

"I'd retired, gentlemen, and not a moment too soon. I was tired from all that running and work was doing my head in. I was ready for a rest.

"There was all that travel, which I didn't mind. I like a good cognit, but the quiet time between planets always made my companion cross and impatient to be somewhere, anywhere. So I'd just find a quiet place and try to ignore his muttering.

"Then there were all those new worlds. It's always interesting, but I often wished we weren't there to work but just to gander. Ah, but there's always something wrong. There's planets where you got a backache from the gravity, or the air smelled of your Uncle Gurney's dirty feet, or the local micros were off your inject's definitions so you'd have swollen eyes and a runny nose for your entire visit. Of course, this last only happens on pleasant worlds with compatible ladies. Go to the quarantined swamp moon of bug planet Infestia and you'd feel great.

"I'm sorry, but you already look puzzled. Let me put this in context for you..."

The Rallax Operation – part the first

by Al B Dickerson

They'd taken the Doctor first, assuming he was our leader. The princess napped while we waited and I smiled when she shifted in her sleep and rested her head on my shoulder. I suppose I drifted off myself, because I was alone when they came for me.

I was marched down a short corridor to what I assumed was an interrogation room. The Doctor and the princess were seated off to the side and three of our captors stood in a semi-circle around an empty chair. One of my guards said, "Here is the final prisoner," and departed.

The leader turned a bland face to me and said, "Please sit comfortably".

I glanced at the Doctor and he winked and tapped his watch. I drew a deep breath of the stuffy air and sat.

"Hullo," I said, "I understand you have a few questions?"

A human would have blinked.

“Why, yes, of course. While we regret infringing on your personal freedom we must insist on your complete cooperation.”

“Certainly. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, eh?”

“It is most urgent.”

“Well, I’d better get started, then.”

“Yes. Place your hand on the verifier, please, and state your true name for the record.”

“I am Peter Gulliver Unstoffe of Darwin Colony.”

“Verified. How long have you been an associate of the Graff Vynda-K?”

May the saints preserve us from the obstinacy of robots and logicians.

“I have never been an associate of the Graff. We’ve already been over this a dozen times. Look, the only way to make you understand is if you let me tell you how we all came to be here. Then maybe you’ll believe us and we can stop wasting time. Shouldn’t we be finding this thing you’re looking for so we can avert disaster? Just stop asking questions and let me talk.”

“You will be brief and to the point?”

“Of course.”

“Then you may proceed.”

So I relaxed, collected my thoughts and told them all about my impending retirement.

That’s when the leader, whose name-tag read, ‘Hello! I am Bob Sunny Day! How may I serve you?’, interrupted.

“A thousand pardons, Mr Unstoffe, but given the potentially calamitous outcome of recent events, may we ask that your narrative be rather less digressive?”

“What? Oh, sorry. Garron used to say I rambled too much.”

“We mean no offense, we assure you. It’s simply that we are unable to determine the importance of your prior travels, interesting though they may be. To regrettably be blunt, is this relevant?”

“Yes, it is relevant. I mean, you fellows don’t seem inclined to take us at our word, so I have to tell you the whole story with all the details. If any of us are going to survive this mess you need your property and the Doctor needs his. If we can’t convince you we’re your friends and not your enemies, well, you know what’s going to happen. The Doctor says we have time, so I’m going to tell this story the way I want. Now let me get on with it.”

“Very well. Taking into account the potentially vital nature of your narrative, you may get on with it in the manner you prefer.”

Okay, then. Anyway, the best and worst thing about traveling was the natives. Always a roll of the dice. All those new people with their strange customs, some of them thinking their way is the only way and everyone else is a deluded alien to be patronised or executed. Or they’d be primitives who’d never heard of aliens and you’d have to pretend to be one of them. Sometimes they’d be nice, you know? That made it hard to work. But usually they were mean, and that made it satisfying...

“What is the nature of your business, Mr Unstoffe?” Bob Sunny Day interrupted.

“Eh? What was our business? Oh, um, real estate. My master Garron was a real estate agent and I was his apprentice. We found and sold buildings, space stations, cities and sometimes even planets to our clients. It was good money, usually, but sometimes it was unreliable. A client would change his mind, or the locals would object to their sacred landmark being owned by an offworlder or the native bureaucrats would suddenly materialize and start waving permits and licenses and local tax decrees...”

“I can see you don’t understand. I wouldn’t expect you to, you being robots and all. No offense. I can see you’re fine robots, but I doubt you’re programmed for greed. Greed is what it was all about. ‘Greed spins the galaxies,’ Garron used to say.

“It works like this: The client wants his property but doesn’t want to pay a single opek more than his personal appraisal tells him its worth. We want his money and at minimum operating cost to ourselves. And the galactic and local governments see money exchanging hands and say, “Hey! We’ll have some of that!” like the unconscionable extortionists they are and by the time we’ve fired rockets our millions of credits are barely enough to cover our modest expenses.”

“Is there not a component missing from your business plan? What of the owner of the property? The party designated, ‘the seller’?”

“What’s that? The seller? Oh, yes, of course, the *seller*. You mean the owner of the property? How could I forget them? They got their cut, too. Everybody got a cut.

“That’s why we travelled so much, you see. It’s the government and their stranglehold on the free market. Institutional greed, wringing profit from the independent businessman.

Greedy buyers and of course sellers. We had to keep working just to stay afloat, year after year, voyage after voyage, world after world.

“And then we made it. Our big score. The likes of which honest realtors like ourselves can only dream. Due to the generosity of a grateful client we found ourselves the legal, new owners of the *Indomitable Prince*, a squarish, ugly cruiser packed with lawfully won plunder, as defined by the Levithian Martial Codex.

“By the way, you comprehend your mistake, don’t you? Do you understand, now? The ship was the property of the Graff, true, but then the ship legally passed on to Garron. When you asked Garron if the ship was his he was speaking true but he wasn’t confirming he was the Graff. Do you understand? Garron is not the Graff.”

Bob Sunny Day silently conferred with the others. I couldn’t hear them, of course; it was all head-to-head, but someone had had the bright idea of giving them body language. So it was like watching a holo with the sound off. Bob What A Deal and Bob Sunny Day were agitated, endearingly animated like veteran Rift Users. Bob Name Your Poison stood still and just looked back and forth as the others talked, like an attendee at a ping-pong match.

Then Bob What A Deal turned to me and stated, “Please forgive our apparent distrust but this remains to be determined. The person you refer to as Garron identified himself as owner of the Graff’s vessel. Our boarding party was rendered unable to correlate our archival footage of the Graff with your Garron. Therefore the matter is not closed. As we have said, all you must do is present this Garron or his remains and we will be satisfied.

“The verifier seems happy with it,” I said.

He frowned in a blandly apologetic manner. “I’m afraid the verifier’s circuits are still preoccupied with the Doctor’s testimony. He was most excessively forthcoming, though I note he is pleasingly silent now. The verifier will render its verdict in time.

“Now, please continue.”

Where was I? Oh, the plunder!

My head still spins at the thought of it. Cyrrenic silk banners, intricately woven by the trained spiders of the Boric delta. The Singing Spear of Sven Venison. The personal battle robes of the Gyronese Emperor of Contention. Choice volumes from the psychic library of the artificial rings of Thoomba. And the art! There was a Gleick, a Vincent van Breda, two Johnsons and a Giggins. All this, mind you, in the very first compartment we peeked into.

Garron clapped my shoulder and I cringed. I'd been shot there that morning, just before the cave-in. I guess I should add that Garron took a couple of souvenirs himself. I knew he'd milk them for all they were worth. Anyway –

He tutted apologetically and carefully clapped my other shoulder and said, "My boy, this is it. My days of struggle are behind me. With the credits I'll get for this lot I'll be able to return to Earth and *buy* Hackney Wick! What am I saying? I'll buy the Earth! I wonder if it's for sale?"

"I'm sure you'll find a willing seller," I said.

"That's the spirit!" he said. "Oh! A comment. Don't worry, lad! I'll see that you are well provided for. This ship, for instance, should fetch you a princely sum in scrap."

"Garron, scrap?"

"Well, there are those who may have taken exception to the Graff's activities, after all. One can hardly slap a coat of paint on her and expect to sell her on the open market. I expect there would be questions." He frowned. "So many tiresome questions."

"You may be right." I said. "You know, Garron..."

"I know that tone. Please refrain from thinking, boy."

"Some of these treasures meant a lot to their owners..."

"We are not giving anything back!"

"Give back? You wound me, Garron! I thought perhaps a few discreet enquiries as to the possibilities of rewards for the safe return of certain state treasures..."

"Oh, I see! My apologies. I thought you were going soft on me again. Let me think on it, boy. You may be right, but there's something to be said for dumping this junk in one big lot and letting someone else deal with the details. The question is, who can we trust? There's the Smith-Kazar's on Fulcrum 5..."

"No, Gentile Smith said he'd put a rake in your skull the next time he saw you, remember?"

"Oh, that's right. We'd best not go there. What about the Castigones?"

"That's a wonderful idea, Garron. Thinking of visiting Henco's daughter while we're there?"

"Oh, the alluring yet clingy Belinda! I see your point." He pondered a moment. "I wonder how our boy's doing?"

"Garron, I once saw Henco eat a fried Dalek. Let's think of someone else."

“You’ll get no argument from me. Oh! There’s Shintaccus on Globe 22...”

“Bounty on both our heads.”

“Curses! The Grindovian estate? I hear they’re going places.”

“Yes, they all went to maximum security.”

“ Phestus Phobos! There’s always the market on Phestus Phobos...”

“Where they’ll slit our throats at the merest hint of the extent of our treasures.”

“The duty-free depot on Happy Harbour?”

“Infiltrated and liquidated by you-know-who.”

“You don’t mean...”

“The legendary Mongoose himself.”

The Mongoose, by the way, was Alliance Security’s greatest undercover agent. No one had the slightest idea who he was but everyone feared drawing his attention. Anyway...

Garron sank into a nearby chair, defeated.

“Oh, Unstoffe! We simply don’t know enough honourable criminals! Where are we to dispose of this junk without being killed for it?”

Bob Name Your Poison spoke for the first time. “Excuse me. Did you just admit to consorting with criminals?”

“What’s that, Bob? No, I didn’t say ‘criminals’. Must be a faulty translator. You should get that looked at: might be a sign of serious malfunction. ‘An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure’, my old Da used to say.

“I said, ‘antiquities dealers’, of course. Oh, don’t give me those blank looks. Antiquities is a cut-throat business. It’s almost as bad as real estate. To continue?”

Garron went off to mutter. I double checked the docking clamps on the ships and set the cruise control on our ship. We left the odd orbit of Ribos with no destination in mind. I wished old Binro was with us and hoped the gods of Ribos weren’t religious. After all, surely *they* knew the stars weren’t ice crystals.

I turned my thoughts to practical matters. Garron would think of something eventually so I might as well do something useful.

I started the inventory of compartment one, growing more excited with every find. The Graff’s taste in treasures ran to the martial – no surprise there – but it must be said: the man

had taste. This wasn't a random cache of loot; these items were artefacts, treasures that had history. I could happily have rummaged through the collection until the end of my days.

But business is business. It would be useful to know what the items would fetch, so I sent a few discreet inquires over the hypercable. After the first few responses I revised my opinion of the Graff. He may have had taste but he was a fool. The contents of this compartment alone would have bought him an army; he never needed Ribos and its jethrik mines at all. And this compartment was one of eight.

Gentlemen, I am an unsophisticated man. Simple as my face, as Garron said. The realisation that I was on board a ship carrying the greatest treasure of the last two-hundred centuries overwhelmed me. I left the compartment, half-meaning to tell Garron what I'd discovered but really just wandering in a daze, when I met him coming the opposite way.

He was pale as a skee-goat and as expressionless as one of the Mikeda masks I'd left in the hold. We met in the hall, exchanged blank glances and stumbled on our separate ways. I looked back from the entrance of compartment two and saw him gazing at me. Suddenly his face took on the crafty aspect I knew so well. He was up to something. All right. I wouldn't tell him about my findings, then. His eyes narrowed, but he left without a word.

He'd discovered something; that was obvious. But he'd looked shocked in a way I hadn't seen since he learned it was a capital crime to drop melons on Agricorp 7. What could possibly have kindled this reaction? I hadn't explored far when I saw my first clue.

On the hatch to compartment four was a nanoglue lock. Have you estimable robots heard of this? It's an old style device that merges the atoms of a door and its frame so they form a single solid. The best lock in existence, but outlawed centuries ago. A minor bit of reprogramming on their safety protocols and they serve as a fearful weapon, capable of fusing any number of objects, a ship in flight, for example, or a living being, into a single mass. One of Garron's antique devices then, from a collection I'd never been able to find.

Charmingly, he'd disconnected the old neural plug and installed a keypad. This was, as the saying goes, a piece of space-cake. I'd booted up my encryption app and started analysis when I heard a hatch slide open. Quickly I muted the interface and pretended to nonchalantly study the door.

"Look, Garron," I said, turning. "What do you suppose the Graff's got in here?"

He was now wearing his 'guileless innocent' face. Inwardly, I sighed.

"I don't know, and don't tamper with that lock! Knowing the Graff it's booby-trapped.

Just leave it alone.”

“But Garron,” I said, “this is the only hatch that’s locked like this! Imagine what’s inside!”

“I imagine it’s something very dangerous. We’ll deal with it when we aren’t shooting through space,” he said, “and that’s my final word on the matter. Now step away from there, boy. I’ve just discovered something that requires your immediate attention.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“The Graff’s galley. Come along, I’m starving.”

We established a routine. I inventoried the Graff’s treasures, compartment after wondrous compartment. It was hard work but I didn’t mind. There was so much history there, so much beauty. So much to think about. Most of it I could catalogue, but even a hypersearch failed to identify a few of the pieces.

There was a glowing cube whose material defied analysis; when I scanned it, it told me to bugger off, so I did. Some kind of paperweight for masochists, I suppose.

There was a black slab of memory plastic with an ornately carved frame: a ship’s registry. I couldn’t break its firewall to see what information it contained, but I did discover that it seemed to be transmitting. I wrapped it in dampening foil, just to be safe. Oh, I see that got your interest...

The robots were downright excited. Bob What A Deal clapped his hands and said, “Yes! We compute a 97.6% certainty that this is the item we seek. It is vital that this object be found!”

“Yes, I gathered. Keep listening and maybe we’ll discover that together. May I continue?”

“Certainly.”

The strangest thing I found was an expensive but common chest full of woman’s clothes – shoes, frocks, swimsuits, undergarments, sporting gear. All very expensive, all the same small size and all seemingly never worn. An individual woman’s traveling trunk, but horribly packed, as if it had been thrown together during an emergency. I searched for clues but there were no tags or crests on any of the items.

“Don’t waste time with that,” said Garron through the speye he’d been using to monitor me. “Is that a jar of gold Kopeks I see?”

Ah, yes. I said we'd established a 'routine'. That would be myself on the Graff's ship, methodically cataloguing the treasure, while Garron spied on me (for my 'own good') from the comfort of our shuttle. He grumbled about his injuries and assured me his constant hypercable surfing was not only essential business research but therapeutic.

We'd gratefully discarded the scratchy natural fibres of our Ribosian disguises. I was wearing a comfortable crewman's overall and Garron was back in his usual costume of an 'A low ha!' shirt, 'Polly Esther' slacks and black socks and sandals.

So, I stayed in the Graff's ship, the *Indomitable Prince*, while Garron wiled away his time on the *Connie*. Only the universal port kept us connected.

I only saw him five times a day, at meals. I tried to broach the subject of the locked compartment but he waved it away; after we were docked and had an escape plan, then he'd allow me to remotely hack the lock, but only then. He wouldn't even let me drill and send in a fibreprobe. "The Graff might have thought of that. After all," he said, "it's always 'safety first' for Garron & Unstoffe." He was half right. It was always 'safety first' for Garron. I'm the one who climbs into the vault to see if the monsters are asleep.

You know, I never asked if I was his first apprentice.

There was no point in arguing. I was forced to concede. I knew the lock was his and he knew I knew, but I simply couldn't outright accuse him and he knew that, too. I hope you follow.

The thing is, principle aside, it didn't matter to me what was in the locked compartment. The treasures I'd already pocketed without him noticing were sufficient to set me up in comfort for several lifetimes. It nagged me that he was cooking a double cross, but that's what I'd come to expect from him. I decided to assume a philosophical attitude.

It was in that enlightened spirit, a few nights later, that I sneaked a peek at his wristtop while he was sleeping off a bottle of invaluable, vintage 3048 Draconian Brandy from compartment two. I was pleased to see his old password ('newmanredford', whatever that meant) hadn't been changed and was soon studying his search history. Among the inevitable mature sentient sites and dealer inquires I found a puzzling exception. On the date he'd locked the compartment he'd visited the home page of the Verne-Burroughs royal family. They're one of the staggeringly wealthy new monarchies that spun out of the collapse of the old empire, ruling a handful of systems bordering the Greater Cyrrhenic Empire. I remembered they were noted for the number of Schlangi mercenaries hailing from their

realm. But there was something else... some news I'd heard in passing...

I was about to follow the link when Garron stirred and snorted alarmingly. I decided to not press my luck. Garron's a light sleeper. Thirty year old brandy wouldn't dull his senses for long.

I decided, as I wasn't sleepy, to run diagnostics on the ship. I can't remember if I mentioned it, but we were using the *Connie* for propulsion: Garron decided we'd not use the Graff's in order to sell the unused fuel. Our ship had a bog-standard Ion drive from Earth, but it was strong enough to tow the Graff's ship. Also, we weren't on a course for anywhere in particular, so I'd set cruise control. What this means is that except for the initial burn and minor hazard corrections we shouldn't have been using fuel. But we had. Sometime since my last check we had changed course and accelerated. I asked the ship who authorised the course change, fully expecting the answer to be 'Master Captain Garron'.

It wasn't.

Less than a minute later I was shaking him awake. Thank goodness he'd fallen asleep in his clothes.

"Wake up, Garron! Wake up!"

"Wha...?"

"Please, sir! Wake up now!"

"Good Lord, Unstoffe! Stop shaking me!"

"You have to wake up now!"

"What's the matter?"

"There's someone else on the ship, sir!"

"What? How on Earth? I said not to tamper – "

"Someone's altered our course! We have to – "

We both stopped talking and stared at one another.

Simultaneously, we said, "Wait! What are you talking about?"

And that's when you lot showed up.

Actually, wait. Something else happened first. You know how sound carries in ships, right? How a whisper in engineering can travel the conduits all the way to the bridge and, say, land you in the brig for five days, eight hours and thirty-seven minutes? Well, Garron began

explaining that he'd meant absolutely nothing by his 'tampering' comment, which was from a brandy dream he'd been having and certainly had nothing to do with the locked compartment and he was wounded by the merest suggestion, and I was trying to tell him that the ship was being remotely flown from somewhere on the Graff's cruiser when we both stopped dead.

"Shh!" I said. "Listen!"

"That's on the Graff's ship!" said Garron, bounding off his bunk.

What had we heard? Well, it's hard to put into words. Imagine an audio portmanteau of a rusty engine cranking while someone is playing a Viccanese theriman and someone else is blowing down the neck of a porcelain jug. No? Never mind. All you need to know is we'd heard the sound on Ribos. It was the engine of a ship or travel capsule, one we agreed was the most advanced we'd seen.

"Is it them?" I asked, as we stumbled for the docking port.

"Of course it's them, Unstoffe! I told you, didn't I? I know a swindler when I see one!"

I'm sorry, I have to back up even further. There was a pair of security agents, you see, snooping around Ribos to make sure our deal with the Graff was on the level. One was a big fella called the 'Doctor', and he had an assistant, a cool, slim fancy named 'Romana'. An odd pair. Oh, and they had a little robot dog. You'd have liked him.

"Yes, Garron," I said, punching the airlock entry code. We passed through, so intent on investigating that we failed to observe basic safety 101 – no matter what, always seal the connection between two docked ships. "I recall you also said we'd seen the last of him."

"He stole my lump of jethrik and now he's back for the Graff's loot!"

You see, one of our recurring meal conversations was this Doctor's real identity. I didn't see much of him, but Garron did and he claimed the Doctor's story didn't jell. He risked his life helping the Ribosians survive the Graff and his soldiers but only, it seemed to Garron, because they stood between him and the chunk of jethrik. Then there was his robot, his travel capsule and his way with gadgets. Alliance Security is well equipped, but this was well out of their league. We'd even weighed the possibility he was the dreaded Mongoose.

"He seemed a friendly sort," I said as we crept up the corridor, Garron bravely guarding the rear.

"Crooks are always friendly, Unstoffe! That's how you know they're crooks!"

As far as Garron was concerned there were two fundamental flaws in the Doctor's story.

One, if he was an undercover agent why did he travel to a restricted, Class 3 planet in a blue, fauxwood capsule with 'Police' plainly written in Earth Olde English above the door? Two, and here was the kicker, this Doctor character was far too intelligent to be security. "No way he's a rhino," said Garron. "His knuckles barely reached the floor."

From the primary airlock of the *Indomitable Prince* a corridor runs straight for several meters, doglegs left, runs another few meters and then up a stair to another level. The hatches of storage compartments one through three lined the left wall, with the rest around the corner.

The Doctor's blue box was straight down the corridor from the airlock. No sign of the Doctor himself. I heard an odd trilling from around the corner. "The Doctor's gadget!" said Garron.

"Garron!" I whispered. "He's messing about with compartment four!"

Garron made a strangling sound and started pushing me, when I felt a gentle vibration through the soles of my feet. It reminded me of the fields back home on Darwin, the way the ground trembled when harvester arrays would pass. "Did you feel that? What do you suppose that is?" I said.

Garron was staring at the ceiling, as if he could see something through the hull. "I think that wretched Doctor is not alone this time," he said.

The trilling stopped and all the compartment hatches whooshed open. Our carefully stored treasures shook loose from the vibration. A few spilled to the floor. Someone groaned.

An unfamiliar voice said, "Hullo! What's all this then? Oh! And who are you, I wonder?"

The ship shuddered and my ears popped as a strong tow beam enveloped us.

"Blast, blast and double blast!" said Garron. "Unstoffe! Stop groaning and listen! Are you wearing your secret belt with all the loot you've been squirreling away? Oh, don't bother denying it, boy! Quick, back to the *Connie*! We've got to get out of here!"

That's when, with a horrible ripping sound and a terrible chorus of alarms, the two ships violently detached and the cruiser's power died. For the merest flicker of a moment we floated in sudden darkness and zero-G. Then, with a thin, terrible howl, the escaping air slapped us toward the gaping hatchway. We tumbled, leaves in a hurricane. Somehow Garron gripped the edge of compartment two and I frantically grabbed his legs as the decanted atmosphere pushed me toward open space. As we hung suspended, the open maw of eternity beneath our horizontal feet, our precious retirement treasure began to fly, tumble

and roll into outer space. I saw the little rude cube, now glowing brightly, struggle against the current until a flying tapestry enveloped it. Both went out the door with shocking speed. Past their exit I saw our faithful *Connie* rapidly tumble away until with a bright green ion explosion it hit something – something huge and dark that eclipsed the stars.

In the failing air I heard myself say, “This is it! We’re going to die!”

“Well, if you’d let go we might not!”

“Oh, Garron! How could you? I ought to-”

“No, you idiot! Let go and then use the emergency hand crank on the airlock!”

“Are you insane? What if I miss the door? What if – ”

I didn’t have to finish protesting Garron’s lunatic plan, for at that moment I heard a dim, distant cry of, “Expelliarmus!” and suddenly emergency power was restored. The airlock snapped shut, gravity returned and we dropped to the deck. We just lay there for a minute, our gasps adding a backbeat to the hiss of returning atmosphere. Then there was a subtle tremor, a distant hiss of sliding doors, and we heard heavy footfalls somewhere above.

We’d been boarded!

“Where’s the Graff’s escape pod?” I asked.

“I thought you knew!”

“I’ve been cataloguing! You’re the leader! You’re supposed to know these things!”

“You know I haven’t been feeling well.”

“You aren’t the one who was shot!”

“Trust you to think of yourself!”

We glared at each other as the lights powered up. Slowly, peripheral awareness returned and we realised a strange man carrying a person in a cryoglove was standing in front of the blue box. He was thin, with unusual spiked hair and a brown striped suit.

He stared at us with an incredulous expression.

“You!” he said. “I know you! Wait, don’t tell me! Gary and Unstuffed? Harry and Full Stop?” He gave a little hop. “I know! Garron and Unstoffe! The Bilkos from Ribos! Well, fancy meeting you here!”

“You have us at a disadvantage, sir,” said Garron, struggling to his feet, “but that’s beside the point. You’ve committed an unlawful search and seizure, per Alliance regulation 221-beta, clause 578, pertaining to the unwarranted damage of, and removal of personal property from, a privately owned vessel. I demand you and your associates leave this ship

and...”

“Sorry! This is a person, not property, and whoever is boarding this ship – it’s the Graff Vynda-K’s, isn’t it? What a terrible man! Anyway, you’d better look sharp, ’cause whoever is boarding this ship, they aren’t with me.”

At that he kicked the door of the box open and carried his burden inside. As the door closed he cheerily called, “Good-bye!”

The heavy footsteps – scarily suggesting beings running in formation – approached as Garron and I gaped at the box. For once, we were speechless. The nerve! The lack of consideration! The –

“Garron! Was that a girl he was carrying?”

“Let’s ask him.”

We dashed to the box. Garron made a ‘let’s calm down’ gesture, straightened his collar and drew a breath. Then he rapidly but politely knocked.

“Excuse my intrusion,” he said, “but might we have a word?”

He listened intently. From the stair at the end of the corridor I heard the boarders draw near.

“I don’t think he can hear us,” I said. “Knock louder.”

Garron pounded on the door. “Hello! Perhaps we could meet a mutually agreeable settlement?”

The hatch atop the stairs slid open. I saw dark silhouettes and glowing green eyes.

Garron saw it too. “Hello, young man? Is the Doctor inside? He’s a dear friend and would doubtless spare no effort to aid us!”

A muffled voice replied through the door. “Well, that’s rather overstating the case, isn’t it? I mean, I don’t take the word ‘friend’ lightly and... say!”

The door cracked open. “Have either of you seen anything unusual? A small glowing cube, perhaps?”

As Garron vainly tried to wedge his sandal-clad foot in the door I replied, “Yes! I know exactly where it is!”

The dark figures reached the level deck and approached. Three robots in security armour, bland but friendly human faces. The one in the lead levelled a large weapon, a gun of some sort, and in a pleasant voice said, “Pardon the interruption but please identify! You are the proprietors of this vessel?”

The man in the box said, “Well, I see you’re busy. Never mind! I’ll find it on my own! Ta!” and pushed the door closed. It clicked with a distinct air of finality.

“I repeat for your convenience: you are the proprietors of this vessel?”

“What?” Garron, still staring at the shut door, said, “Yes, of course we... wait!”

“Identification confirmed. You are the criminal the Graff Vynda-K and unidentified associate. You have been tried and convicted *in absentia* of crimes against...”

“No, no! I’m not the Graff! You’re making a mistake!”

The blue box made a faint sound, like an old-style combustion engine starting on a cold morning, and the little lamp on top began blinking. The robots simultaneously cocked their heads. I heard a distant mechanical voice say, “Warning! Return to ship! Unscheduled warp commencing!”

From within the blue box I heard a cry of, “What?” and suddenly the craft’s engines began whining shrilly. The blue box began to fade in and out of sight, but with no pattern, as if it were struggling.

The *Indomitable Prince* began to shudder, then lurched violently. Garron, myself and the robots were tossed into the air, hit the ceiling and came down hard. In the brief stillness that followed a foil-wrapped package – that ship’s registry you’re so keen on – dropped out of compartment three and hit the deck with a *tink!* As one, the robot’s heads snapped to it. So did Garron’s.

I guess it was just instinct for the old man. If it was valuable to the robots it was valuable to him, you know? So all four of them dived and scrambled to be the first to gain possession. As the box gurned behind us and the ship began to shudder again, Garron and the lead robot played tug of war with the slab. The foil ripped and Garron was left holding it while the robot triumphantly held the slab aloft. And then the sarcophagus case of the 3rd Duke of Misty Meadows toppled out of the compartment and squashed the three robots flat. Garron whispered, “Thank you!” to the gods of realtors and hugged the slab. I grabbed his shirt and pulled him to his feet and yelled, “Escape ship!” He nodded and we stumbled away in opposite directions.

“This way, you old fool!” I said, reasoning that the escape ship dock would be mid-decks.

That’s when the blue box made an incredible tolling sound and everything went transparent and sparkly. It was like a primitive computer graphic. Sparks crawled along the

lines of everything. I could see the frame of the ship, the decks above and below and, incidentally, an empty escape ship port and an unpillaged, secret treasure compartment. But superimposed upon this was something else, something like a labyrinth of corridors and chambers, somehow escaping the confines of the blue box and extending into the far distance. It hurt the brain to look at it. I saw the stranger standing at a console and a slumped figure on a seat near him. He stared at us, open mouthed, and began to furiously throw switches.

Beyond the ship I could see a vast black orb with a veil of the same blue sparks, an umbilical reaching out and ensnaring us. The stranger yelled something over the reverberating tolling and grabbed a lever. He looked over at us, cocked his head and grinned, and pulled it.

I heard Garron cry out. The planet had vanished but the blue sparkly veil remained. As we watched, it stretched tighter and thinner until, from our perspective, it was like looking down the mouth of a cone, tunnel or vortex. The machine rumbled and I heard the man cry out again, “No, no, no!”

And, just like someone had released the end of a stretched rubber band, we shot forward into the sparkly vortex...

“But what of the registry? Do you know where it is?”

“That was the last I saw of it. Sorry, Bob: I was too distracted, what with having my very existence violated, to pay much attention to anything else. I guess it was on the Graff’s ship?”

“The wreckage of the Graff’s ship has been searched with no success. We know the registry is here and regretfully we accuse you of concealing it.”

“And I’m telling you that the only person who might know is Garron. And Garron isn’t here. Now, if I can continue maybe we can figure it out together?”

“Very well. Despite the urgency of our situation, I must confess we find your story fascinating. You were shot into a space warp vortex, then? That must have been alarming.”

“You’ve no idea.”

I was still screaming when I awoke in the jungle. I screamed again when I realised I was slipping through the very top of a very tall tree. I seized a handful of thin branches, clambered to the bole and found a thick branch to sit on. Assuming I could climb down, I was

safe.

I looked out through the leaves. A hot yellow sun gleamed in a cloudless blue sky. A sea of green foliage stretched to the base of a high plateau that spanned the horizon. Behind me, the jungle thinned and I could see rolling grasslands. In the farthest distance I saw another treeline and an expanse of sparkling water.

Here and there I saw signs of civilisation. A quaintly curved road crossed the prairie, occasional clumps of trees and buildings along the way. Multiple small columns of smoke lazily curled upward into the still air.

Birds sang, and the trees were crowned with butterflies.

I breathed deeply. The air was flush with green freshness. It made me feel at peace.

That's when I realised a sound had slowly been overtaking me. A thin sustained squeal or scream coming from the sky above. I looked up just as something white plunged into the branches overhead. It snapped into the foliage a bit further from the trunk than I and continued to fall. Without thinking I lunged toward it, guessing where its trajectory would intersect mine. Using a springy branch I leaped and took hold of the plummeting object.

I realised two things. One, the object was a woman in a tight cryoglove. The inhabitant of compartment four that Garron had tried to hide from me. The same one the stranger had taken into the box. The Graff's hostage.

No, no. Not a woman. A woman is mature, measured in tone and temperament. A woman, no matter how lovely, has some invisible gravity to her that a man can sense. This was a *girl*. Young, fresh and astoundingly beautiful. A princess, you know? My arms encircled her right beneath hers and I gazed into her face as she gawked into mine. I instantly fell totally and terrifyingly in love. Endless hours later her screams and struggles alerted me to the second thing I mentioned before. We were well away from the branches of the tree. We were in mid-air and plunging toward something big, brown and flat. As the ground rushed up at us I cried, "I love you!" She screamed and I cried, "I'm sorry!" She screamed again but I didn't have time to respond.

Well, obviously I didn't die. If there had been solid ground beneath us I expect we'd have been goners, but the flat brown thing luckily turned out to be the surface of a deep mud hole. We impacted with a *slap!* and the morass closed above our heads. I imagine it was quiet for a moment, maybe a bird made a tentative attempt to resume its song, when we erupted, spitting, from the mud. The princess waded through the waist deep mud, glared up

at me with brilliant emerald eyes from behind her brown mask, and slugged me with surprising strength. My knees buckled and I just lay there.

“What,” She spit mud, “was the,” spit, “meaning of that?”

“Princess, I -”

She held an imperious finger aloft and expelled brown mud for a moment. I floated, enchanted, as she cleared one fine nostril, then the other. She squeezed the muck from her long dark hair, peeled the glove from her skin and shook off the excess goo, and sighed. Then she looked down at me.

“You idiot! Were you trying to get me killed? And who gave you permission to touch me? And,” she paused, “did you just call me ‘princess’?”

“I do. I mean, I did.”

“What would a princess be doing... Oh, fine. You know.” She looked around her, seeming to take in her surroundings for the first time. “Where are we?”

“I have no idea. Some planet. You *were* in cryosleep on a ship belonging to the Graff Vynda-K. Now we’re both here. I think there was a warp accident. By the way, you appear to be sinking. You should try not to stand.”

She gave a startled shriek and did exactly the wrong thing, which was struggle. In a moment she was stuck fast, only her head visible. I paddled across the surface to her.

“Permission to touch the sacred personage?” I asked.

I’d heard the word ‘glower’ before and knew what it described, but I reckon I’d never truly seen one.

“Just this once, imbecile.”

It crossed my mind, briefly, that Garron would have left her there upon being called, ‘imbecile’. Fortunately, I am not Garron. I am, however, me, and the princess’s singularly common manner stung.

“Princess, ‘imbecile’?” I said as mildly as I was able, “You wound me. I’ll tell you what – perhaps there is a gallant prince of proper breeding somewhere in this jungle. I’ll ask around, shall I? Don’t wander off!”

She growled and struggled, freeing one arm. Luckily I was out of range. She sank a little bit more. I smiled to myself – she was in no danger. Soon she’d realize a hard layer was just under her feet. I had better hurry.

I swim-crawled my way to the reeds edging the mire. I pushed my way through,

enjoying the solid ground beneath my squelching space shoes. The princess cursed my ancestors; really, her vocabulary was appalling. Inventive, to be sure, but rather raw for a person of breeding. I was chucking over her intimation of my grandfather's proclivity toward llamas when I reached a large fallen tree. I hoisted myself up and got a good view of our surroundings.

A narrow, clear stream rushed toward the prairie; we'd landed in an adjacent pool. The jungle thinned considerably to what I guessed was the north, in the direction of the stream. One of those clusters of trees and buildings lay outside the forest, sharply delineated in the bright sunlight. Down below, in the shadows of the jungle, I was pleased to see the princess treading mud but now silent. She saw me on my high perch and thrashed again. She shouted.

She was going to 'behind me'? That didn't make sense, did it?

Well, gentlemen... BAM! I was staggered by a hard knock to my head. "Ow! That hurt!" I said, spinning to see who'd done the deed. I must have been hit harder than I thought – turning around made me terribly dizzy. I swayed there, looking into the reptilian face of a savage warrior! It swung the club again, giving me a good clock on the ear.

"Stop it!" I said. I was getting very lightheaded, but my sense of self-preservation kicked in and I covered my head. So he calmly reached out and gently pushed my chest. That was all it took to send me off the log and down into the foliage below.

Garron says I have a hard head and he's hinted more than once that my capacity to withstand injury was the reason I caught his eye. That's all fine and good for him. He's not the one being hurt. I've been stabbed with knife, spear and sword, shot by laser, slug and plasma (Oh, plasma!)... I won't even mention the torture. Sure our Handy Housecall unit on the *Connie* always fixed me up in a few days and I've no lasting scars, but in principle I'm strictly opposed to pain and general discomfort. So, while being hit twice with a metal club and falling about twenty feet into a bramble was par for the course, I didn't really enjoy it. I wish I'd lost consciousness, but I rarely seem to.

I was instantly surrounded by more reptilians and dragged toward the mud hole. I thought there was a horde of reptiles but realised I was seeing triple. So there weren't really eighteen reptiles encircling three princesses, but I went with it for novelty's sake. The princesses, sunk to their perfectly tapered chins, were uncharacteristically silent. The reptiles were speaking

in an unknown tongue, and I was wondering if my Babblechip was on the blink again, or if the knock to my head had damaged it, when I started to make out certain words and phrases. My vision returned to normalcy at the same time.

The reptile who'd slugged me entered the group. He was bigger than the others, so I assumed he was their leader.

"<?> friends <?> we <?> dinner <?> evening!" he said in rich, stentorian tones.

They cheered.

"<?> prepare the meat!" He pointed at the princess and said, "Give <?> females!"

Say, I'd better tell you what they looked like, shouldn't I? They were standard humanoids: two, one, one, two and two, and their faces were quite human. But their heads were conical, their ears were pointed and they had wispy chin beards. Knobby scales grew from the sides of their head and covered their bodies except for the rude parts which, to my fleeting amusement, suffered rather markedly from Kendaw Syndrome.

Bright war-paint covered their brownish bodies and they wore a variety of crude adornments. Armbands, helmets and the like.

Despite their fearful appearance, they looked familiar and somewhat comforting. I was pondering their identity when the princess solved it for me.

"Hear me, Draconians!" she said, in perfect textbook Draconian which my translator easily converted. "I am the Princess Shawneequa Jane Lime of the royal house of Verne-Burroughs! I invoke the Seven Civil Fundaments of Draconia and entreat thee for respectful assistance and fellowship!" She looked in my direction and frowned muddily. "And for my servant, too, I suppose."

Well, that got them jabbering and I took the opportunity to relax. Draconians kept to themselves except for the few rogue elements found in every species, but they were generally reckoned to be fair, serious and lawful, with an altogether less roughshod culture and civilisation than humanity. Which is why Garron and I kept out of their empire.

I'd 'relaxed' about ten 'nits toward the treeline when one of the savages noticed me. "<?> princess's servant <?>!" he cried, and I was seized and dragged to the edge of the mud. The Draconian chief pointed at the princess and jabbered at me. I didn't need a translation, and "Slave <?> talking female <?> clean <?> eat for dinner" wasn't at all helpful except in making me regret my agnosticism.

"I'm coming out to get you, princess," I said, "please don't hurt me."

“I’m fine where I am,” she said, “as they don’t seem to speak Draconian.”

“Oh, I think they got the gist, but their Draconian is rusty. Turn on your translator.”

“I have no translator.”

“You’re not chipped?” I asked, surprised.

“Royalty is not chipped, thank you. One may be unduly influenced.”

“All you need’s a brain, for that,” I said, gingerly stepping into the cool mud and waiting for a withering retort.

Instead, to my surprise, she asked, “Are you alright? He hit you very hard.”

My joy at her concern was somewhat mitigated by her addition of, “Of course, I expect your skull is very thick.”

I stopped, waist deep. “You know, my chip is functioning perfectly.” I called up Draconian. “You are aware that they intend to eat us?”

I chuckled; that shut her up.

“I hear the wild Draconians prefer to ingest their prey while it’s still alive, in fact.”

“That is patently untrue! You besmirch our reputation!”

No, that wasn’t the princess. That was the chief. I looked, and a half dozen spears were pointed at me.

My chip had sorted out the dialect and had been instructing my vocal cords to simulate their speech. The good news was, we could beg for help now. The bad news was, I’d just insulted them. I cowered and entwined my writhing fingers like Garron taught me.

“Please forgive me, oh great chief and mighty warriors. My mastery of your sophisticated tongue is crude and ineffective and I regret any untoward misunderstandings. May I, your humble servant, inquire as to the exact nature of your intended course of action concerning the princess and myself?”

“You may inquire.”

There’s one in every jungle. The tribe chuckled. I sighed.

“Great one, what are your intentions concerning the princess and myself?”

“We shall treat you as we treat all the fallen sky gods, of course. First, however, we will mark the novelty of this particular situation and accord you due respect. You will be cleaned, groomed and treated to a fine meal in celebration of your advent among us.”

“Oh!” I translated for the princess Shawneequa, who said, “That doesn’t sound so bad!”

At which the chief added, “And then we’re going to eat you. You’ll be cooked first, of

course. ‘Raw’, really!”

Someone gibbered at this. I realised it was me and willed myself to stop.

I translated for the princess, who said, “Fiddlesticks!”

“Don’t worry,” I said, ignoring her appalling profanity and cuing the chip to speak English. “I’ll get out of this. I mean, I’ll get us out of this.”

“Hurry up, human,” said the chief. “It takes hours to marinate the meat properly.”

“So, what’s your plan?” said the princess.

“I’m working on it, I’m working on it” I said, while thinking to myself. “Let me work through this abject terror first, alright?”

Then I recalled something the chief said. “Wait! What did you mean by ‘sky gods’?”

“What do you mean by, ‘what do I mean by “sky gods”? You have fallen from the sky like so many before you. Therefore, you are a sky god. It’s quite simple, really. Though I must admit your current state is unique, in our experience.”

“That’s right! You said ‘novelty’. What’s so different about us?”

“Why, you’re alive, of course. And,” he frowned slightly, with distaste or maybe doubt, “*talking*. In times before, all sky gods were either old and withered or seem to have previously suffered grave injury. Also, thanks to Skink, there...” – one of the warriors nodded – “...you two are the only ones we have seen actually fall at the same time. It’s quite odd, now that I come to consider it.”

I thought furiously. This was an unexpected boon of some sort. I had to turn this situation to my advantage, but how? The Draconians seemed rather blasé about our advent. Was this simply due to their stoic nature? And what was the explanation for all the dead bodies they’d feasted on? Was this some sort of cemetery world? I looked closer at their ornaments. Gentlemen, among the obvious things foraged from the jungle - feathers, hides and such – they were wearing obvious technological relics. I saw a fusion battery strapped to a club head, a diode chain necklace, a plexi-port worn as a chest shield and other things. Under its crown of feathers the chief’s headband, I realised, was a comm unit.

These weren’t primitive Draconians at all! They were the degenerate descendants of some crash survivors or lost expedition! I looked at the chief again. He was conferring in whispers with a priest of some sort, a wiry fellow with half his face painted red and a single horn strapped on that side, who glanced sidelong at me and ran a finger across his throat. It wasn’t hard to ascertain his opinion but the chief appeared unconvinced.

That's when it happened. I don't know about you, but when I get a brainstorm a warm glow fills my body. Well, I was blazing when I climbed out of the mud.

"Play along, princess," I said. "I have an idea."

I drew a deep breath as the furious chief approached and cried, "Stop! This charade has gone on long enough! Hear me, sons of Draconia! Harken back to the tales of your ancestors!"

They murmured. This was good. I jumped on a nearby boulder. Always go for altitude when you're talking down to people, Garron says.

"Why are myself and the royal princess alive when all the other sky gods were but corpses? Do any of you know?"

They did not. The chief shushed them. He sensed he was losing control. I had to cow him, now.

"Why are you here? This is not your homeland! Chief! What hereditary secrets does your line hide from your tribe?"

His expression told me everything I needed to know.

"We are those ones foretold in your legends!" Bit of a gamble, that. "The prophesied time has come!"

The warriors began to mutter, the priest wailed and the chief roared. He leaped upon a slightly larger boulder, damn his eyes, and furiously signalled for silence. The mutters subsided.

"My people!" he cried. "The sky god speaks the truth!"

One point for Unstoffe.

"From the beginning, your chiefs have hidden a terrible secret!"

Two points.

"We are not natives of this land! We came from far away, from beyond the sky!"

Game, set, match.

"For our ancestors were outcasts! We followed forbidden pursuits! Our people came to us with fire and steel! They meant to destroy us and we fled to this hidden refuge!"

Wait. *What?*

"And now the cursed day has come! We have been found and this soft creature is a harbinger of our destruction! He must be destroyed, now, lest he expose us!"

Oh, fiddlesticks.

Have you ever heard the tale of Crewman Colepit? I always meant to tell Garron. I wish he could hear it. Absolutely true. This was a fellow, a few centuries back, who served as a welder on one of the old mining dreadnoughts during the early succession wars. He was caught outside during a surprise attack. The hull exploded under his feet but he was miraculously saved by a bit of intact shielding. The attacking fighter's pilot had ejected prematurely and Colepit tumbled right into the empty cockpit. To his amazement it powered right up and gave him control. You have to understand, these things were keyed to the pilot's biocode so that enemies couldn't do what Colepit proceeded to do – he flew straight to the enemy carrier and dropped a torpedo into its engine core. When he returned to the dreadnought they discovered that the ejected pilot was none other than his long-lost twin sister, who in turn had been captured after unexpectedly being able to enter the similarly defended dreadnought. It was computed that the odds of this chain of events were several trillion to one, and the reunited siblings went on to win the Atomic Lottery and live happily ever after in a stylish four-up on Beggar's Bounty.

The tale of Crewman Colepit was the first thing I thought of when, immediately after the princess wailed, "You fool! What did you say to them? Who is going to save me now?" my communicator crackled to life and I heard Garron say, "Unstoffe, you fool! What are you playing at with those Dragons?"

"Garron? Oh, Garron! Where are you?"

"Don't look up! The Doctor says he has a plan."

"The Doctor's with you! That's wonderful! What's his plan?"

The communicator was silent for a moment. Then -

"Well, I didn't expect that."

"Garron? What's the Doctor's plan?"

"Plummeting to his certain death, apparently."

I looked up. Hundreds of meters in the air I saw a rotund burden dangling from a parachute. In the air between, growing larger by the second, the man in the brown suit dropped to earth, his faint scream growing louder. I thought fast.

"Hear me, Draconians! I bring you a sacrifice to prove my good intentions!" I bellowed.

And that's when the chief glanced up, tilted his head and was clobbered by the falling body. I heard the distinct *Crack!* of snapping bones and hoped they were the chief's. The startled tribe scattered into the jungle. Flocks of birds erupted from the jungle to mark their

flight.

I stood there for a moment, my mind a puzzled haze.

“Hey! Snap out of it!”

“Oh, sorry, princess!”

I rushed to the mud hole and, using a dropped spear made of a plasteel spar, pulled the princess to dry land. Garron gently trotted to a landing in the clearing.

“Hello, boy,” he called, “nick of time, eh? Shame about this fellow, I suppose.”

I helped the princess stand and joined Garron to gaze on the bodies. The chief, amazingly, was slowly clenching his hands. He’d survived. The heroic agent stared at the sky, unblinking. I reached to close his eyes when they shifted in my direction and he grinned. We all jumped back.

He sat up, stretched and then stood. He did a little dance, as if drying his limbs, and we heard his joints pop. He ran a hand through his hair and grinned. “Well, I won’t want to try that trick again anytime soon! Oh, look at the Draconian. You poor man, we’ll soon have you right as rain. Right! You two,” he meant Garron and myself, “we need a stretcher! Garron, don’t bother stuffing your parachute back in your tesseract, we’ll use that, Unstoffe’s spear and that stick over there.”

I knew it! I’d suspected Garron had a tesseract but he’d never admit it. If you don’t know, a tesseract is a highly illegal pocket of void space one can have tied to one’s person and made accessible only at your personal command. With the possibilities for mayhem inherent in such a device, not to mention the possibility of a gargantuan implosion should the portal fail, it’s understandable that the penalty for owning one is, thanks to modern medicine, three consecutive death sentences.

Still, it was preferable to the other way he could make useful items appear, I suppose.

We assembled the stretcher with only mild complaint; I think Garron and I were a bit out of our element and uncharacteristically willing to follow the stranger’s lead. He appeared occupied with the chief, the princess watching, so I took the opportunity to confer with Garron.

“Garron, who is that guy? You called him ‘Doctor’, like that bloke on Ribos.”

Garron squinted sideways and studied the man.

“I don’t know how, but it is him. We had a few minutes to talk, floating around up there. He said he’d regenerated, whatever that means.”

“Must be a new custom body process,” I said. It was perfectly feasible. “So, was he following us?”

“Complete denial. Just a coincidence, he said. He was after that glowing cube.”

“Oh.”

We laid out the parachute and folded it over. Garron, the need for secrecy passed, snapped his fingers and a perfectly round shimmer appeared an inch from his chest. He performed a complicated hand gesture and quickly reached inside. It was hard to look at. When his hand emerged he held a pocket knife. Another finger snap and the portal – that’s what it was – shrunk to a point and vanished with the faintest of sparks. He began to saw the cords, ignoring my glare.

“You could have told me. I’ve suspected for years, but you could have told me.”

He frowned. “That would make you an accomplice. Do you know the penalty for having a tesseract?”

“Of course. I know the penalty for almost every crime there is.”

“You always were a pessimist. Go grab that pole, will you?”

I went to the pole, which stuck straight out of the soft ground, and Garron said, “I’m glad to see you’re okay, Unstoffe.”

I said, “Me too, Garron,” and pulled the pole from the earth. Its savagely beautiful tip gleamed through the dirt.

It sang.

“Garron! This is the Singing Spear of Sven Venison! From the ship!”

“What?” said Garron. “That means more of my treasures may be around! Keep your eyes peeled, boy.” He began peering around. A thought struck him and he cringed and looked up.

“I wouldn’t worry,” said the Doctor, his screwdriver trilling, “it’s all over now save the singing. Speaking of which...”

He adjusted the ’driver and examined the merrily humming spear. He scowled and made another adjustment. No result.

“Excuse me,” said Shawneequa, “but if that’s what I think it is, it won’t stop singing until it makes a kill.”

“That’s hardly scientific!” the Doctor snapped.

“Well,” said Garron, “Let’s just kill two birds with one stone, shall we?” and looked meaningfully at the chief.

“Certainly not!” said the Doctor. “That would be murder!”

“Says the man who was prepared to abandon two dear old friends to the mercy of killer robots,” said Garron.

“Nonsense. I was just having fun with you. I was on my way to rescue you when we got caught in the warp. Dangerous thing, an unshielded warp drive fusing with an admittedly wonky dimensional stabilizer and...” – he glared meaningfully at Garron – “...a leaky tesseract. Certainly took the Tardis by surprise.” He paused for a moment. “Still, no harm done, eh? We’re safe and sound on this planet’s surface and if my readings are correct there are some items from the ship just over there. Now, let’s see where the Tardis landed and we’ll get out of here.”

He pointed the device towards the plains, the jungle, the plateau. “Nothing.” He pointed it straight down. “You never know.” Frowning, he pointed it straight up to the blue sky and I heard the pitch change. Garron, the princess and I exchanged looks while he stood there, his arm moving in a slow arc horribly suggestive of an orbit.

“Well... that’s certainly cast things in a new light,” he said. “Damn.”

And that’s when the mutter of drums began drifting from the jungle.

“The next hour was extremely hectic, full of drama, incident and humour. I’m going to skip it, if you fellows don’t mind. If I keep rambling on you’ll have to break for a recharge. Speaking of which, is there food? The three of us haven’t properly eaten in days.”

“Your comfort is our command! A menu will be delivered forthwith!”

“Oh, thank you! That’s uncommonly decent of you.”

“Not at all. Now, did you say, ‘drums’?”

I sure did. Scary ones, too. An hour later found us running along the stream toward the plateau I’d spotted. Well, I say running, but walking at an accelerated pace is more like it. The princess and the Doctor shared the front of the chief’s stretcher while I held the rear. Garron puffed behind us, a bit theatrically, I thought. The chief reclined in comfort, murdering me through slitted eyes.

Thanks to the Doctor's sonic, we were free of mud and feeling refreshed. My skin still tingled. The other items from the ship proved to be the scattered contents of the princess's trunk. She was now outfitted in stylish jungle explorer gear (my valiant offer to stand watch while she changed was refused). I must say, the jodhpurs were flattering from where I stood. Between the agreeable view and the spear's jaunty march I found myself having a strangely enjoyable experience. The only clouds in my mind derived from the Doctor and princess's instant rapport and the chief's reluctant admittance that the drums were those of his tribe's bitter, savage enemies and not, as we'd supposed, those of his people. Who, I may as well tell you, don't appear again.

Why were we running toward the plateau? Well, we ran because we were being chased, though we hadn't caught more than fleeting glimpses of our pursuers. We ran to the highlands because the Doctor had had an idea. He'd made a few more scans with the 'driver and appeared puzzled. He dropped a rock. Hopped in place. Studied the sun. Then he threw himself flat with an ear to the ground and listened. When he stood, he had open admiration on his face.

"We have to get that plateau," he said, "if I'm right about where we are, and I am, that's our only hope."

The chief spoke from the stretcher. "Many who brave the walls of the world do not return. Those who do are mad. Please do not take me there."

The Doctor knelt. "Sorry, chief. You're our bit of insurance. I assure you we will allow you to come to no harm."

"You will keep the fat one away from me?"

"Sure."

"And allow me to regain my honour by defeating the large-eared one in battle?" He meant me, by the way.

"Eh, probably not, but we'll see. May I ask you a question?"

"You may ask," I said, and the chief frowned.

"Hmmp! Ask your question."

"What do you call your world? What's its name?"

The chief's answer was stunning.

The universe is full of ghost stories. Most are just nonsense, spacer's yarns meant to while

away the grind of a long haul. Everyone's heard of scratches on the hull, lights that follow, dead crewmen peering in ports, that sort of thing. But some have real substance, a weight to them that's pretty much convinced all but the most sceptical. There's a spectral saucer fleet that appears in the Medusa Cascade. There's a 1,000 year-old Earth automobile with an eccentric but friendly crew that's been seen for, well, 1,000 years. Even Garron claimed his old cottage in Hackney Wick had a phantom, an old resistance fighter from the Dalek invasion. But the most mysterious, most feared space ghost wasn't a ship, a person or a monster – it was a planet. A black, featureless sphere, this world was said to leave a trail of madness wherever it appeared. None who landed on it returned. The most awe-inspiring thing about it, though, was its age. This world, the greatest ghost of all time, was said to have appeared not for decades or centuries. No, the planet Rallax and its eldritch reputation had haunted the space lanes for *millions* of years.

"Are we really on Rallax, Doctor?" I asked later, "'cause Rallax is supposed to be black and featureless. This is a jungle. Well, down there it was."

We'd reached the foothills of the plateau. The stream now raced cold and clear as it sought the low lands. The vegetation was thinner, the trees turning to evergreens. We cast long shadows as the sun set behind us. Above us, the sky darkened and tiny points of light appeared.

The Doctor slowed to a stop. He scanned our path and appeared satisfied.

"We can rest for a minute," he said. "We can see them coming from here. Now, Unstoffe, I really don't want to say what I'm thinking. I doubt you'd believe me. It's better if I just show you, alright?"

"Now you sound like Garron. You'll tell us when we need to know."

Garron was studying the emerging stars with an unreadable expression. "Doctor?" he said. "Have you ever been to Earth?"

"Earth's my second home. And I know what you're seeing so don't mention it."

"It's deuced odd."

"Yes."

They trailed into silence, watching the sky. The princess and I exchanged shrugs.

As Garron had had the foresight to truss him securely, the chief had given us no trouble. He'd maintained a stony silence through our flight, though I spotted him tapping his fingers

in time to the spear's music. But he spoke now and I'm glad he did.

"I hate to interrupt your astronomical studies, gentlemen, but I assume you'd be interested to know that a tribe of human savages is creeping up the hillside?"

We grabbed him and ran. The primitive humans let up a cry and pursued.

"Thanks!" I panted, and he replied, "I have no concern for your lives, however if I am to survive I require at least two of you to bear me."

"Unstoffe, stop talking to the Dragon and run, will you?" said Garron.

He didn't need to tell me twice. About running, I mean. These savage humans had bows. I heard a sound I'd wished to never hear again – the *plink!* of arrows hitting rocks. Well, actually *plink!* is good; that means one less arrow in me. It's the meaty *thud!* I didn't want to hear.

We raced up a narrow, steep path. The chief stoically bore the forceful shaking. The spear was now singing a dramatic choral piece. Garron huffed alarmingly as he passed us, belly jiggling and legs working like pistons, and blended into the murky darkness above. The Doctor and the princess ran like automatons, showing no sign of weariness. I was developing a painful stitch in my side and felt a slight tug on the stretcher as they began to outpace me. We ran, and a howling horde followed.

The path levelled and turned to follow the cliff face. The front-of-stretcher crew put on a burst of speed. "Wait!" I said, but they didn't. The stretcher was pulled from my hands. It bounced and dragged on the gravel but to their credit the others didn't let go. I caught up, wheezing, and bent to grab the poles when an arrow cleanly parted my hair and I heard a distant cry of disappointment. Then they began to fly amongst us in earnest. *Plink! Plink! Plink!*

The Doctor turned, wide-eyed. "Grab the stretcher, Unstoffe! Now!" I did, unable to resist the command, and we fairly sailed along the path. I was waiting with abject dread for the next arrow to plunge into my back, feeling immanent death piling up like an oncoming wave in a storm. But it didn't come. I risked a look back as the sun finally slipped below the horizon and night fell. The path was empty and quiet. I looked down at the chief, who of course had been anxiously peeking around me the entire time. He settled back, relaxed.

"Doctor, I think they're gone," I said.

"Of course," said the chief. "This place is taboo for all inhabitants of Rallax."

"'None return', remember?" I added.

“Do you intend to?” asked the Doctor. “This is just the place we want to be, then!”

We jogged on at a thankfully slower pace and a bright moon crept out from behind the cliff top and lit our path. The Doctor studied the moon and nodded as if a suspicion had been confirmed. The princess stared.

“Doctor,” she said, “my ancestors came from Earth. I’ve studied their history...”

“Yes, yes.”

“Then that means...”

“Yes.”

“Amazing! Rallax is a...”

I didn’t get to hear what Rallax was because just then Garron shouted from above.

“Doctor! This is amazing! You must come see this!”

I was getting heartily sick from being excluded from all the shared amazement, let me tell you. I’m always the last to find out anything. So it’s absolutely typical that at that moment I heard a thin whistle and something smacked the lump where the chief clobbered me and for one of the few times in my poor beleaguered existence I fell unconscious.

Wild shadows cast by flickering flame danced across the cliff face while capering figures ululated and shrieked. Drums beat a frenzied tattoo that pounded into my leaden muscles and splitting skull. Then I blacked out again.

Garron was speaking from far, far away. I blinked my eyes and my vision returned. I was lying discarded at the foot of the cliff. The fire was now red embers. In the moonlight I could spy the distant tree tops far below. From the moon’s position I deduced a couple hours had passed. The tribesmen were sitting in an attentive array facing four posts set along the edge of a circular area.

Garron was lashed to the post on the far left, the others lined up to his right – the chief, the princess, the Doctor. They’d been in a scrap, that’s for sure. As I said, Garron was speaking. He was using his ‘teacher’ voice, accompanied by the singing spear, and the tribe was entranced. I wished I could see their faces.

“...and, as I’ve said, ’tis a magic land we hail from! A land without beasts who devour the hunter! A land without brambles to catch on the skin! A land of plenty, of safety, of many buxom maidens like the one you see here!” The princess, who honestly isn’t particularly

buxom or, I suspect, the other thing, glared at him.

He'd segued into his huckster voice. "Careful, Garron," I thought.

I slowly sat up, trying to not alert the tribe. I saw the four notice me, and the Doctor cried out, "Well, it's about time! Er, It's about time to demonstrate that yes, we are indeed gods! No doubt!"

The princess chimed in, "And now we will awe you with our mighty power!"

"I want nothing to do with this, but if it will free me I will attest to the godhood of these humans," added the chief; rather unconvincingly, I thought.

At this heretical utterance a mild point of theological contention erupted between the tribal agnostics and the true believers.

Garron cried, "Do not squabble amongst yourselves, mortals!" as with a resounding series of thuds the agnostic delegation was silenced. "Oh," said Garron, "That efficiently settles that. Now, er... Doctor?"

"Right. Who out there can tell me: what are those little points of light in the sky?"

After a quick conference, a timid, "Stars?" was offered.

"Right! And which of you fine fellows can tell me what stars are?"

"Sparkling pieces of ice," I thought. I leaned back to enjoy the show and was immediately startled. The cliff face hummed and vibrated!

"Are they suns like ours, only so far away they appear tiny?" said the resident astronomer.

"Oh, that's brilliant! You're brilliant, you are!" The Doctor grinned for a second, pleasantly surprised, then frowned. "No! The stars are simply little floating chunks of ice!"

I looked at the rock wall and what I saw was so incongruous, so impossible, that my mind refused to accept it.

"What is this 'ice' you speak of, possible god?"

"Oh, er, you don't really have that here, do you? It is a jungle after all, isn't it?"

"Is it a type of bird, perhaps?"

I faced a control panel. In large English letters, it read, 'Wild Adventure Environmental Control Substation H'. I brushed off centuries of dust and studied the gently glowing switches and dials.

Behind me the Doctor said, "Yes! Yes, that's it!"

"This 'ice' is a bird, then? But why does it glow? Does it self-luminesce like the

glowbugs of the plains?”

“Forget the ice!” Garron thundered. “It’s not important! What’s important is that we have the very power of turning the darkest night to brightest day!”

Which, in fact, was clearly labelled on the third panel down.

A furious voice broke through the erupting clamour. “Stop! This will stop now!”

A rather formidable female form leaped to her feet. “These are not gods! Do gods bruise and bleed? Do gods beg for their lives or traffic with the cone-headed ones? No! Let me hear you say, ‘No’!”

Oh, she was good. Their chorused, “No!” echoed across the night.

“And what of these claims they make? Not even the gods can turn night to day! Such a thing is impossible! Unheard of! They merely delay us in this forbidden place with their stories and puppets and magic dances!” I’d missed an awful lot, apparently. “Slay them! Slay them now before doom comes to us all!”

Spear and knives were readied, the savages advanced on their helpless, struggling victims and the singing spear reached a dramatic crescendo. I drew a deep breath, coughed, and drew another.

“STOP!” I thundered. They froze in place.

“The dead one lives!” came a hushed whisper.

“BEHOLD OUR POWER!” I turned the ‘Sky Array’ manual control knob to ‘Day’.

“Sorry, Binro,” I thought, as the night sky instantly and blindingly became bright blue day, “but sometimes they *are* really just lights in the sky.”

The effect on the tribe of feral humans was instantaneous. A third of them fainted in their tracks. Another third, the chief lady included, howled and fled. The remainder grovelled.

“Stand, faithful ones!” I intoned, feeling guilty at my enjoyment of being worshiped, “Though fully capable of doing it themselves, demonstrate your loyalty and free the other gods.”

This was done, though the Draconian chief rather let the side down by crumpling to the ground. I suppose our demonstration was a bit too much for him, poor chap. The others crowded around.

“Fine work, my boy,” beamed Garron, slapping my back.

“Not bad, not bad at all,” said the Doctor, shaking my hand.

I almost joined the fallen chief when the princess enveloped me in a sincere hug and

kissed my ear. “You will be rewarded,” she whispered. After only briefly considering the nature of my reward, I realised we were still the object of veneration. Embarrassing, ankle stroking veneration, in fact.

“Oh, get up, you lot.” I commanded. “Take your fallen comrades and go from this place! Never return, or we will plunge your world into eternal night forever!”

It was done in less time than it takes to tell you.

“Well, Unstoffe, that was redundant but it did the job,” said the Doctor. He rubbed his hands. “Now! Let’s be on our way! Oh, and Unstoffe?”

“Yes?”

“You really should let the princess go. I’m fairly sure she’s stopped breathing.”

We left the Draconian chief where he lay. There wasn’t any reason to carry him further.

Beyond the control panel a flight of stone steps with a tarnished hand rail climbed the rock wall. We ascended, higher and higher. Soon the round ledge was far below, a coin on a sidewalk.

Higher still, and in the distance we saw another plateau beyond the sea. The sky assumed a knobby, multifaceted texture. And at the top of the stairs we all stopped as the Doctor waved his sonic at a small control dais and a section of the sky creaked down to join the stairs. Somewhere beyond, I heard engines and ethereal music.

It was magic. It was wonderful. Everyone seemed enchanted by the awe of it, even flinty old Garron, and we all moved with a certain solemn grace.

The Doctor ascended the stairs and stepped into darkness beyond the glowing blue bulbs. Garron and the princess followed. I paused a moment, touched the sky. The lights weren’t hot at all, but cool as ice.

I turned to bid the wild land goodbye and realised the rising, ethereal music I’d been hearing wasn’t in my head at all. The Draconian chief, his noble face contorted with rage, surged up the stairs and threw the singing spear. I ducked and it cracked past like a thunderbolt. Pledging good behaviour if the gods saved me, I scrambled for the darkness.

As I passed the portal the ramp shuddered, creaked and rose. The stairs weren’t stairs any more and I tripped and sprawled. I’d banged my knee but I was safe. I panted for a moment, mentally recanted my hasty promises and began crawling to salvation when a vice-like grip seized my ankle.

I was pulled backwards and desperately gripped a metal stair. “Let go!” I cried. I saw my leg now protruded past the sharp edge of the hatch. The chief heaved himself up. He now hung halfway in, but I saw that the hatch would seal in seconds. We’d both be killed. He followed my glance and realised the same thing. His face lost its manic intensity as realisation dawned. Our eyes met.

There was only one thing I could do. I had no choice. I kicked his face once and his grip loosened. Twice and he let go, snagging the hatch edge with his fingertips. On the third blow he dropped into the tiny details of the land far below. Maybe he landed safely, maybe on the stone stairs. I don’t know. I hope so.

“You idiot,” I said, as the line of light narrowed and disappeared with a pneumatic thump. I clambered up and brushed myself off. I heard, as I said, the rumbling mutter of far away engines. Condensation or lubricant dripped somewhere. The light fixtures popped and buzzed. The Doctor and the princess were discussing something in urgent whispers. But there was a missing sound, something I couldn’t quite identify.

In the dim light ahead I saw two figured kneeling by a third. “Don’t move him, not an inch!” warned the Doctor. I was sickened by the realisation of what sound I’d been missing.

“It won’t stop singing until it makes a kill,” I thought.

The song was over and the spear was silent.

TO BE CONTINUED...

