his choicer extremities but it also seemed to mean no speech. Will was unused to quiet, his culture had resonated to the ceaseless hummings and scoldings of advanced machinery. His few attempts at conversation had got him nowhere. The only response to his many variations on a theme of: "Where are we?", "Who are you?" and "Where are you taking me?" had earned him nothing more rewarding than a curt tap from a spindly insect-like stalk and a possible warning glance of technicolor brilliance from the rainbow centred eyes. After a while, Will even gave up asking about the fate of his colleagues. He started to talk, or rather recite, to disseminate some of his culture to his hosts, trusting that they possessed some sort of hearing apparatus about their bodies, as he assumed an affected hammy accent.

'My lords, ladies and gentlemen - I presume that you have different genders. As a small thank you for your charming hospitality I would like to present some items from my own culture for the education and entertainment of this distinguished company. I will now relate, from memory, the complete works of the noted Earth dramatist and all round literary icon, Mister Entertainment himself, the bard of Avon; William Shakespeare. I must admit that I've heard of a captive audience, but never a captive actor. Be that as it may, please rub your stalks together for my first piece, a delightful light-hearted little work entitled "Macbeth" or "Don't buy any long-playing records if you're king.'

Like a COMS generator, once started Will was hard to stop. He went on and on and on. By the time he had finished Macbeth, Hamlet and A Midsummer Night's Dream, complete with whatever lame-brained extra material or observations that he had deemed appropriate, his voice had hushed into a croak. This did not matter as none of the "palettes" seemed to have paid the slightest attention to a word he

had said, however stylised. Will yearned to hear a sound, a voice, even Sulphur at his most caustic would have been welcome.

When he did hear a someone or something speaking distantly, his Bard-dulled brain at first rejected the voice as wish-fulfilment, but as they moved nearer to wherever they were going, the voice, or voices, as Will realised them to be, got louder. Somebody seemed to be taking inventory, asking curt questions in a sharp monotone. The same questions again and again, and receiving replies that were both humble and to the point. After finishing its interrogation it would issue an instruction. Then shortly after, another empty handed "palette" would appear to be running away, perhaps on some vital errand. Strapped and trapped as he was, Will could do nothing but wait as the voice drew nearer, trying to ignore his clamouring curiosity, curiosity that had acquired a loud-hailer by the time he saw the arch of a doorway up ahead, and that was screaming itself hoarse with expectation as he was lifted across the threshold. Will had prepared himself for something strange but whatever wild vision he had expected, it had not been this.

It was as if someone had decided to build the Coliseum underground, with all manner of slowly rotting debris as the building material of choice. The circular cavern was huge, on all sides were doors, and stretching through each doorway was a line of the creatures, each carrying a burden, each patiently waiting their turn. All over the walls were small hatches, each labelled with a printed figure denoting a period of months, years or decades. In strict rotation, a palette would step forward from one converging line at a time, one after the other they would complete their business and then leave empty-clawed and what a curious business it was. In the centre of the converging lines was a much battered, huge old lectern, next to the lectern, a high stool, on which was balanced one of the creatures; a creature with enough individual features to separate it from its fellows. .

This "palette" was twice as large as any other Will had seen, The rounded "head" was not smooth but covered in a tangled mass of erect wispy white tendrils. The epaulettes on the shoulder were connected to some long flowing black fabric which gave the creature the slight appearance of a Victorian undertaker. This connection with the distance past of Earth was enhanced by the vastness of the ledger which lay open on the lectern, the super-sized pot of what appeared to be ink by his side, and the number of unwieldy-looking quill pens which it held adroitly in its spindly stalks, writing furiously, pausing only to dip one of at least half-a-dozen hardworking nibs into the ink bottle with a balletic flowing movement.

The whole cavern seemed to mirror this ceaseless activity. All around the dome above them, "palettes" laboured, perched precariously on ladders, constantly changing the ingredients that made up the ceiling far above. Removing items of rubbish, replacing them or adding new pieces. Occasionally some scrap of debris would float or plummet from the ceiling to the floor and be swiftly rescued by one

of the many creatures not in line, that seemed to be scuttling about on other errands, and immediately returned to the ceiling.

All was done at great speed. A creature in one of the queues would move forward to the lectern, holding up the object that was being carried. The "palette" at the lectern asked quick, no nonsense questions: "Object? Age? Etc." Its voice amplified resoundingly by the acoustics of the hall, whilst, all the time writing furiously in the ledger. When this transaction was over, this head "palette" would signal, waving a quill and one of the many creatures rushing about the hall would take charge of the burden, disposing of it by placing it in one of many labelled hatchways.

Will realised that perhaps he was destined for a place in one of these hatches; it was dispiriting, and somewhat insulting, to face the fact that these creatures considered him to be no more than an item of junk. He tried not to think about it, concentrating on what he would say when he was held before the lectern and the black-cloaked creature. After a while he realised with vague nausea, just where the creature's voice was coming from. A wide, narrow row of needle like fangs opened and closed in the creature's pod-shaped belly and sound came out. Will finally got a chance to observe this spiteful mew as he was carried to the lectern.

'Object?'

One of Will's captors opened its stomach to reply.

'Alien.'

'A being. Age?'

'I'm twenty-five,' Will offered politely.

'Impossible! Age of deterioration?'

'I'm not as far gone as that.' The indignant Will, much to his disgust, found further protests impossible. One of the creatures placed a leathery stalk in his mouth.

'Age of deterioration?' The head creature repeated with what sounded like anger in its voice.

'Depends on soil. No more than twenty years.'

'Twenty years. Next!'

Will knew that unless he wanted to find out what was on the other side of the hatch for the next couple of decades, he had to do something, however unpleasant. With this pressing thought in mind, he took the only course open to him. Turning his bound body with as wild a motion as he could manage, Will bit down hard on the offending stalk in his gullet. He felt a horror that exceeded anything he had experienced, as the stalk broke sending a choking flood of cold bitter liquid into his protesting throat. As he struggled to spit out the remains of the "palette" appendage, to overcome the retching and loathing that now took control of his body, the maimed creature let go of him, its stomach wide now, screaming in agony, spraying its fellows with its dark yellow blood. For a second, all discipline in the immediate vicinity evaporated. Will was dropped to the floor as, with the exception of the "clerk" behind the lectern, all the creatures nearest the maimed "palette" fell upon their wounded colleague, their stomach/mouths, those rows of terrifying teeth,

fully visible now as they sank in a frenzy into the flesh of the injured one. In a moment, nothing was left. Not the stalk that Will had spat out, not even the epaulettes.

'I suppose it saves on the funeral expenses.' Will managed to croak with a glib morbid humour that he did not feel. Inside, he felt desolation and horror. He had been responsible for a death. The creatures resumed their places in an orderly fashion as if nothing had happened. Will could hear the 'clerk' resume its questions. Four of the hatch fillers now advanced on him. Will reacted almost without thinking.

'Sod off, Bug-brains!' he shouted in a voice charged with unaccustomed anger and vigour.

Echoes bounded around the cavern dislodging debris all over the place. For a moment it was snowing paper and small objects, a ticker-tape parade in the underworld, in hell. Then something happened that had not happened in the history of the "palettes". With its tangled head vibrating with impatience, the 'clerk' laid down its quills for a moment.

'What is the problem?'

'The alien being.' The four helpers answered in unison.

'Yes?'

'It's alive.'

'ALIVE!' The "clerk" boomed, bringing down another shower of litter upon their heads. For a moment there was an uncomfortable pause. Will allowed himself a split-second of hope. Then the creature spoke.

'Well, kill it then.'

Will thought fast as the four approached. He needed to. This time their mouths were wide open. Will had never seen a stomach with a tongue before, now he saw four up close, and they were drooling. With almost sobbing gratitude, he felt words tumble into his brain and his mouth.

'If anyone comes near me. I'll bite 'em.'

It seemed to have the desired affect. Four ravening bellies shut tightly with a snap.

This was going to go down as a momentous, inconceivable day in the history of this culture. For the second time, the clerk stopped its listing.

'What now?'

'I demand my right to a trial, to a lawyer?'

'What's a lawyer?'

'I demand my right to information then.'

'If I give you this information, will you stop interrupting things and die without fuss? We do work closely to a schedule you know.'

'Never mind your bogging schedule. Why do you want to kill me?'

The creature was a pragmatist. It had not won promotion after promotion in its long and illustrious career, without learning how to adapt. In the interests of getting this troublesome irritation out of

the way, it dropped the rasping curt quality of its stomach's vocal tone for a sound that was almost paternal,

'Look around you. What do you see?'

'Garbage.'

We are the Estapoppi. We exist to study the deterioration of matter.' He indicated a small white shape in a nearby creature's stalks. 'That soiled disposable nappy for instance. We estimate that it will take 500 years for it to fully biodegrade. We think it's a beautiful thing to watch decay. We will study this nappy closely, observe it and its contents processes of disintegration, make notes, draw up our findings and suggestions, all based on our testing procedure.'

'Why?'

'Somebody has to. Long, long ago we were without purpose, absorbed in self-interest and war. It was decided then that the only way to save ourselves was to create a reason for our existence.'

'So watching rubbish rot is your goal in life is it?' Will felt twice as incredulous as he sarcastically sounded.

'Yes. Call it idiosyncrasy, or perversion, but we like decaying matter.'

'What use is it?'

'Use! It's of crucial use. We have heard from beings such as yourself of other worlds scattered beyond our own and we estimate that there are only a finite number of planets. However, the scope for the growth of population is infinite. Each being that lives leaves waste material, material that becomes harder to dispose of each year, causing increasing damage to the Universal ecology. Eventually, cultures will have to work more and more, on getting rid of the litter left by their ancestors. More and more of the interplanetary economy will depend on efficient waste disposal. The entire Cosmos will be in danger of being buried by waste. When that happens, we will offer to come to the rescue. Based on millions of years of study and research, we will have the most efficient garbage disposal system in creation. We will, for a reasonable price, offer to get rid of the waste problem.'

'What price?'

'We are a highly specialised service. Complete domination of the Universe seems reasonable.'

'For picking up litter!'

'Think of the research. Think of the hours we have spent on this. We had to develop a machine that transports items of interest from all over the Galaxy. Everything from scrap-metal to socks from laundry baskets come here. It was a colossal engineering feat. It was also very expensive. We need some form of payment for our efforts.'

'So you bring rubbish from everywhere. You're telling me that after all I've been through to get here, to pursue some adventure and excitement, after all that's happened, I've ended up in the universe's main garbage dump?'

'Yes!'

There was only one word to sum up the way that Will felt and he used it with bitter emphasis:

'BUGGERATION!'

'Are you upset?'

'No, of course not. Why should I be upset? EVERYONE'S life is like this.'

'We could kill you now if you're depressed.'

'Depressed! I'm suicid...' Aware of an untensioning of stomach muscles around him, Will just managed to catch himself in time.

'Why go to all the trouble? Why not just build ships and invade other planets.'

'We don't want to hurt anybody.'

'You want to kill me.'

'That's just business. Surely you want to help with a litter-free future for the universe.'

'Of course I do. Let me live and I'll promise to always use a bottle bank in future. Isn't your plan for domination the long way of going about things?'

'It's good for a culture to have a long-term ambition. We all do our jobs, help locate research material, help the future of society. There is no war, no crime, we are all fulfilled and happy.'

Will shook his head in disbelief. 'I can see it now. Come to Spoggle, land of the laughing litterbugs.'

'We are only a small part of "Spoggle" as you call it, but we flatter ourselves, the most useful part. Think of the alternative, we could take over the universe your way, with ships. Lots of us would get hurt and in the end there would be no point.'

'You'd rule the universe.'

'But we wouldn't be happy, content. The universe's waste problem would grow and grow and we wouldn't be there to stop it. Everybody in existence would die just because we concentrated on selfish short-term gains.'

'It'll take forever.'

'We need as much time as we can get. The decay of some of these new plastics takes forever. Talking of time, yours is up. Take him away.'

Will was still confused, "Why must I die?'

'You don't think you're biodegradable whilst you're alive, do you? If you're going to decay properly, I'm afraid we have to kill you. Why else do you think the transporter brought you here?'

Interview session over. The "clerk" picked up its quills, motioning to the Estapoppi with the nappy to come forward. There was nothing Will could do. There were just too many stalks all at once, none of which came near his mouth. Whimpering gently to himself, he was lifted up. Nearby, a stomach opened widely, expectantly. So after all, this was going to be the end. Bit off in his prime. As they moved his head into the foully gurgling stomach, toward those rows of expectant razor-sharp teeth, Will could not think of any profound last words. He was too upset. He was inches away from the Estapoppi's tongue and it was not pleasant. In the split second as the



creature's stomach muscles started to clench, the evil mouth to close, he found himself betting, irrelevantly, that the creatures never flossed their gums, or were they intestines? Was it possible to floss intestines?

'He talks about transporters. I don't know about transporters. I wish I'd never heard of the bloody MADID.'

'STOP!!!' The "clerk" voice suddenly screamed.

Twenty thousand Estapoppi in the room jumped at once. The one about to eat Will's head, snapped its jaws shut in surprise. Fortunately for the human, the instinctive reactions of his carriers were just that little bit faster. He was dazed but he was alive. Suddenly, the mood of the room had changed. The unthinkable had happened. The "clerk" with a bounce of those powerful rear legs, had overleaped the lectern.

'How many times,' he said, in a voice that caused several ladders on the far side of the cavern to fall over and at least one of the far doorways to collapse. 'How many times must I tell you? In memos, in person? It is the most important thing to remember, is it not? Always ask a new arrival before you process them - WHAT?'

You could almost see the twenty thousand Estapoppi mentally think WHOOPS!, before they answered in a deafening chorus.

'HAVE THEY HEARD OF THE MADID?'

Two more of the fragile rubbish doorways collapsed.

'Because, if they have heard of the MADID? the clerk prompted.

'WE HAVE TO DIRECT THEN TO THE SIGNS AND LEAVE THEM ALONE.'

By this time, even the creatures struggling to repair the damage caused by the noise had given up in momentary disgust, those that is, who had survived their fall from the ladders.

'I'm terrible sorry about this.' The clerk said to Will in a sweetly charming voice. 'You can't get the staff.' The tone he used on his assistants was far less polite. 'RELEASE HIM AND TAKE HIM WITH ALL SPEED TO THE SIGNS.'

Extremely bemused, the newly unfettered Will was carried away at a breakneck pace toward the exit, he distantly heard the last of the clerk's fulsome apologetic farewell.

'.... And, it's been a pleasure to meet you.'

Strangely, Will did not feel able to reciprocate. "CRETINS!" was the last work he heard as the "clerk" turned on his followers. Will nodded. Now that was an opinion that he could agree with. He had heard of being in the dumps, but this was ridiculous. Still it was comforting to note, that as a seeker after the MADID, he was something of a celebrity.

On another part of the planet, Balidare was also getting

used to celebrity status. It was not at all enjoyable. As he ran away from a growing crowd of locals, each with a great beaming smile on their face, he tried to understand just what had happened during the past day.

Awakening on a gently rolling hillside, he had quickly taken in his surroundings and had been in no way disturbed by them. It did seem a little odd, at first, that the soft sweet-smelling grass was tinted a rather fetching shade of blue, and that the sky was subtly streaked with green, but he was on a new planet and soon accepted it. It had been very nice indeed to stroll across the softly-sloping blue downs, the slight breeze blowing air that was intoxicating in its freshness, the two suns, glowing emeralds brightly distant in the sky, gently warming and caressing his skin. He had not concerned himself with the absence of the others, preferring to just enjoy the tranquil solitude, the sensation of being in some alien Elysium field. Even the town when he had seen it, nestling comfortably in an Arcadian hillside, had looked peaceful and inviting. An almost fairy-tale place. He had turned his feet towards it, walking not with impatience, but taking his time, stopping to brush his teeth in a small sweet-tasting, green stream, to wash his hair, and change his clothing from the carefully chosen stock in the metallic case that he had managed to retain halfway across the universe.

His first contact with a rustically dressed local had gone without incident. The fellow could be described as a native pastoral ideal. He was playing, badly, an instrument resembling a flute, his thick digits struggling with the fingering, as he lay tending a flock of slowly grazing round shaggy creatures. This "shepherd" was vaguely humanoid in shape, resembling Balidare in compact, stout build. His skin was roughly bronzed to a golden texture, he had large glittering green eyes, a great flapping droopy nose and ears that splayed out like an elephant. But by far, his most striking characteristic had been his huge, ecstatic smile. The row of perfect yellow teeth had been almost dazzling. Here at last, Balidare felt, was a creature that had all he needed out of life. There were no strong jealousies, troubles or emotions to cloud that brow. There was just utter contentment. The local had nodded politely as Balidare had passed, obviously unperturbed by the arrival of a stranger. On his way to the town Balidare repeated this experience more than once, meeting creatures dressed as merchants or shepherds, males and females. All gave him the same beaming grin, the same happy nod of welcome. There was another curious custom of greeting that the Elfen noticed on his way to the town. Each nod of welcome was accompanied by a rap on a small black cube that everyone wore around their belt.

The town from the inside was as much of a fairy tale chocolate box image as from afar. He had had no trouble walking through one of the many thick stone gateways and had his first conversation with a local. The man had described his people as the "Boxemics", tapping his cube as illustration, as he spoke in perfect, though thickly accented Elfen. Balidare recognised Merlyn's handiwork and asked

after his old friend but had been disappointed to find that he was the only stranger to arrive in living memory. The brightly grinning Boxemic had been thrilled to help with directions towards the centre of the town.

Balidare had found himself dawdling on the way, enjoying the neat cobbled walkways, the brightly painted tyrolean-style buildings, grouped together with medieval closeness, looking like they should be made out of gingerbread. The frequent cobbled squares with well laid-out trees providing the bluary, with children happily running about providing the noise, and usually an imposing, heroic statue of some local dignitary called "a caretaker" providing the civic grandeur. Most of all, Balidare delighted in the warmth of the smiles on everyone's face. After millennia of dealing with humanity's miserable, self-pitying visages, the feeling of universal contentment had soothed some part of the Elfen, deep inside. He had found himself marvelling at their constant ecstasy, wandering if they ever got face-ache from all that grinning, but all the while, he returned the Boxemics beaming greetings in kind. To his great surprise, he had found that happiness was catching, smiling radiantly back at the townsfolk, forgetting, for a while, his supposed ugliness, his coarse dwarfish skin. He felt at one with the bustling joyful crowds that thronged the busy streets, at one with their sense of pleasure. He forgot the MADID, forgot his dislike of Grendella, forgot his pain at not going home, forgot all anger and bitterness. This delightful town could be a new home.

It was at this moment, when his pleasure was most intense, that a richly-clad Boxemic man approached. The man had been following him for quite a while, and he wore the habitual Boxemic smile with just the slightest hint of nervousness, his eyes were just a little anxious and his skin was just a little clammy. But, for Balidare, all was finally right with a world. The Elfen had gone beyond such negative emotions as suspicion. He had taken the "welcoming" scroll the Boxemic had offered without a thought, not registering the way that the man had perked up as the scroll entered his hands or the speed with which the man had distanced himself.

Balidare had even opened the scroll, had absently scanned the illuminated hand-written script with shining eyes, lettering that read:

CELEBRATE YOUR GOOD FORTUNE CITIZEN.

YOU HAVE WON THE LOTTERY. AS HOLDER OF THIS SCROLL,  
YOU HAVE  
BEEN CHOSEN AS CARETAKER DESIGNATE.

AFTER TRAINING, YOU WILL ASSUME OUR HIGHEST POSITION AND  
WILL  
BECOME RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONTINUED HAPPINESS  
OF OUR  
PEOPLE. A MUCH LOVED AND HONOURED STATE.

SIGNED,  
THE MINISTER OF CONTINUOUS RAPTURE,

Balidare had sensed nothing disturbing about the scroll. It was only fitting that a being of his obvious wisdom and experience should be recognised as worthy of high office, and there seemed no trick in keeping these creatures happy. The hard task would be making them miserable. He had placed the scroll in his bag and turned to other matters, to getting a wonderfully neat and tasteful room in a charming inn, to eating the most sensational meal, cooked perfectly to his torturous instructions and to drinking rather a lot of the local potion, a nectar that seemed to taste of fermented delight. All had been lovely beyond belief. Balidare, like all Elfen, was a hedonistic creature at heart. He had been scared to sleep, to let go of the day, but sleep had come, sleep that caressed and fed his senses.

He had awakened in the perfect room, consumed the perfect breakfast, and laid back to luxuriate in the perfect bed and had started to read the local paper.

"IT'S OFFICIAL!" blared the headline. "Our beloved Caretaker has only a month to live, the scroll patrol has been alerted..." On and on with the same story. In his pleasure-sated state, Balidare had not had the patience for dull local politics. He had showered, dressed and gone for a stroll, amongst the same crowds, with the same ever-present smiles. Buoyed up by euphoria, the Elfen had not noticed the slight glint of hunger in the Boxemics bright eyes as they watched him pass, or the slightly impatient sharpness of tone with which they rapped their boxes. All in all, it had come as an intensely disturbing surprise when everyone had started to chase him.

Eventually the Estapoppi had carried Will to the foul-smelling surface, had pointed him to the nearest sign and had rushed back to their subterranean labours. The sign that they had pointed out was a plain wooden direction post. It seemed to be new, or at least, newly painted. The words were plainly stencilled in black on a white background: "THIS WAY TO THE MADID", the sign had said. Will had let his eyes follow where the sign pointed, making out the distant white shape of another sign, positioned in the cleft between two mountains of rubbish. He had found himself briefly wondering why he had not

noticed the signs before, but quickly moved on to self congratulation.

"This is going to be childs-play," he thought. But that had been days ago. Long days of clambering over foul rubbish, of no food or water, of dealing with the constant clinging smells of the mounds, the foundation stones of Estapoppi empire. Occasionally he had a distant Estapoppi for company, scuttling or bounding across the surface of a mound with effortless ease, ceaselessly working, but Will was without the generations needed to adapt himself to travelling over the detritus-composed environment, for him it was hard going. Every time he reached a sign, he found himself, hoping wildly that it would say, "HERE IT IS". But every time there was just another sign in the far-off distance, another goal to wearily reach, this quest business was turning out to be no fun at all and murder on the legs into the bargain.

By the end of the third day, the mangy mountains of garbage had started to thin out. By the fourth they were behind him, and by the fifth even the smell had started to ebb. He could look back and see the mounds far behind, the neat row of signs marking his route and look forward to another row ahead of him, seeming to go on for infinity. For the past day the signs had been all there was to look at. He was crawling slowly over nothingness, or what seemed like - nothingness, the bare smooth surface under his exhausted body, the sky above, all were exactly the same dull shade of grey. Apart from the receding junk mountains behind him, this was a landscape of total emptiness. No rock, no river, no creature, no sound. Nothing! Only one human, nearing the end of his physical and mental tether, and a perfectly laid out row of newly minted-signs.

Somehow Will stubbornly kept going, picking himself up as he collapsed from fatigue, again and again, onto the flat and textureless ground, forcing himself forward. He had to keep going, he had responsibilities, he was a leader. Somewhere out there the others might need help, might indeed be on the verge of death. He started at the word, still thrashing himself with remorse at the thought of the horrid death that he had caused, at the end of the hapless Estapoppi, the poor slob that had just been doing his job. Not for the first time, he felt thankful for the chance to continue his own job, thankful to whatever benign deity - or possible purple Queen - that had ensured that he could speak fluent Estapoppi, aware that it had been his use of their language that had saved his own life. He shuddered at the thought of what would have happened if he had not been able to communicate, turning his thoughts back to putting one callused hand in front of the other, getting his sore and bleeding knees to follow his onward scolding, pleading bidding.

It seemed like forever since he had left the last sign, an eternity filled with pain and unending weariness but now the next was near.

"Come on!", Will's mind screamed at his exhausted body, "just one more and we can sleep."

After another age, he reached the sign, his fatigued mind taking time to realise that something was wrong, that this sign was

different.

"ARE YOU HAVING FUN YET?" It mockingly read.

'No!' was all that Will managed to whisper, before his body took him up on his promise and rushed thankfully into slumber.

He dreamt of Queen Sharon. She was holding a box labelled, "THE MADID", was giving him a prize, and saying "Well Done" and "Thank you". The sky was blue, there was a sound he recognised from video as birdsong. All seemed lovely. Then, the Queen's stomach opened. A little demon Queen lived there, with ravening fangs and jagged claws.

'It's all been a trick. APRIL FOOOOOL!!!' She spitefully chuckled.

Then those claws raked his body and he woke up.

Will hurt everywhere. Even the bits of his body that he did not know the Latin names for, felt like they were showering in razor blades. He raised his head, hoping for some sign of existence, of day or night, of seasons, but all around was still the same grey nothingness. He wondered vaguely if he were dead, if he was just being masticated by a Estapoppi's insides, but he knew, really, that this could not be true. He had not lived that sinful or interesting a life, to rate such pain in the Hereafter. The sign above his head made him momentarily forget the vigorous protest of his physique, and rise in astonishment. "TO THE MADID", it said. He was sure that it had not said that before. Had he been hallucinating? Or was he hallucinating now? Certainly something had changed. He looked ahead at the row of signs; there was something that he could not place, a subtle difference. After nearly an hour of staggering ahead, of searching his still weary brain, he realised that the markers were pointing to a wall, to a round blob of red in the centre of a wall. Neither had been there before.

Deep inside, one last store of adrenaline gave up its contents, giving a last desperate surge of power to his muscles. Will quickened his pace, his tyrant mind forcing his limbs forward, reminding them that this was their last chance. It was a long way to go, but lying down forever was the only alternative.

On the Road, Iowa. Early 21st Century, October.

It was hard to see who had been more astonished by the reunion. The rest of the members of the Misbegotten Sons of Hades, or Blossom. It had been over thirty years and none of them had weathered that well. The damage done to Blossom's figure by years of suburban comfort had been more than matched by the "Sons" use of drink and drugs over the years and neither had acted as an elixir of youth.

Still, the "boys" in the band, as Blossom had called them, without a hint of mockery, looked as good to her as the day she met them in the corridors of Calvin Coolidge high, and they in turn could see the remnants of the beautiful, spirited woman, who had seemed to promise so much. A woman who caused many a lonely hour of spotty teen-angst amongst the male population at the time.

Not for an instant did they connect their new passenger with the blue-rinsed hair and the blushing cheeks of a twelve-year-old, with the woman whose disappearance had prompted a storm of media attention. Only that morning, they had heard the story on the radio, how this woman had been denounced by her husband, called a spawn of Satan and blamed for all his recent troubles. Only that morning, Casper Titwilleger had engaged the old established Iowa lawfirm of "Gredi, Graspin, Bastaards & Billings" to handle his divorce. It was a big story: Starchild was even thinking of writing a song about it.

To them, this woman, this treasured relic of their pre-erotic past, was not known as Titwilleger. Her name had been Pimpleknocker when they had last met and high school reunions had never featured on the band's list of must-do's. Now as the band and their passenger resumed their journey, there was the chance to catch up.

'Whatever happened to the freak?' Eric "Moonglow" Matisowitz, band drummer, wildman and general fuzzed in the head individual mumbled with interest.

'The freak?' Blossom was trying to be helpful and charming, she was grateful for the ride and the chance to meet old friends, especially ones that she had had a young married's crush on, but the name meant nothing to her.

'Yeah! The freak. You must remember!' Moonglow was becoming insistent but his enthusiasm did nothing to dispel her puzzlement. The comments of Bassist George "Goon" Gaddis or keyboard man Fletcher

"Stumpy" Carlisle did little to help clear things up.

'You know. The weirdo.'

'The oddball.'

She turned to Starchild for clarification.

'I think they mean the creep', he offered. It did not help.

'I still don't.'

'The goofy guy.'

'Which guy?'

'The guy that had the hots for you. The jerk that you used to think was such a waste of space.'

Moonglow butted in.

'The loser who helped out in your dad's store, who liked the dead animals an' stuff.'

Suddenly it was depressingly clear.

'Oh, him.' She said quietly.

The Band were excited now, carried away on the kind of trip that did not rot braincells, a nostalgia trip.

'God, that guy was such a case.' Starchild shook his head,

'Weird-d-d-d city!' Moonglow agreed.

'A total spazmo,' giggled Stumpy.

'What d'yer say happened to him?' asked Goon.

'I married him.' Blossom said, trying to keep her voice matter-of-fact.

After thirty-nine years together, the band were used to harmonies.

'BUMMER-R-R-R!!!' They all said in unison.

Blossom had to agree.

'You're telling me,' she nodded.

She felt the comforting touch of Starchild's hand on hers. Felt the strength in his shrivelled, craggy arms as she leaned her head on his shoulder.

'Talking of weird guys,' said Moonglow, who had really forgotten altogether what they were talking about.

'Whatever happened to your brother?'

'Now he really was a dork!' Goon and Stumpy, nodded aged heads.

'Did he end up in the pen like we said he would?' Queried Moonglow.

'Or the army?'

'He was such a thug.'

'He's a preacher in California.' Blossom quickly put them out of their misery.

'NO WA-A-A-Y-Y-Y-Y!'

'He's got his own T.V. show, his own church, makes fifty million a year.'

There was a stunned silence. Eventually with a shocked expression of wonderment, Starchild spoke for them all.

'Life's a bitch, isn't it?'

Blossom gently nodded.

'As I said, you're telling me.'



Wilbur Prince, lard bucket of God, was beside himself with fury. He had not minded his sister throwing away her life, had not minded her marrying that idiot into the family business, did not give a damn what she did with her private life. But when she started being called a "mistress of Satan", when she got her stupid fat face plastered all over the press and when the publicity was damaging the Lord's work, and, more importantly, business, it was time to act. He picked up the phone and did the only thing that an upstanding citizen, loving brother and devout Christian could do in the circumstances. He phoned some business associates and had a hit put out on his sister. Then he went back to reading Primrose Bland's latest fan letter.

'Hey. You want to know somethin' really freaky?' Starchild said.

Blossom smiled; for the first time in a long time, she was having fun. They had just sang her song, the one they had written in high school: "You're a bitching chick Blossom, but stop playing possom on me...", it was awful in the way that only early 'Sixties bubblegum pop could be, but it had been written for her and she was very fond of it.

'It's so amazing. With all this stuff about the past,' Starchild continued.

'What is?'

'We're going home.'

'Where do you live?'

'Not our home. The old place. Your home. We're gonna play Ashton. Isn't it great?'

Blossom's smile froze on her face. She felt buffeted over the head by the wicked cosh of disappointment. Ashton was the last place she wanted to visit.

'We could all visit the old high school.'

'Why! are you hungry?'

Starchild looked especially puzzled by her answer, so Blossom explained.

'They tore it down in the 'Nineties. It's "Bob's Side o'Beef on a Plate" now, "burgers and ribs for hungry people".'

There was a startled silence in the van. However decrepit they had got, however much they had changed, the band had always had an image of the old town staying the same.

Moonglow perked up.

'Well, you could visit Casper. Talk over old times.'

'Somehow, I don't think he'd enjoy that.' Blossom's reply was

certain.

Claude Billings was one of the most highly regarded, and expensive, lawyers in the state. He cultivated an air of folksy distinction, "Out-Twaining Twain" as he called it. This policy had worked spectacularly. His office was an image of tastefully restrained opulence, a shrine to his legal success. In this room, he had dealt politely and sensibly with murderers, rapists, arsonists, every kind of violent criminal. That was before he had decided to try divorce work. Now his office was mostly filled with gibbering madmen. On the surface, Casper Titwilleger did not look mad, he did not look like he had that much character. But what he was saying was purest loony tunes.

'You've got to find her. She's dangerous, possessed by the devil.'

'Most people are when they get a divorce, Mr Titwilleger. It's the stress.'

'She has to be stopped.'

'I wouldn't worry. As far as divorce goes. Our firm is the best.'

'The devils will protect her.'

'We have to find out which firm is representing her before we start slandering them.'

'We have to find her.'

'Half the newspapers in the country are looking. Don't worry.'

'Worry!' Casper fixed him with a wide-eyed fanatic stare. 'Of course I worry. If we don't find her, she could destroy the world. Believe me, it's worrying.'

'If you want we could hire a private detective for you. I have a woman in mind who's done a lot of good work for us.'

'Yes! Yes!' The taxidermist was beside himself with sweaty eagerness. 'Tell her, it's her chance to save the world.'

As he lifted the phone, Claude Billings felt suddenly exhausted. Tired of all the oddballs, the dealing with fools, that went into earning a legal crust. He was sorry that he had taken this case, sorry that he had been attracted by the publicity, sorry that he could not think of a way to get Titwilleger out of his office. The phone rang for a long time. Then someone picked it up. A familiar voice growled abruptly at the other end, and suddenly, Billings did not feel weary or sorry anymore.

'Hi Munday. It's Claude Billings. Can you drop everything? I've got a case you're gonna love. The client says you can save the world.'

Will's tiredness had outstripped the bonds of mere reason some time before. Now only the zombie-like slow motion of his limbs and the freeform mind-games in his head kept him going. For several hours, or so it seemed, the large red blob had been taunting him, had even adopted a spiteful demonic face to do so. "Lie down and sleep you loser", it suggested. "Lie down and die", it demanded. "Your friends are all dead", it informed him, over and over again.

Will did not pause for an instant, just kept crawling forward at a pace that would make a snail seem like a hyperactive leopard, his dry lips, too sore and cracked to reply to the scarlet tormentor. Closer and closer came the blob, and more and more sarcastic grew its taunts, until Will was close enough to make out the fact that it looked like a red button. After a few minutes he could even hazily read the small lettering on the sign above it: "PRESS FOR THE MADID", it said.

"Press," thought Will, "I'm not just going to press. I'm going to punch its bloody face in."

As Will finally got within reach and felt the relief of striking out as his fist connected brutally with a solid metal surface, he realised that it was really just a button after all. A button that slowly pressed down. There was a slight pause as Will waited for something wonderful to happen. Suddenly, brutally, the button connected and an electric shock seared through him. Lifting him off the floor and depositing his body, fizzing and rippling from the effects of the energy bolt, almost six feet away.

As he slipped, once again, into unconsciousness, he heard a chiding inner voice say. "Not again! I don't know why you ever bother to wake up", and more than that, he heard another sound, one that seemed to be moving towards him from above; the boisterous sound of happy laughter.

"Yuk!" had been Grendellal's first impression as she woke up and her opinion had not changed since then. It was all too neat and sanitised to be real. She had been walking for hours across a flat grassy plain. The grass was lush but short, as if freshly mowed. The few trees looked pruned, all cut to the same size, carefully grouped together. There was not even a bump or a stone in the ground.

"This isn't nature; it's set design," Grendella thought to herself, as she scratched the "Slime Girls" tattoo on her arm, belching and farting softly. It was just no place for a fun-loving Dwarfen, hot-to-trot and loaded for bear. "This place is Bally's idea of a good time."

The thought of the others kept her moving. They at least would cheer the place up a bit. Maybe she could share the few beers she had thoughtfully stashed in her shoulder-bag, start a party and get the Prince kid to lighten up a bit. After a while, she saw the settlement, it was not calculated to thrill.

"Definitely Dullsville."

It was as if suburban planning had gone mad. Not even COMS had been this rigorous in its uniformity. The town was made up of rows and rows of small bungalows, all laid out in a strict block pattern, there was none of the relieving individual flourishes, none of the tastelessness that had typified the suburbs in the old days on Earth. There was no stonecladding, extra garages, bay-windows or 'Dunroamings' here. Each bungalow was the exactly the same size, exactly the same colour, built in exactly the same way. Even the front lawns, outside the dwellings, had exactly the same flowers planted in exactly the same places. All over town, bungalows repeated themselves, precise replicas of each other. The "square" had definitely inherited this "Earth."

Grendella soon reached what she presumed was the outskirts of town; it was difficult to tell, as from a distance the centre of town looked exactly like the block she was standing in. She looked closely at the nearest bungalow, noticing that, even by her petite standards, it looked small. Not that it mattered, she did not plan to stay here. She turned, about to leave. Behind her a bungalow front door opened and two of the locals stepped out. Grendella spun back, shaking her head, somehow she had known that they would look like this.

They were humanoid figures. Just over two-foot-tall, dressed exactly alike, in bright dungarees, and long-sleeved stripy jerseys, they looked curiously doll-like. From the slight variations in physique Grendella presumed that one was male and one was female. It was hard to be sure; their hair was cut the same, even their faces were totally alike: with little button noses, small tight thin-lipped mouths, and narrowed suspicious eyes. Their skin was multi-coloured, covering their rotund little bodies in a patchwork pattern, but even this complex pattern seemed to be repeated exactly on each of them. They approached her, keeping precisely in step with each other.

'Hi, Shortstuffs. Which one is Tweedledum, and which is Tweedledee?'

They said nothing. Instead, as if synchronised, they both produced a small notebook and pencil and started to write rapidly, all the while looking extremely disapproving.

'So tell me Munchkins, what does a happening guy and girl such as yourselves do for entertainment 'round here?'

'Obviously a knowledge-base non-possessor.' They both spoke

together in dull, dead sounding voices.

Grendella bristled: 'Are you saying I'm thick?'

'Differently abled.'

'That's good, coming from a couple of runts like you.'

'This is fascinating,' the colourful beings agreed. 'The use of language to offend is obviously cerebrally challenged.'

'Talk sense, you little creeps.'

'Perhaps the contaminant is sobriety-deprived.'

'I haven't touched a drop for hours!' Grendella was getting annoyed.

'Who ARE you?'

'We are the Ritons,' the curious figures answered politely.

'That figures. How do I get to somewhere sensible?'

The Ritons shook their heads sadly.

'Mentally disadvantaged.'

'Listen half-pints. I can't say that rapping with Tom Thumb's uptight cousins has been fun, because it hasn't. But joke's over. It's time to get out of this toy-store town, just tell me who made you little wind-up dollies and I'll go there for some fun.'

'I am afraid you cannot leave,' the first Riton said.

'You are a contaminant, you see.' added Riton number two.

'You must be stopped.'

'Put on trial.'

'TRIAL!' Grendella blurted incredulously. 'What for?'

'For crimes against the state.'

'Crimes against the language.'

'Crimes against a fair and balanced world.' They waved their notebooks. 'We have the evidence you see. We are afraid that it will mean the terminal penalty.'

'What's that? Polite conversation with you two funsters.'

'You must be stopped. Neutralised.'

'Rendered non-viable.'

Grendella had had enough of their surreal little delusion. She leaned forward, smiling dangerously.

'You've got to catch me first.'

The Ritons looked soberly at each other, they nodded and opened their mouths wide. Overcome by gas, the Dwarfen fell over.

'I should have known,' she managed to mumble dully as she passed out, 'Talking horse-manure all the time - bound to have bad breath.'

The Ritons gazed at each other impassively, shaking their heads.

'A chronic under-achiever, we must be careful to avoid inappropriate physical abuse.'

Then they started to drag the Dwarfen away; carefully.

"Please God. Let me see something nice this time," Will thought to himself as he opened his eyes.

The face that looked back was weathered and grinning, deeply tanned and lined by its owner's amusement at the cosmos. The eyes were large, softly brown with a merry twinkle, and under the large gnomonic nose, the wide lips contained a brimming gob, full of gleaming teeth. Add to this the large hoop earring that adorned the thick left ear and the great tumbling cascades of shiny curly black hair and you had Will's vision of what a buccaneer should look like.

His clothes too seemed suitably flamboyant. The long flowing, gypsy-style white silk shirt, the large musketeer boots, the colourful poncho carelessly thrown on, the long black gloves, and that hat: a hat of brocade and feathers and finery, a hat that seemed to go on forever, of unlikely dimensions, somehow defying gravity and not flopping all over the place. This being was something to see, and you could tell he knew it too, from the slightly posed carelessness with which he sat on the stool, the rugged jauntiness of the fist resting on the hip. He was certainly impressive, considering he was only eleven inches high.

'Greetings, Will Prince,' the being said in a deep voice dripping with gregarious good-fellowship, 'Welcome to the quest.'

Will said nothing, he could say nothing. He was just too shocked.

'Would you like something to eat? Something to drink?'

The being casually clicked his fingers, a substantial table appeared, covered with fine linen, china, silverware and more importantly, more mouth-watering delicacies than Will had ever seen. It was all too much. Will fainted, ears resounding with the creature's fruity laughter.

Ashton, Iowa : Early 21st Century, October.

"Cyanide Sal", the limpicks had called her in Big-City Homicide, behind her back, of course. In the department, Sally Munday had had a reputation for being so hard-boiled, she needed dynamite to crack a smile. She did not suffer fools gladly, had not put up with the "boys" on the force's constant sexist jibes, had taken charge of her own destiny and set up as a private detective.

The same kindergarten mentality adopted by her ex-colleagues still occasionally prompted some jerk to think that he was really clever, calling her a "private dick" in a sniggering, patronising, voice. Sally, treated such cretins with the contempt, and the sharp right hook to the jaw, that they deserved.

However, Sally was no stereotype from some old movie, no cool blonde with a smoking gun in her hand, hatred for all men and a frigidaire in her heart. She did not even own a fedora, much to her customers' disappointment. Sally Munday, was a together, large boned early thirties red-head, with a no-nonsense attitude, casual taste in clothes, a ten-year-old son to support and a flair for her job. She did not need to make slickly impressive wise-cracks about being good at what she did; she just was.

Right now, that job was finding Mrs Titwilleger, although having met Casper, she felt that Blossom was probably better off on her own. It had been surprisingly easy so far. Some fellow bus passengers had seen her walk away. It had just been a matter of following the route in her battered Sedan, asking questions. People answered Sally; she was a rarity in an impatient time, for she asked questions like she really wanted to hear the answer, and then she listened.

'Sure,' The spotty teenager said. 'I thought it was strange, she seemed so normal.'

'And she climbed into a van with some old guys.'

'Old! They were dinosaurs, like outta the movies my gran'daddy watches. Woodstock n' Monteray n' stuff.'

'Was there anything distinctive about the van?'

The kid looked uncertain, confused. 'Distinctive, what's that?'

'Anything special or noticeable. Anything that stood out.'

'Shi-i-i-t-t-t mam! Distinctive ain't the word. That thing was so old, it was a wonder it was still moving, AND the paintwork. You've never see the like! Unicorns, stars and all types of weird stuff, all over the damn thing. It looked horrible.'

'Were there any words painted, with the pictures.'

'Yeah but they were real strange, "PEACE" n' "LOVE" n' "END THE WAR NOW". What damn war's that? I thought.'

'Anything else.'

'Yeah, "HELL NO! WE WON'T GO", "LAY DON'T SLAY", and somethin' else. Some kinda' name. It stuck in my mind...'

Sally nodded eagerly, spurring the kid on.

'The Misbegotten Sons of Hernandez, or Houston or some damn thing.'

'When it drove off, did you see which way it went?'

'Well, it was far off when it turned, but I think.'

'Yes?'

'I think it turned off towards Ashton.'

Sally rewarded the youth with a smile and some effusive words of appreciation.

'No sweat M'am,' he said, 'Can I have the fifty bucks now?'

He was a killer, although he was not bothered by the fact. It was just a job. Even his collection of passports, each with a different alias, were reasonably upfront about it. Occupation, they said: "Exterminator". And it had to be said that he was lethally efficient. Better than most poisons, a hundred per cent effective against tiresome pests.

Now he had arrived in Ashton, just another place full of secrets, hidden lusts, hatreds and despairs. None of it mattered to this rather nondescript looking man with the sober taste in suits. He had not arrived as a tourist, like the many others camped outside the Titwilleger home. All he wanted to do was get things over with, do the business and get back home and work on his golf handicap. He was a man of few needs and most of those needs were focused now on rapidly finding Blossom Titwilleger and terminating her existence.

'Ah, you're awake. Good.'

The swashbuckling figure had moved his stool to the dinner table.

'Am I?' was all Will could mutter weakly, he had been unconscious so many times recently, he had no certain idea of which state he was in anymore.

'I don't think I'd bother to talk to you if you wasn't.'

Will did not even listen to the creature's answer. He was distracted by the smell, the delicious, wonderful odour, of lots and lots, of food and drink. He had been thoughtfully placed at the table, within easy reach of everything. For a while he drank it all in, then he looked at the little man, the longing virtually dripping down his face. The flamboyant personage politely motioned.

'Please, feel free.'

That was all the encouragement Will needed. Like a manic, raging beast descending upon his prey, Will attacked the contents of the table. For a long time there was just the sound of happy



swilling, munching, and the little man's encouraging mirth. For Will, it was a wonderful experience, almost orgasmic in intensity. After all the years of difficult COMS GRUB machines, after all the privations of the past few days, it was a dream made flesh, and such flesh; sweet, tender and gorgeous. For a while after he had finished there was silence, a quiet formed from perfect contentment and rose-tinted memory. The meal had been marvellous. Then Will called his pleased senses to order.

'Who are you?' he asked the creature in the unlikely hat.

'The name's Gilhoolie, I'm a fantastation.'

'A fantas...A what?'

'A guide. Your guide to Spoggle. You summoned me when you hit the MADID button.'

'That's nice. You can start by telling me where my friends are.'

'That would be telling.'

'You just said you're a guide.'

'I'm more generalised than that, I don't want to spoil the fun.' Gilhoolie chuckled.

'Fun, what fun?'

'The fun of you finding your friends. The fun of you rescuing them. The fun of proving that you're worthy to go after the MADID.'

Will tried a little conceited name-dropping.

'THE Queen Sharon, Queen of the Illuminated Way, no less, thought I was worthy.'

The Fantastation looked distinctly underwhelmed.

'We know. But believe me, she isn't as important as she thinks she is. The opinions, or the powers, of your purple, or orange friends, don't matter here.'

"That's telling me", Will thought. No wonder she said she couldn't help.

'So, if you can't tell me where my friends are, what can you tell me?'

'There is a very old natural law in effect in the universe. That for every piece of well thought out, logical action, there must be a equal piece of total jammy blind luck...'

'That about sums up my life.'

'When this place was created - don't ask me anything about the creators because I won't tell you - it was decided that the last thing anyone needed was luck mucking about with everyone's careful plans. So, the creators did what they do best; creating. They created the MADID and they created the quest for the MADID and they created me to oversee that quest. That way, all the blind-luck element of life's equation is used up in seeking the MADID and all the planned stuff can go on without disturbance.'

'So, I'm here as some sort of lightning conductor for luck.'

'You seem to be fairly lucky. You're here, you've survived so far.'

'So, what's next?'

Gilhoolie smiled his most trustworthy smile.

'The fun bit, you'll enjoy this...'

'Wanna bet!' Will mumbled to himself resentfully.

'Somewhere out there, on this BIG, BIG world, are your friends. All you have to do is find them, and rescue them.'

'RESCUE?'

'Yes. They're all in some danger. A little precaution we take, just to make things interesting.'

Will absolutely loathed every minute of being a hero. It was nothing but grief, he decided.

'That's nice. What if I do all this, if I rescue them.'

'Well then, I take out my scorecard, tot up how you've done and see if you go onto the next bit. That's the really hard part.'

'You're treating it like it's all a game, scorecards and things.'

'It is a sort of game really. Anything that's got so much luck involved is a game. Life's a game if you look at it that way.'

Will could feel the beneficial effects of the meal ebbing away in direct proportion to his growing realisation of the tasks ahead.

'What if I fail?'

'Cheer up Will, you won't.'

'What if I do?'

'I don't write the rules...'

'Yes?'

'It's nothing to do with me.'

Will nodded, growing impatient. For a moment the Fantastation's eyes lost their sparkle, his mouth it's mirth.'

'If you don't succeed...!' Gilhoolie hesitated.

'WHAT HAPPENS?'

'You all die horribly,' came the subdued reply. 'The Estapoppi won't release you a second time.'

Will suddenly felt very cold.

'What happens if I say - we quit, we don't want to go on, let us leave?'

'You can't. You're committed. Give up and you give up everything. It's death or glory now.'

'You're a bundle of laughs, d'you know that.'

'Sorry!' The Fantastation looked genuinely apologetic.

It was all a bit much for Will. In an instant, a man who had only been responsible for collecting a DOLE payment suddenly found that the lives of everyone he had involved in his adolescent heroic fantasies depended on him. It was what Hollywood movie makers used to call "a moment of courage" and much to his continued amazement, Will rose to the occasion admirably. After all, he told himself, "You have no choice."

'Come on then, how do I start?'

Gilhoolie brightened, bounding onto the dull ground. He clicked his fingers and the wall with the button, along with the table and chairs, vanished.

'What! No doggy-bag?' Will protested pathetically.

Another nonchalant click of those nimble-gloved fingers and a

new row of signs appeared, stretching off into the distance, apparently for Infinity: TO GRENDELLA, they said.

'I'm supposed to walk, am I?'

'No. We provide transport.'

Another movement of those magical fingers and the transportation arrived. Will looked at the gleaming new blue bicycle sceptically, taking in every detail, including the basket containing the small chaise-lounge at the front.

'You travel in style, I see.'

'I'm here to observe and to give advice. I'm not supposed to do anything.'

'Where's the engine?'

The Fantastation had recovered its good spirits, but was starting to find this human tiresome. It could tell that he was going to be a difficult one.

'There's no engine. We want no pollution here. You PEDAL it.'

'Will was horrified, it was bad enough being under sentence of death without having to play around with some dismal old contraption.

'I CAN'T RIDE THAT THING!'

'Then LEARN!'

Will made his way to the bike with sullen ill-grace, pulling insulting faces and hissing bad-tempered retorts under his breath. As he climbed onto the bike, the human's features cleared; a thought had occurred.

'This quest?'

'Yes?'

'Have other people tried it?'

'We have had representative heroes from most races and cultures. I have adopted many shapes over the years.'

'How did they get on?'

'In what way?'

'Well, did they get to this next level for instance?'

'No, I must admit, they all died horribly. But don't worry Will, it's like cycling; there's always a first time.'

Ashton, Iowa: Early 21st Century, October.

For all his dark talk of taking action, it had taken a weary threat of divorce from the normally placid Primrose to motivate Cecil Bland. Once more, the uptight Englishman had crossed the Atlantic,

braving a journey that had become hated, keen to restore what he saw as: Traditional Moral Values. Cecil had always been careful with money, but for once his normal parsimonious restrictions had been lifted. There were more important things at stake than a few extra pounds high interest on his account. This was to be another kind of book balancing.

For someone with money to spend, purchasing an over-priced rifle had been fairly easy, although the strutting rednecks in the survivalist camp had not quite known how to deal with their puny foreign visitor, the steely glint in his eye, or his sense of purpose. It was all going to plan. He had the gun, he had taken the lessons and knew how to shoot. He had arrived in Ashton, the most loathsome place in his personal universe. Now all he had to do was locate and kill Blossom Titwilliger, the woman everyone said was a Satanist, and thus the main cause of his troubles.

As he walked the streets of the Town, on his way to the hotel, his mind was filled with one thought. He did not notice the curiously-painted van, with the fading stars and unicorns, as it drove past him, just inches from his face. He did not see the celebrated figure sitting in the passenger seat, trying to look inconspicuous. Cecil Bland was too busy thinking, "where is she?"

The Arbor were an odd lifeform. About the size and shape of raisins, floating in a nasty green soup of an atmosphere. They did not need to drink, eat, make love, sleep or perform any other physical function. Long before mankind had started as a single cell organism, the Arbor had outstripped the transitory pleasures of the flesh, becoming for all their apparent disadvantages a very content culture. On one level, the raisin level, the Arbor did not exist, and on another, they had amazingly rich lives. Once they had possessed limbs and hearts and ambitions. Then the green mist had come, a college chemistry project that had gone wrong. After that, everything that the Arbor imagined came true, mental images of stunning reality shaped by some special quality of the mist. In a very short time, the Arbor had all laid down, giving themselves up to their imaginary pleasures, minds and bodies completely hood-winked by thought, believing that they ate well, took care of their physiques; that they had in fact developed into a race of super-fulfilled super-beings. After the first few millennia, all that was left of the Arbor were small wizened round lumps.

CRAAAASSSSHHHH!

The Stratacharger Warspite, its guidance system addled by its journey across infinity, landed heavily on Arboria. Not for the

Star-Corps Major the choking veil of Emerald Mist. Here was a planet of breathtaking white skyscrapers, of wide gleaming white thoroughfares, plentiful parks and lakes and incredible beings. On this planet where thought became substance, Buck Chandler had become real.

It had taken lots of time and effort, not to mention painful falling over, before Will mastered the art of cycling. The initial thrill of pumping the pedals had soon lost its magic and after a couple of days, Will had begun to heartily detest every agonising second of the experience.

'How much further?', he whined for only the fifth time in an hour.

The Fantastation lay reclined on the small chaise-lounge, relaxed, and at peace with the world, a racy pulp novel in one hand and a miniaturised vodka martini in the other.

'How much further?'

'Could you please stop asking, "how much further?, how much further?" ' The voice from under the great brim of the hat mimicked Will's plaintive quality to perfection.

'I want to know.'

'We get there when we get there. Save your breath for your pedalling.'

Will reluctantly took Gilhollie's advice, concentrating on the recent developments in the surrounding landscape. For the first couple of days, there had been nothing but the greyness and the signs, but then they had reached the columns. Great rounded structures, about the size of a small city in width, their surfaces shimmered with a strange energy as they thrust themselves out of sight into the atmosphere above his head. Despite their drab colourings they were an awesome sight grouped on the unending plain.

'Grey floor, grey sky, grey towers. These creators of yours were sure creative with colour', Will had commented with heavy dollops of irony.

The towers, for all their lack of brightness, were even more colossal, even more magnificent as he cycled amongst them, impressed and fearful of their sheer size.

'What are they doing? Holding up the sky?'

'You'll soon find out.' Gilhoolie had said.

The chance came quicker than Will had expected. Absorbed in thoughts of the towers and of revolt against the pampered Fantastation, Will had not been paying attention to the signs. Now he looked ahead and realised that there were no more signs. He had

just passed the last one. Panicking slightly, Will braked heavily, noticing with disappointment that Gilhoolie was completely unruffled by the abrupt halt.

'We're here,' it said, languidly scratching an earlobe.

Will looked around with total disbelief. All that cycling, all that effort for nothing. "Here" was nowhere. They were positioned at the closest point between two of the towers, usually there was a gap of at least a couple of miles between the massive structures, but these were different, closer, only a couple of hundred yards separating them.

'Where's Grendella?'

'In one of those.' Gilhoolie indicated the two nearest towers.

'She's in a five-mile wide solid column. How am I suppose to rescue her? With a pick-axe?'

'Appearances can be deceptive.'

'I know. I THOUGHT you were on my side.'

The Fantastation paid no attention to Will's anger.

'The question you have to answer, is...'

'Why am I here?'

'Is: Which one is she in?'

'How can I tell? They're both the same.' Will struggled valiantly to keep his voice even.

'I didn't say it would be easy.'

'I know what the answer to this is going to be, but just to make things clear, what happens if I pick the wrong one?'

'You die horribly.' The Fantastation delivered the sentence with casual ease. It was in danger of becoming a catchphrase. Will sighed to himself, nodding his head.

'I thought you'd say that.'

Gilhoolie was matter of fact about it.

'You have a fifty-fifty chance.'

'That doesn't cheer me up.'

'You can take as long as you like to choose.'

'Really!' Will brightened slightly.

'I could do lunch.'

'Sounds good.'

'But, if you take too long, I can't guarantee that your friend will still be alive, and then you fail and then...'

'We all die horribly. I know.' Will stretched, climbing from the bike.

'Whoops!'

He smiled slightly spitefully at the little shriek as he let go of the handles, enjoying the moment, as bicycle and piratical passenger fell heavily to the ground.

'Decisions, decisions.' For a long time he stood musing, paying no attention to the disparaging comments Gilhoolie heaped on his genealogy, his head moving from side-to-side like that of a spectator watching an extremely impressive tennis rally. On one side Grendella; on the other: death.

'Oh well, better get it over with. I wasn't enjoying life much anyway.' He started to walk, fairly resolutely, towards the tower on the right. Sulphur was always telling him he never got anything "Right". This was his chance to prove the scaly upstart wrong, wherever he was. At the final moment, he paused turned back, uncertain.

'What do I do now?'

The Fantastation replied from the relative comfort of its rescued chaise-lounge.

'Keep going.'

'WHAT! Into the wall?'

'Yes.'

For a while, Will stood, like a novice parachutist, preparing to jump, summoning up all his courage. Then he turned back.

'Aren't you coming?'

'Not this trip...' Gilhoolie waved his hand from side to side in an exaggerated gesture. 'Goodbye!'

Will pouted irritably.

'That's supposed to cheer me up is it? Goodbye?' He turned back, facing the solid wall and closed his eyes. 'You could at least have said Au revoir.'

He stepped forward and vanished.

Ashton, Iowa: Early 21st Century, October.

'Life's a bitch,' Moonglow mumbled feelingly.

The band were depressed. This was not the hero's homecoming that they had fondly imagined, scripted and embellished in their heads. It was bad enough finding that the town had changed, bad enough to realise that the venue they were playing was on the site of Mickey's Rock 'n' Roll Diner, hallowed shrine and favourite hangout of their youth. But in front of Blossom, to find out that they had been booked to play at a retirement home. A "Where Are They Now?" slot at a senior citizens disco. They had a right to be despondent.

The disgusting chirpiness of their guide did little to lighten their collective gloom. Mrs Handy, The Chief Executive of the Residence (Managerial Section), was a compact, dynamic little bundle of energy, with a smile as fixed as her well rehearsed line in welcoming patter. She paid no heed to the Band's wailing and gnashing of false teeth as they toured the "Autumn Years Experience Enhancement Facility". Mrs Handy was a pro, a product

of years of service industry, an inveterate "have a nice dayer", she could witter on with the best, blithely overlooking such everyday retirement home commonplaces as depression or Alzheimers. Such minor considerations could do nothing to diminish this indefatigable woman's relentless grinding cheerfulness.

'I think it's so nice to see people of YOUR age, still giving so much entertainment,' she chirped.

'Well shucks, ma'am,' Starchild replied, miming strangling motions behind her back all the while, '... It sure is difficult, leaving our bath chairs, our blankets, chunky cardigans and mugs of hot cocoa, but we felt we owe it to our fans to put on these leather trousers, drink mind-boggling amounts of tequila and rock till their ears drop off.'

'That's really sweet'. By the way, if you feel the need for refreshment, we do have the latest cocoa-making facilities. Now, Mr Hickey!' She wagged her finger theatrically at a hapless resident. 'Don't bash your head against the wall like that, there's a good boy. We don't want you to damage the paintwork now, do we?.'

As Mrs Handy swept past, the old man gazed at them with the eyes of a small trapped animal, all the while, thumping his head rhythmically against the wall.

'Poor Mr Hickey,' Handy spoke in a confidential whisper, loud enough to wake the dead. 'He doesn't seem to have made the adjustment.'

The band members were satirically shocked.

'REALLY!' they exclaimed in harmony, looking at each other in laboured bewilderment, 'We can't think why.'

Starchild turned to his guest, with a strained evangelical grin, he mouthed through gritted teeth.

'Are you enjoying this, Miss Pimpleknocker?'

Blossom played it to the hilt, responding with a manic painted-on smile of her own and a hyper-glassy-eyed nod.

'It's just so wonderful to see all these people, in the twilight of their years, having such fun with enemas.'

To herself, Blossom could admit that she was enjoying the experience; the murderous glares the others shot at their jaunty patronising hostess, the sense of belonging that she got from sharing the company of her old school friends. Most of all, she was enjoying a feeling of intense relief. She knew that the media would be making a fuss about her disappearance, that people would be looking for her, and the thought of arriving in Ashton had filled her with horror. She had dreaded accidentally bumping into some old friend or acquaintance and setting off the whole sad circus of press attention again. Perhaps destroying her links with the band and her hopes for a new future. Now, as they walked round "the complex", unwilling captives of Mrs Handy, Blossom felt that she could relax. There was no one to identify her in this isolated environment. This home was as isolated as Shangri-La.



She was safe.

Sally Munday was tired. Early that morning when she had tracked the strangely decorated van to Ashton, it had all seemed so easy. But Sally knew that detective work was never easy. The long afternoon had proved that fact beyond doubt. She decided that the van owners had to be some kind of entertainers, had picked up the phone and dialled, and dialled and dialled: every bar, hotel, restaurant, school, cocktail lounge, deli, garden shed, woman's group, that might put on a show. Hours and hours of bright and polite requests for information had drained her, reducing her voice to a croak, flaying the inside of her throat in the process, and all for nothing. No one had booked a group or magician or any kind of act with a van of the type she was after. All routes led to a brick wall and she was too weary to punch her way through it.

As she picked up her son from her neighbour, apologising for the zillionth time for being late, she could barely keep her eyes open, even though it was only six. Unfortunately, ten year old Chris Munday was no respecter of parental fatigue. His bubbling energy and excitement exploded around her in a stream of breathless chatter about his day. For a while, Sally sat in her chair at home, coat still on, letting her son's flowing voice wash over her, then she became aware that he had asked her a question.

'Well, can I?' Chris repeated, realising that really old people, ones in their thirties such as his mother, sometimes had trouble with their hearing.

'Can you what?'

'Can I stay at Jimmy's house tonight?'

'Who's Jimmy?'

'He's in my class, you don't know him. He lives over on Harper.'

'By the retirement home?'

'Yeah, right next to it.'

'Why, suddenly, do you want to go and stay with this kid. What computer games he got?'

Chris screwed up his youthful face disdainfully.

'Ma, get with the program, computer games are passé.'

Feeling prehistoric, Sally let her lack of fashionable knowledge pass.

'So why do you wanna go.'

'To see the van'

In an instant, Sally felt her fatigue evaporate as her brain moved up a gear.

'Van. What van?'  
'The one I've been talking about all night, Ma. You're so slow.'  
'What van, Chris?'  
Chris pulled his lower lip, looking thoughtful.  
'Well, it's really cool. Really old and covered with really crucial things. Unicorns an' stars an....'  
Sally resisted an overwhelming urge to hug her son and whoop with delight. Luck was a wonderful thing.  
'Where is this van now?'  
'Where it's been all day. Parked next door to Jimmy's, where they store the old people till they die.'  
'Give me Jimmy's number and get your stuff together. I'll call his parents and take you over right away.'

For a while, she stood in the parking lot, gazing hungrily at the faded panels of the ancient vehicle. Then Sally made her way inside. The sweaty, gum-chewing, headset-wearing, orderly on the front desk scarcely looked older than her son. He viewed the new arrival with impatience, having just got to the good bit of his virtual programme: "Sex Warriors of Venus".

Sally inwardly sighed; she was making a habit of interviewing kids today. Outwardly she gave the youth a winning smile.

'I wonder if you can help me. I'm trying to find a friend who's here?'

'Visiting hours are three to five.' The youth tried sullenness hoping to get rid of her. He had better things to do, Empress Trixie's life was at stake.

'She's not a resident.'

The orderly's rude response would have been enough to make Mrs Handy wilt and die with embarrassment.

'Like I said, lady. Visiting hours are three to five. Everyone's gone.'

Sally was starting to get annoyed.

'Do you like artwork?' She motioned at the absurdly overdeveloped, half-naked forms luridly illustrated on the virtual disc cover.

'They're okay.'

'I have some artwork you might be interested in.' She held up the finely engraved bank note.

The orderly swallowed his gum, abruptly becoming helpful. Empress Trixie's life was one thing, money was another.

'What d'you want to know.'

'I think my friends with the entertainment...'

Sally ran to the portable phone in her car. It was six forty-five. She thanked her lucky stars that she had listened to her hunch and negotiated this job for a flat finders fee, rather than by the hour.

'Yes,' the servant said. 'Mister Billings is at home.'

Billings was looking forward to a date with a shapely blonde, one not long out of puberty. He did not relish the interruption.

'What is it, Munday.'

'I've found her.'

'Already!'

'But you'd better be quick. She's appearing for one night only.'

Casper rapidly scribbled the address.

'Yes, I know where Harper is. I'm on my way.'

He slammed down the phone. A superhero hurrying to save the planet could have barely matched Titwilleger for the speed with which he changed and made it to his car. The sudden emergence from the garage caught the bored-looking press pack by surprise; before they even had a chance to grab their cameras he had roared off on his errand, glove compartment filled with stakes, garlic, holy water and perhaps, most importantly, silver bullets. Casper had bought a gun.

The Assassin was skilled in a wide range of criminal activities. One of them was bugging a phone. He smiled grimly to

himself as he listened to Claude Billings break the news to his client, then he looked at the map.

"This was going to be easy."

"Americans! They all drive like maniacs."

Fortunately for Cecil Bland, he had been parked facing in the right direction when Casper screeched out of the house. He had known that Blossom's disappearance had been just another of the Titwillegers pathetic publicity stunts, and had camped in his hire care outside the horribly familiar dwelling.

Now, as he swerved and cursed, struggling to keep pace with Casper's frantic driving, Cecil allowed himself a brief moment of self approbation. He was sure that Titwilleger was driving to meet his wife and it felt good to be right. He wished that Primrose was beside him so that he could tell her so. He wondered what she would think of her husband if she could see him now, looking forward to Casper and Blossom's reunion with stern satisfaction. It was going to be their last. A good civil servant, through and through, he was going to place them forever in the archive of time. In a file marked - "Closed."

For a moment, all was clogging suffocating greyness. Foul-tasting nothingness filled his mouth, nose and lungs, and then it cleared.

'I'll be damned,' Will said expressively, as he was overwhelmed by the lawnlike plain of greenery, the decorative clumps of small trees. He looked back, expecting to see a wall of grey, but no such wall was in place. On all sides he was surrounded by an endless flat horizon of green. Will felt he had to experiment, taking a few steps back. But once again he could find no evidence of a wall, visible or invisible. It was as if his surroundings went on forever.

For a while, he waited, luxuriating in the lush landscape. This was a new experience for the city dwelling-human, to be encircled by nature, even neat and tidy nature such as this which

did not smell of anything. With much effort, he pulled himself together. Somewhere "out there", lost on this plain was the woman that Will loved. Perhaps she was even in mortal danger. Further enjoyment of the scenery would have to wait. Filled with a sense of high moral purpose, Will started to walk straight ahead, not really knowing why he had chosen this direction.

Someone should have told the first-generation Personifications in the bar that there was one thing Merlyn's people could not stand: Satire. Perhaps then the difference of opinion could have been averted. No one heard the jovial quip that Robert Benchley uttered, but all the retired COMS units felt sure that it could have only been uttered in the spirit of good-natured banter that typified the model. Unfortunately, the figures in plaid were touchy when it came to their sense of humour. With one smooth motion, a fierce warrior drew forth his sword and neatly sliced off Robert's head.

The head flew through the air, bounced off the bar and came to rest by a spittoon. To the tribe's considerable astonishment, "Bob" seemed unscathed by the experience. Dorothy Parker bent down providing the grinning head of the decapitee with a martini (thoughtfully equipped with a straw), Mr Benchley took a sip, bemoaning the fact that, "the martinis were not like the ones at Tony's", then turned his attention to Kinata and her wide-eyed followers.

'...Of course, you realise that this means War?'

Will had been enchanted by the Riton town, had been fascinated and touched by the identical Riton creatures that had come to visit him. After that, things had gone downhill and he had fared no better than Grendella. His unconscious body was soon conveyed to the building that had been adapted to hold any unwanted visitors.

Grendella's features filled Will's dreams while he slept and his vision when he woke up. Her smiling face was just inches from his, Riton architecture not being designed for individuals of Will's or even Grendella's size. It had been a tight squeeze to imprison them both and as a result, much to Will's intense, strawberry-tinted embarrassment, he found himself pressed against his adored colleague with a closeness that would have made a sardine claustrophobic. Grendella could not contain her amusement at the human's obvious discomfort or his heavy blushing. Will Prince was just so gruesomely adorable.

'So tell me, Will. What's a nice kid like you doing on a planet like this?'

Will took a while to find his voice. He desperately wanted Grendella to like him, and did not want to make a mistake by opening his mouth.

'I've been sent to rescue you,' he mumbled sheepishly.

'Well, you've made a helluva start.'

'Sorry.'

'Don't apologise. I haven't done that well on my own.'

'What do you think we should do now?'

'Don't know. I haven't decided yet. It's getting dark, I don't think they'll try us until tomorrow.'

Grendella fidgeted in the confined space as she spoke, trying to get comfortable. The soft motions of her body sent an electric thrill through the human, a delicately pleased sensation that he had never experienced before.

'Tell me what's been happening to you.'

When Will eventually found his voice, it was somewhat strained.

'W-Well, I woke up.'

Ashton, Iowa: Early 21st Century, October.

Mrs Handy knew enough about local politics to be truly impressed by the name Claude Billings. Casper and his lawyer soon filled the places of guests of honour at the entertainment. They sat uncomfortably, waiting for the show to begin, in the bright clinical main-hall, surrounded by patients in wheelchairs, many too doped or distracted to care who was appearing. Sally Munday, job done, hung around out of interest, sitting where she preferred to be, on the sidelines.

'I can't!' Blossom was being shy.  
'Come on; you'll be great.' Starchild was not taking "no" for an answer.  
'I remember you in the drama group. You wasn't shy then.'  
Moonglow said in a tone of voice that indicated mild surprise at remembering anything.  
'That was over forty years ago.'  
'All you have to do is bash a tambourine. Anyone could do that, even your dork of a husband could do that.'  
'I can't?,' Blossom's resistance was starting to crumble, Starchild pressed on.  
'Ask yourself; who's going to know? You're never going to see any of the people out there again, and its not like it's a big important gig. Half the old folk are probably on more sedation than I was in '69.'  
'Go on. It'll be a blast.' Goon and Stumpy added their encouragement.  
For someone of her years. Blossom's giggle was surprisingly girlish.  
'Okay.'  
As the other band members whooped their "Far outs" and "Cools", Starchild leaned forward and gave Blossom a kiss on the cheek.  
'Look on this as an audition. If we like you, we may just keep you.'  
Blossom grinned back: 'Just what I always wanted. To become an honorary Misbegotten Son of Hades.'  
'Perhaps it's time we added a daughter to the family.'

Will had finished his story, but he barely noticed. He we hypnotised, totally enthralled by the petite creature at his side, by the magical sparkle in her eyes and the wicked thrill in her laughter.

This Grendella, Princess of the Dwarfen, was a woman of perfection, to be placed on a pedestal and worshipped. Her soft

unimpeachable loveliness should be wooed by the finest music and the best poetry. If he could pluck up the courage he would whisper apologetically of his unworthy love, but for the moment he waited, enraptured.

Grendella felt a bubbling feeling of hilarity. They were all there, all the soppy signs: the sighing, the shy yearning puppyish looks. Not for the first time, she wondered why men became such simpering fools at the thought of screwing. For a while, she weighed up the pros and cons, realising that, after all, she had nothing better to do, and besides, she had always thought that he was "kinda cute", in a drippy sort of way. After she decided, she belched heavily, winked at Will with a sinful gleam in her eye, and indicating their cramped surrounding, asked him matter-of-factly.

'Have you ever done it in a Wendy house?'

As Will opened his mouth to shyly reply, her lips struck his forcibly. To his total amazement, Will found himself responding with a passionate hunger he had never known himself capable of. After a while, the little bungalow started to shake. The Riton guards, who fell off the roof, waited in terror for the Spoggle-quake to envelop them.

Ashton, Iowa: Early 21st Century, October.

On the front desk, the orderly had been forced to make sacrifices. The gum and the virtual disc had gone into storage for later. He could not really complain, it was turning out to be quite a profitable evening. He did not know who this band were but they certainly seemed popular. Both the crazy foreign guy and the dull one in dark glasses had paid him well for letting them in and giving them directions. The orderly felt no guilt at admitting unauthorised outsiders, going against residence policy.

'After all,' he told himself, 'What harm can they do.'



Fortunately, the staff were all involved with preparing for the disco/concert and Cecil Bland was not challenged as he followed directions to the hall's upper level. Years before, after Micky's Rock 'n' Roll Diner and before the building had been converted into a residence for the aged, this hall had been part of a school, the upper level had been vital for assemblies, parents' evenings and the like. Today it was unused, just a storage area, full of stacks of old chairs, walking frames, the sort of stuff that builds up in a busy institution and that nobody can bring themselves to throw away.

Cecil settled himself amongst a nest of old chairs. He had a good view of Casper's pinkly balding head and of the stage. No Blossom as yet, but he felt sure that she would turn up somewhere soon. With hands made slippery by sweat, he struggled to put the rifle together. So involved was he, in visions of the new moral world order that would spring from his actions, that he did not notice the door on the far side of the upper level open, or see the nondescript-looking man creep in and hide behind a pile of boxes.

Will was not a virgin when he slept with Grendelia, not physically anyway. COMS regarded the sheer illogic of Humanity's hang-ups about sex as some sort of strange aberration, but they had reluctantly concluded that mankind had physical needs, and that such needs had best be catered for. However, such provisions did not mean that sex or procreation could not be strictly controlled. The vitamin and nutrient enhanced pap fed to everybody on Earth contained a powerful contraceptive and sexual sedative. Will's very conception had been a fluke, taking place as it had in the relaxed atmosphere of Mars. COMS had programmed themselves to protect human life, whatever the cost, and it had been this programming that had permitted Will's birth, on a transport bound for Earth. The problem was that for those machines in the Olympian position of controllers, love was an abstract concept, passion just a word. They did not interface with humanity, as did the Personifications. Emotion was an unfortunate biological side effect to be restricted where possible. Thus people were allowed to have sex whenever they liked, as long as they promised not to enjoy it, harm one another, or most importantly, get involved. People who wanted sex advertised on Channel 69. They made an

appointment. They met once and that was that. It was all cold and clinical. Part of Humanity's, trade-off for a roof over their head, three bowls of pap a day and 6005 channels on the vid screen.

Will had been involved in quite a few sexual encounters. Frigid impersonal no-nonsense affairs; swapping body fluids about as emotional an experience as shaking hands. Like most of his peers, he had come to wonder what all the fuss was about. That was before last night, before Grendella.

Will now lay with a silly grin on his face, and the sleeping Dwafen in his arms. Emotionally a virgin no longer, he wanted to hug her small figure so tightly, to never let her go. Instead, he waited, his entire body shaking and quivering, waiting for this amazing creature to open her eyes. At last, she did.

Will sighed happily.

'I love you.' He said,

Grendella patted his cheek.

'Not now, Will.'

'I mean it. I LOVE YOU...'

Grendella started to dress with difficulty in the confined space.

'I mean it too. Not now.'

'But! I LOVE YOU!'

'Look, Will. I think it's nice. We had a good time last night, sort-of. But right now I've other things on my mind.'

Will pouted, looking like a kicked puppy.

'What can be more important than love?'

'The Ritons are going to kill our arsens, if we don't have a plan. I'm not cut out to be Juliet, and Romeo you ain't.'

'You have a point.'

'I know.' Grendella pulled on her trainers with a flourish.

'Now! Put your pecker away, put your clothes on and get your brain into gear. We've got to think of a way out of here.'

Will did as he was told. Eager to please he was soon dressed.

'How much time do you think we've got?' he breathlessly asked.

At that moment, there was a sharp rap at the door. Grendella suddenly seemed to deflate.

'Much less than I thought.'

If Casper's gun had been the size of a howitzer, it could not have felt heavier in his pocket. He had not expected to be so prominently placed and was feeling the strain of imagined eyes on the back of his head, eyes that flashed with accusation: "Murderer."

He wanted to turn on the audience, to explain that what he was doing was for the good of society. It was not right to let a witch loose, casting spells all over the place, it was not right to let such a creature live, even if he was married to her and even if he still partly adored her. The pressure of the orbs behind him soon became too much. He excused himself to Billings, told him some fiction about "going to the john" and slowly made his way to the back of the hall.

There was a rather sad looking cleared square there, about the size of an over ambitious postage stamp with a struggling splash of red lighting. This was, as Mrs Handy had explained with a thrill of pride, the disco. Around the edges of the square, a couple of very bored-looking residents were congregated. As Casper took a place conveniently near the exit, a sweet looking little old lady in her early nineties, moved over to his side.

'Hiya hotstuff', she said with a saintly smile. 'D'you wanna boogie?'

'No, thank you', was all he could think of to reply.

'Don't give me that. You shy ones are all he same: you say "no", then shake your sexy thang till your butt drops off.'

'Listen, lady'

'Call me Peaches.' Her come-on look lost some of its appeal in translation, since she had forgotten to wear her teeth.

'Listen lady. GO AWAY.'

Casper almost fainted as he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. He turned. The man behind him could have passed for God's older brother. His Methuselahen face was contorted with rage.

'Hey, Scumbag. You messing with my date.'

'Don't hit him Frankie. He's not worth it.'

'I asked you a question, Scumbag.'

Casper was under a lot of strain and his voice failed him. He energetically shook his head.

'Frankie, he's just some kid. Forget him; let's Boogie.'

'Later, Punk!' Frankie growled, before letting the Casper go with a look of angry reluctance. Peaches gave him some coins and sent him off to fill the decrepit, and very quiet, jukebox in the corner. It gave her a few moments to give Casper a knowing wink.

'He's so jealous. Don't worry though. In a while, his medication will kick-in. Then I'll be back for that dance.'

To Casper's lingering horror, Peaches patted his behind.

'Remember. Save a boogie for me, Sweetcheeks.'

For a while. Casper watched as Peaches and Frankie

performed a series of contortions to an old Bee Gees track, movements that looked, even at their slow-motion pace, like a sure-fire recipe for heart failure. Faced with a rendezvous with Peaches, he was unsure whether to use the gun on himself. Instead, he forced himself to think of his mission, reminding himself that he had the safety of all the residents to consider. Reaching in to his jacket, he rested his hand upon the solid grip of the pistol, and waited.

Eventually, Will and Grendella managed to fight their way out of the cat-flap sized door. There was quite a deputation of Ritons outside, almost the entire population, with the exception of the judges and lawyers, all looking exactly alike as if newly minted off some production line, all with strongly disapproving faces and with notebooks and pencils poised to record any new sin against the language, and, therefore, society. With Grendella around, such crimes were not long in coming.

'Hiya short-stuffs.'

The sound of thousands of indignantly directed pens sounded like a convention of flea-infested yetis' scratching themselves.

'Nice day for a lynching. The only problem is, how the hell're you going to find a tree tall enough?'

Grendella giggled to herself; a distant smile from Will the only accompaniment to her amusement.

'Hey, Will. Lets make a run for it, they'll never catch us with those short legs.'

The Ritons started to widen their mouths.

'Only kidding. We'll come quietly.'

The Ritons subsided, their little faces as grim as a Bavarian fairytale.

'Jeez, you Munchkins are real down-dudes.'

A representative Riton couple stepped forward.

'Shall we go?', they said together.

'Where?' Grendella was doing all the talking. Will just kept a stupid, happy smirk on his face.

'To the Place of Justice. You are now in the early stage of finalization.'

'You've got big mouths for small persons. We don't finalize that easy, sawn-offs.'

'You will be given a fair trial, and then you will be taken for a health alteration and immediately deprived of your life potential. It is for the good of society.'

'What is? Judicial murder?'

'You are both dysfunctional and cannot be allowed to corrupt the language or the culture. This way, please.'

They started to move. Grendella toyed with the idea of running for it, but the small bodies of the Ritons pressed in too tightly, confining the movements of her limbs far more effectively than shackles. She managed to elbow her companion sharply in the ribs.

'Wake- up!'

Will felt the sharp dig of the boney elbow, but it did nothing to diminish his sense of well-being, of things being right with the world. Will was in a terrific mood and was not going to let such minor considerations as imminent death bring him down. He was in love and the world was rosy. In the best of humours, he turned his loving eyes on the Dwarfen.

'Do something, you idiot!'

Will did something. He decided to share his good humour with the world. Speaking in a jovial voice, loud enough for all to hear.

'Why do witches ride broomsticks?' He paused for a split second, a contented smile on his face, '...Because vacuum cleaners are too heavy.'

Will laughed heartily to himself. After a while, Grendella surprised herself by joining in.

'That's awful. Going for the insanity defence, I see.' She said when she had finished chuckling.

'There's madness to my method.'

'What's next? Juggling and acrobatics?'

'Another joke.' Will motioned at the hoards of nervously scribbling Ritons, 'I think they're a bit slow.'

'Go on then.' Grendella could not see the point, but, apart from being executed she had nothing else planned for the afternoon.

'What do you call an animal making a toasted sandwich in the jungle?'

'I don't know! What do you call an animal making a toasted sandwich in the jungle?'

'A griller.'

Grendella reaction was half wince, half smirk.

'Ouch! That smarts.'

'Why did'nt the Cannibals eat the Clown?'

'I don't know Will. Why did'nt the Cannibals eat the Clown?' She acted up putting on her best vaudevillian manner.

'Because they thought he would taste funny.'

Grendella cracked and roared with near childish glee.

'Your turn, beloved.'

'If you don't stop talking about this love stuff, I'm gonna belt you in the mouth. We haven't the time.'

'Your turn, most beautiful Grendella.'

The Dwarfen sighed her exasperation.

'Okay. This is a joke your old man told me, like yours, it's not very good. There was this Venusian that crash-landed in Central Park....'

Ashton, Iowa: Early 21st Century, October.

They looked vaguely ridiculous. The grey-haired men that climbed onto the small stage, paying no attention to Mrs Handy's patronising applause or encouraging comments. Then they picked up their instruments and were ridiculous no longer. Committed disciples of the god of thrash guitars, they could still kick hell out of a Hendrix anthem when they wanted. At the sudden surge of raw music, at least one set of false teeth loosed by startled gums went flying across the room, The Misbegotten Sons of Hades had collectively said: "Screw this, let's have fun", and in full mega-blast mode were something to see. Mrs Handy gaped, mortified, this was not the olde-time dancing she had been expecting. An atmosphere began to take hold of the big hall. An atmosphere of peace and love and heavy drugs, distilled into music. Even those in the hall who had spent the late 'Sixties as fervently Right-Wing pillars of the community, suddenly remembered Monterey or Woodstock, wishing that they had wallowed in the mud and had got to know the beautiful people. Then, for a moment, the music stopped. Wild-eyed and exultant, Starchild made his way to the mike.

'Now, I bet you didn't know us "Sons" had a sister. Well here she is. Our very special guest, "The Woman of Mystery".

Blossom strode on the stage, wearing a glitter-covered mask, a relic of the band's misguided flirtation with Glam Rock. The covering did not fool the vengeful men waiting for just this moment. All at once, three guns were levelled at Blossom's heart.

The trial took place in the open on the edge of town, because there was no building big enough. Under that lovely clear sky, surrounded by the tidy non-smelling grass, the strangers lives were to be decided. A parade of paired Ritons, each twosome exactly alike their predecessor, had appeared before the twin judges, flatly reading the evidence from their notebooks.

Grendella had to admit that things were not going well. When an entire society decides that you are guilty, a fair trial does not come into it and Will was not helping. He ignored the proceedings totally, preferring to amuse himself with increasingly awful jokes. The Dwarfen did not have the heart to chastise him, at least he would die happy. She sharply felt the irony of the situation; for hundreds of generation she had lived amongst a culture not her own, had avoided conforming to human standards of the norm, of "correct" behaviour. Yet she had travelled across the universe to be put to death by the most uptight beings in creation.

'Have you anything to say before we pass sentence of termination?'

Grendella, opened her mouth. Will was no good and if she was going to go, she was going to make damn sure that she was really guilty of crimes against the language. Suddenly though, she heard a voice. It spoke clearly and assertively. Full of righteous anger.

'I'd like to speak.'

Grendella could not have been more stunned if a grand piano had dropped on her. It was Will who spoke.

'I do not believe in the jurisdiction of this court.'

'Silence, or we'll hold you in contempt.'

'I AM in contempt. In contempt of you and everything you stand for. In contempt of anyone, anything, that tells people how to think or feel. How to live. Where I come from, we've had plenty of people like you, people who decide that they know best, that want to restrict everyone else's right to free choice, but they always fail. Because fanatics have one fatal flaw. A flaw that's common to every little Hitler, McCarthy, COMS Computer, or Riton.'

Will was visibly shaking with the effort of his words. The Judges started to look strangely nervous.

'Terminate them. Terminate them now.'

The crowd of Ritons closed in for the kill. Grendella prepared for the end, stood ready to take as many of the little buggers with her as she could. Will ignored their approach, confident and contemptuous.

'Fanatics have no humour. You can't stand anyone laughing at you, can you? At just how ridiculous you are? Vile, pathetic, pompous creatures like you would never get power over other's minds, if everyone just laughed soon enough. Your moronic power-sated self-importance wouldn't stand a chance!'

Will and Grendella were starting to get overwhelmed. The

numbers of punching, clawing hands, of bitter spiteful faces was crushing the life out of them. Will ignored the pain of the hundreds of blows, ignored the unconsciousness that was making persistent demands for attention. He kept on in spite of everything.

'Well, it's never too late to laugh.'

Will opened his mouth and roared with laughter. As they beat him, as they struggled to kill him and the threat his merriment represented, he rocked with mirth. This was no giggle or chuckle, there was no politeness about it. This was a huge, incredible belly laugh, a summation of life spent dealing with the frustrating or ridiculous and a celebration of that life. Suddenly, Grendella's voice joined his, her laughter just as epic in scale. The pain now came from their aching sides, from their watering eyes. Dimly they could see the Ritons falling back in confusion and it only made them laugh all the harder. Their surrounding seemed to become unclear. To run and fade like water-colours in a downpour and none of it mattered. For the moment, there was just the joy of hilarity, of sharing the happy thrill of existence. For the briefest instant the Human and Dwarfen were joined by joyous, all-consuming mirth, bonded with a closeness that even sex had not managed. Then, they lapsed into exhausted unconsciousness, cradled in each other's arms.

Will awoke with a smile on his face. He was alive and in love. He could see from the reassuringly grey surroundings that he had survived the first test. There was only one thing to do in the circumstances, and he did it: He got up and danced. Concentrating on just moving his body, he forgot, for the merest instant, the trials and tribulations that lay ahead of him. He forgot the friends and followers - Sulphur, Balidare, Merlyn, Magda, his father, even Fitcher - who were somewhere out there in that grey waste, probably in terrible danger. For the moment, all that mattered was the dance. A dance of celebration, of self congratulation, of the sheer wonderment of being alive. It came as no surprise when Gilhoolie appeared.

'Congratulations.'

Will executed a neat little two step,

'Thanks...'

'I'm surprised and impressed', The Fantastation admitted.

'You're the first hero to survive that test.'



Will continued his jig.  
'Lucky old me.'  
'But then, most heroes don't have much of a sense of humour.'  
'You surprise me,' Will started to do the Swim. 'What's next?'  
'We follow the signs.'  
'Have you got a bike for Grendella? Maybe we could try a tandem.'  
'She's not coming,'  
The effect of Gilhoolie's words was more sobering than a naked dip in Arctic waters. Will stopped dancing and started glaring.  
'What!'  
'I said, she's not coming, not for now.' The Fantastation seemed quite relaxed about it.  
'Why not?'  
'It wouldn't be fair for you to have help.'  
'You mean, I've been through all that stuff with the Ritons for nothing.'  
'You've saved Grendella, for the moment.'  
'What d'you mean? For the moment?'  
'She's in storage, until you rescue some more of your group. If you don't succeed...'  
'She dies horribly.'  
'That's right. You're finally getting the hang of Spoggle.'  
'I love her.'  
'You'd better do well then. Your transportation's this way.'

With leaden feet, Will followed the bouncy fantastation, and with equally leaden heart and mind, he cursed the cruelly unforgiving fates that seemed to dislike him so much.  
Gilhoolie turned, reassuringly smiling at the Human's long face.  
'Never mind! Look at it, this way. It all builds character.'  
Will felt all the cares and responsibilities of a universe, once again land heavily on his sloping shoulders. He thought about it a while, then found the words to sum up his turbulent feelings of injustice, speaking from the heart, with more bitterness than a crateful of lemons.'  
'HOW MUCH FUCKING CHARACTER AM I SUPPOSED TO NEED?!!!'

It was at this point that the lights went out.

Part-way through his story. Sulphur was beside himself with fury, his eyes glowing an angry yellow in the gloom, as he complained to the other old or derelict machines, his companions on the junk-heap, in the wait for the end.

'It's bad enough we're waiting to be scrapped, without having to do it in darkness!'

For a while they tried to persuade him. But it was no good. The Dragon had learned a great many things from his human companion and had picked up a transport-load of bad habits; one of these was bad-tempered sulking.

There would be no more talk of Heroics INC. this night. However, the other machines comforted themselves, for a little while at least; there was always tomorrow.

**TO BE CONTINUED.....**