

Tina Palamac

Her Lives & Times
Cycle Beta of a Century 21 Multiverse Story
by Clya Brown



“The trouble with leaving school,” muttered Captain Scarlet only half under his breath, “is that you walk out on your last day nurturing this ridiculous idea that you’re never going to have to sit any more exams as long as you live. I mean, why do they make us *do* these tests, for heaven’s sake?”

Symphony grinned at him.

“To make people like you look stupid, of course! Why do you think?”

A sound not unlike a snort emanated from Scarlet’s nostrils.

“Actually, that’s essentially the conclusion I’d already come to. I mean, never mind all that airy-fairy stuff about tactical deployment, command and control systems, bridging and demolitions, weapon handling skills and all that rubbish. What they *really* want to know is how you’d work out the height of the Leaning Tower of Pisa armed only with a barometer. I mean, I ask you...”

“That’s not such a dumb question! It tests your ability to think laterally – and you need skills like that when you’re up against an opponent with unknown capabilities. It’s all about trying to make sure we’re up to the task of *anticipating* their actions, as opposed to just fire-fighting.”

“So the next time the Mysterons are holed up at the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, I’ll know how high to aim the SPV’s front-facing cannon before I get zapped. Great.”

She took a deep breath.

“You’re missing the point, Paul – it’s all about making do with the resources at your disposal to turn a *disadvantage* into an *opportunity*! In the problem you’ve just mentioned, you’re obviously supposed to determine the difference in air pressure at the bottom and the top to work out how high the building is.”

“Lateral thinking, eh? In that case I can’t see what’s wrong with the solution I proposed.”

“And what was that?”

“Take the barometer to the top and lower it to the ground on a piece of string. Then haul it up again and measure the string.”

She shook her head impatiently.

“You weren’t told you *had* any string! Resources, remember?” She considered for a moment. “Though coming to think of it, I suppose you *could* throw the barometer off the top and see how long it takes to hit the ground. Then you work it out using distance fallen equals gravitational constant multiplied by time in free fall squared. How’s that for lateral thinking, Adam – you sat this series of tests a couple of weeks ago, didn’t you?”

Captain Blue had joined them in the corridor outside the training suite. He shook his head slowly and grinned.

“It was the same sort of exercise, though the questions were different. That solution you’ve described doesn’t *really* use the fact that it’s a barometer. I think you’re supposed to use the fact that it’s a barometer as opposed to any other heavy object, though I’ll bet it never actually said so. And anyway, the wind might blow it into the side of another

building on the way down. I've got a better idea. Find the guy in charge of the local tourist office, and offer to give him the barometer if he tells you the height of the tower."

Scarlet pulled a face. "Suppose he doesn't *want* a barometer?"

"Then you tell him it's Galileo's original, and while he's inspecting it in disbelief you walk off with one of his brochures, of course. Lateral thinking, Paul! So what did *you* make of the whole thing, Symphony?"

Symphony raised her left hand to chest-height and waggled it in a 'so-so' gesture. "It was okay, I guess. Most of it was fairly obvious. The last one was interesting, though."

Scarlet rolled his eyes. "Oh yes – number twenty. That one took me longer to answer than all the others put together."

"Really? What was it?"

"Question number twenty consisted of just four words. It was... *Is this a question?*"

Blue considered for a second, and then laughed. "Oh, nice one! The sort of thing you could spend all day trying to answer. How long did you spend on it, Captain Scarlet?"

Scarlet grimaced.

"Fifteen minutes. I typed almost a whole side. Doesn't seem to have done any good though. Symphony here beat me by a good ten marks – and since I *know* I got all the others right with the exception of that ridiculous barometer thing, obviously she must have got the last question right while I got it wrong."

Symphony shrugged. "Not necessarily. The test is marked on both accuracy and time. I'll have completed it faster than you."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I only wrote... let me think... eight words on question number twenty."

"Oh, yes? So what *is* the answer to question number twenty, then?"

She grinned. "I've no idea. But then neither have you – and I said so more concisely than you did."

"How?"

"I wrote *If it is, then this is the answer*."

"*That*," said Scarlet darkly, "is cheating."

"Fiddle-dee-dee, as your namesake in 'Gone with the Wind' might have put it. I recognised the spirit in which the examiner wrote the question, and responded in a similar spirit. That enabled me to save the time necessary to pass the test."

"But you *didn't* pass the test. You didn't answer the last question correctly!"

"That's because it doesn't have an answer."

Scarlet frowned at her. "No - I can't accept that. It's got to be either right or wrong. You can't have it being neither."

"Incorrect. There *are* questions that don't have an answer. That was one of them."

“Rubbish. *All* questions have an answer. It’s just that sometimes you don’t know what it is, that’s all.”

She shook her head. “Not true. And I can prove it.”

She tore a piece of paper out of her notepad, rapidly scribbled four words on it and handed it over to him. “All right, Captain Cleverclogs – is this statement true or false?”

He looked down at the words in front of him. “It’s false. You’ve said so.”

“I’ve written ‘*This statement is false*’. And you’re agreeing with that, are you?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re saying that what I’ve written is true.”

“Yes.”

“But I’ve written that the statement is false. So it *can’t* be true, can it?”

“N...no.”

“But a couple of seconds ago you agreed with me that it’s true.”

“I agreed with you that it’s true to say that it’s false, yes. Now wait a minute – this is getting silly...”

She laughed. “It’s not silly at all! If it’s false, then it must be true, and if it’s true then it must be false. The question ‘*Is this statement true or false?*’ quite simply doesn’t *have* an answer. Which is an example of what I said in the first place. QED.”

“Nonsense! It’s just a verbal trick – the sort of thing that quick-witted smart-arses like you use to get the conversation going at dinner parties when nobody can think of anything to say.”

She shook her head vehemently.

“It’s nothing of the kind. You’re dismissing it as a party-trick because you can’t see the relevance of it to the world we live in. I read once that Faraday got a similar sort of reaction when he discovered electricity. Somebody asked him what the use of it was, and he replied that it was of the same sort of use as a new-born baby.”

“So what’s *your* little conundrum going to be when it grows up, then?”

“It’s not *my* little conundrum! It’s an example of a question that’s unanswerable. About 140 years ago, a guy called Gödel proved that within any formal system there are questions that can’t be answered – I remember being told about it at school. This is one of them.”

“So what’s a ‘formal system’, then?”

She gestured vaguely out of the window at the crystal-clear sky above Cloudbase.

“Well, for example, the Universe is a formal system. That just means that it’s a structure that conforms to a set of laws. And in this universe, what you’ve just dismissively referred to as ‘my conundrum’ can’t be resolved.”

Scarlet's right eyebrow rose alarmingly. "Are you saying that it could be resolved in *another* universe?"

"Sure! Another universe could have a completely different set of rules to ours – and that could include a different set of rules of logic. Or for that matter, maybe the rules of logic in *this* universe aren't quite as straightforward as we think they are."

"Oh, come off it, Symphony! What could be more straightforward than logic?"

She snorted. "What could be more straightforward than a straight line? But we all know that there's no such thing. It's nothing more than an idealised abstraction – a tool we use because we have difficulty understanding anything more complicated. What I'm saying is that logic *itself* could be nothing more than an idealised abstraction: that there's no such thing as 'absolutely true' or 'absolutely false'."

"That's ridiculous. The concepts of true and false could hardly be more obvious." He glanced round at the faint footsteps approaching their table from the direction of the Amber Room, and pointed towards the woman approaching them. "Harmony, right? Is she or isn't she?"

"Well, I'd say that it's likely to be Harmony. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that it's *very* likely to be Harmony. But then again, I *could* be wrong."

Scarlet made a gesture of banging his head against the wall. "Symphony – it *is* Harmony. *I* know it's Harmony. *You* know it's Harmony. *She* knows she's Harmony, for heaven's sake! So she *is* Harmony!"

"And all of us could be wrong. For example, she could be a Mysteronised construct. You and I are forming our opinion solely on the basis of what Harmony looks like, and if she *were* a Mysteron, she'd probably be perfectly convinced that she's Harmony too! All we *really* know is that she's *probably* Harmony – and that's somewhere *between* true and false. There's always an element of doubt."

Scarlet took a deep breath, and waved the Japanese Angel into the chair opposite with a smile.

"Harmony – would you mind telling Symphony here if you're Harmony or not?"

Harmony considered the question thoughtfully.

"I think I am Harmony, Captain Scarlet. And Descartes tells me that if I think, then I am. So I am Harmony. At least as far as I am concerned."

Scarlet shook his head. "I give up! You're Harmony as far as *everybody* is concerned. That means that you're Harmony. End of story."

Harmony lowered her eyes – a gesture that Scarlet had no difficulty recognising as indicative of her strongest disapproval.

"I do not think so, Captain. I think the world was round even when everybody believed that it was flat. *My* reality is not necessarily the same as *your* reality."

Scarlet frowned. "Are we agreeing on what we mean by 'reality'?"

"My reality is *my* perception of the material world, and your reality is *your* perception of the material world. We may or may not agree on what constitutes the material world,

but my *perception* of it undeniably differs from yours. This is because my perception is formed by my personal past experiences – and my past experiences are not the same as yours.”

“So what you’re saying is that *your* reality is a combination of physical fact and prior belief?”

“That is so. Reality is not absolute – only relative. And when realities come into conflict there is discord. For example, I think that the Mysterons must have a very different perception of reality to the one that we possess. This is because their experiences are likely to differ very much from ours. I think also that this will make it very difficult ever to make peace with the Mysterons.”

Captain Blue raised an eyebrow. “Why do you say that, Harmony?”

“As Symphony was saying when I joined you, always we allow for the possibility that we are mistaken. Our reality is an amalgam of this physical world and our collective prior beliefs. A different group of people would have a very different collective prior belief – and so would exist in a very different reality. Because we can admit the possibility that we might be mistaken, we can conceive of other realities. This allows us to see the world from the point of view of others. But the Mysterons are not like us. It may be that they cannot conceive of the world through our eyes. And if they cannot, there will never be peace. Whichever of our realities they inhabit, there can never be peace... unless it is the peace of the grave.”

She glanced at the clock on the wall, and adopted an apologetic expression.

“Regrettably I am late for a meeting. I do not wish to seem impolite, but I cannot stay. Perhaps you will excuse me?”

She rose gracefully from her chair and walked away, leaving Scarlet and Symphony regarding each other in sombre silence.

§

Melody Angel stopped chasing the last remaining piece of haddock around her plate, and put the fork down with a sigh to address her slightly-built blonde female companion at lunch, who was peering sideways out of the window at the banks of cloud floating several hundred metres beneath them.

“That's the fifth time in as many minutes that you've taken a sneaky look out of that window when you thought I wasn't looking, honey. Have you spotted a flyin' saucer that you don't want to worry me about, or were you a meteorologist in a previous life?”

Lieutenant Almond turned her attention back to the plate of stuffed peppers she was eating, with a guilty grin.

“I have not been to Cloudbase before, I admit. I have not yet myself accustomed to the realisation that I am suspended twelve thousand metres above the Earth. Every time I look down it seems to me that I am closer to the ground that I was before. It is... er... *erschreckend*... I cannot find the word – you will help me please?”

Melody considered for a few seconds. “Unnervin’?”

“That is so - unnerving. I ask myself how many minutes I have to find a jetpack if somebody turns off the engines.”

Melody shrugged.

“Not long, I guess. I stopped worryin’ ‘bout it ages back.” She lowered her voice. “But that’s ‘cos I got a secret plan, honey. I’ll tell you what it is if you promise not to tell anyone.”

Lieutenant Almond’s eyes open wide.

“I promise this. You tell me please – then I think I sleep better at night.”

Melody bent her head closer to the table and lowered her voice.

“You do nothing at all until Cloudbase is about two metres off the ground, and then...”

“Yes?”

“... and then you jump into the air high as you can. That way you won’t be standin’ on the floor when it hits the ground. A second later, you land on your feet – and just walk out the door.”

“Ach! This is stupid! You cannot believe that, no? It will not work!”

Melody’s eyes opened wide in consternation.

“It *won’t*? Well, slap my thigh! And to think I’ve been sleepin’ sound in my bed up here for the last two years not worryin’ about it. Now I declare I’m never gonna get a good night’s sleep again – an’ it’s all *your* fault, honey.”

Lieutenant Almond feigned a hurt look, though her eyes retained their twinkle.

“You make fun of me. This is not nice.”

Melody grinned.

“Sorry, honey – but we’ve all been though this one, believe me. Personally, I find it helps to realise that if anything ever goes wrong with this hoverin’ battleship then we got absolutely no chance at all. Zilch. Even if you got to an escape chute in time with a jetpack you’d asphyxiate ‘cos there sure as hell ain’t much air out there, and even if you *did* manage to get breathing apparatus on before you jumped, you’d probably freeze to death anyway. Best just to forget all about it – like I do. Pass the salt please.”

“You have already put salt on the fish. Salt is protoplasmic poison. Is bad for you. In my country all food is organic. Is much more healthy.”

Melody poured a copious pile of the offending compound onto the side of her plate.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it, honey. It’s organic salt.”

Almond’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

“*Organic* salt! How you make organic salt, please? Sodium chloride is *inorganic*! Is only inorganic substance we eat! The food makers, they deceive you! They condemn you to die by poisoning your protoplasm!”

Melody pulled a face and shrugged.

“I guess I like to live dangerously. Live each day as if it’s your last, I say. Which is a pretty damn stupid expression if you think about it – means that by all rights you oughta be screaming blue murder all the time ‘cos you know you’re about to die, but let’s not get hung up on *that* one. Where you born, honey? I say you never got that accent on ma side of the pond – you sound kinda Germanic to me.”

“I am Transylvanian Saxon. I grow up in back streets of Brasov - learn English from American soldiers when they throw out occupation forces from Bereznik. I learn to say ‘Got any gum, chum?’ when I am four years old.”

Melody laughed out loud and clapped her hands.

“I guess we’ve spread more of the English language round the world by handing out sweets to all the local kids than the Brits ever did by adding their countries to the empire! Or is it just that English speakers never bother to learn all the other folks’ languages? Speakin’ for myself, I picked up quite a smatterin’ of Choctaw when I was a kid, and I’ve been learning other languages ever since - it’s kinda fun. Harmony’s helping me with Japanese, and I can cuss pretty good in French these days – that’s the Destiny effect, y’understand. How many do *you* speak, honey?”

Lieutenant Almond considered a moment. “About ten, I think.”

Melody’s eyes opened wide in astonishment. “You don’t *know*?”

Almond shrugged. “I pick up little bits and pieces everywhere. Sometimes I forget which one is which.” She frowned as if remembering something. “How many languages does Captain Grey speak, please?”

Melody pondered a moment.

“Five, I reckon. English, French, German, Spanish and Japanese. Harmony’s been giving him lessons in the last of those – she says he’s pickin’ it up pretty quick, though it seems to me they’re spendin’ a mighty long time alone together workin’ on it. Any particular reason for askin’?”

Lieutenant Almond nodded abstractedly.

“Yes, five is what I understand also – he says to me on the flight back from Marineville that he speaks these languages. I speak the four European ones also, and I too know a little Japanese. I therefore think this is very strange.”

Melody raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“What’s that, Lieutenant?”

Almond assembled the plates on her tray and began to rise out of her seat.

“He does not seem to understand the meaning of the word ‘No’ in any of them.”

She picked up her tray and strode off in the direction of the catering hatch, leaving the Angel choking on her haddock.

Lieutenant Almond made her way out of the restaurant, pausing for a few moments in front of a large schematic of the base to get her bearings before setting off in the direction of the female officers' quarters. At first fairly certain of her direction, her step began to lose its confidence when, after about a further ten minutes, she found herself standing outside the Amber Room. As she tried to work out where the inevitable missed turn could have been made, the door slid back as Symphony walked through, and the two women collided, catching each another to prevent either falling over. Simultaneous apologies and flurried assurances of no permanent damage on either side took a total of three seconds, after which Symphony peered at the new arrival.

"Can I help? You look kinda lost."

Almond smiled ruefully.

"It is true. Could you tell me the way to the female officers' quarters, please?"

Symphony grinned. "Lieutenant Almond – of course. Hi – I'm Symphony. That's Symphony on duty and Karen off it, though most people call me Symphony all the time. You're Rodica, aren't you? You arrived on that helijet that came in two hours ago – I saw you disembark. Has Melody been showing you round the base?"

Almond nodded. "Melody has just taken me to lunch; I now go to unpack my things."

"I'll take you there – it's only just around the corner actually, but I'm just going off duty. Would you like some help with your unpacking?"

"Oh, thank you – but I shall not ask, you are no doubt tired..."

"Phooey! Any excuse to stretch the arms and legs would be *very* welcome. These shifts are too damn long – the sooner we can get some more pilots trained the happier I'll be." She regarded the lieutenant speculatively. "Do you fly?"

Almond shook her head. "I think I get airsick."

"Shame. Come on – quarters are just around this corner."

They turned the corner just in time to see two men standing outside one of the doors, one of whom had obviously just knocked. They both turned at the sound of the footsteps, both of their faces instantly breaking into a grin, which Symphony returned.

"I *knew* you guys would turn up on my doorstep the second my shift was over! Don't I even get a chance to take a well-earned shower? Lieutenant Almond, meet Captains Scarlet and Blue, who seem to spend more time in my quarters than they do in their own."

Almond smiled. "Captain Scarlet I have already met. Hello again, Captain. I have however not yet met Captain Blue."

They shook hands, and Blue grinned back. "Your reputation precedes you, Lieutenant – I'll wager that I know more about you than you do about me. Captain Scarlet has told me about your part in bringing that sabotage business in Marineville to a successful conclusion."

Almond shook her head. "Not completely successful, I think. We did not recover the arms consignment."

“Not your fault. And without your computing skills we’d have had half of Spectrum still down there trying to work out what the hell was going on. You did a great job, Lieutenant – which I understand is why you’ve been transferred to Cloudbase. Any chance of some coffee, Symphony? We’re both dying of dehydration.”

The Angel rolled her eyes in mock disgust.

“Can’t you make your own just for once, Adam? No, don’t answer that... Okay, okay, come on in, boys – I guess my shower can wait a while.”

The usual rejoinder connected with having her back scrubbed by one or both of them wasn’t forthcoming – the effect of having a young female lieutenant present, no doubt. *If men had any idea how... basic... a group of worldly-wise women could be when left to themselves...* She grinned to herself, led the way into her quarters and walked over to the percolator.

“How do you take it, Lieutenant?”

“I will have milk but no sugar, thank you.”

“Join the club. Makes life easy when everybody takes the same – you need an excuse to disengage your brain occasionally up here. I reckon it’s all to do with the rarefied atmosphere myself. The reduced air pressure results in increased stress as your head tries to expand. Say – maybe you could work out the height of Cloudbase by how often you get a headache, Paul!”

Scarlet peered up from his coffee cup and blinked.

“What was that, Symphony?”

“The barometer problem, dumb! Forgotten the test already?”

“Oh – sorry! Somehow intelligence tests seem rather less real than the Mysterons: I forget them quicker! And yet if there’s anything that’s not quite real in this universe it’s the Mysterons. I remember Captain Brown’s last words to me before... well, you know... He was talking about wishing they were more tangible... more three-dimensional. Sometimes I wonder whether they’re less... *real* than we are.”

Captain Blue laughed.

“You know, whenever I think about their unbelievable powers, I find myself wondering if maybe they’re *more* real than we are! I mean, are they more likely to exist than us, or are we more likely to exist than them?”

Scarlet snorted. “You’re beginning to sound like Harmony with all those subjective realities of hers! Obviously *we’re* real, so they must be a figment of our twisted imaginations.”

Captain Blue shrugged. “I reckon they’d probably say the same about us! Perhaps *we’re* just a figment of *their* twisted imaginations.”

Scarlet gulped a mouthful of coffee and shook his head as if to clear it.

“Well, we can’t *both* be right. At least that’s *one* thing we can be certain of.”

Lieutenant Almond leaned forward apologetically.

“Forgive me, Captain Scarlet, but this is not so. There is no such thing as certainty – only relative likelihood - and even in this field of comparative existential philosophy the possibility of nonlinear structures is not ruled out.”

Scarlet blinked. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant – I didn’t understand one word of that! Are you saying that we can’t even be certain that one of us is less real than the other?”

She nodded vigorously.

“Not if we define reality in terms of likelihood of existence. Reality is subjective – just like likelihood. Heisenberg tells us there are some things that we *cannot* know – even whether an elementary particle is real or not! Everything is probability - but even in *this* universe we cannot agree on how likely something is to happen.”

Captain Blue frowned.

“What – you mean all that stuff about throwing dice that we learned in high school? But that’s easy – you just work it out all the possible ways...”

Symphony shook her head. “This is all about subjective probability assessment, isn’t it, Lieutenant?”

Her little blonde companion nodded. “That is so. You explain, yes? I have difficulty finding the right words – this is not my subject.”

Symphony grinned, and turned to Captain Blue once more.

“What you’re talking about only applies when you *can* work out all the possible ways something can happen, Adam. Sometimes you can’t. Take a horse race, for example – like the ones Pat runs a book on. Captain Magenta’s our resident bookie, by the way, Lieutenant – it’s a little legacy from one of his past lives. He’ll offer you odds on anything from the toss of a coin to the date of Captain Black’s funeral. But as I was saying, when you want to place a bet on a horse, you make a *subjective* assessment of how likely it is to win – which is based on your personal assessment of the relative abilities of the horses. The bookie does the same using *his* personal assessment. In effect you’re putting your reality into conflict with his. Sometimes you win, and sometimes he wins – but *both* of you enter into the deal believing that the other one’s going to come out the loser. If you both had the same perception of reality, nobody would ever place a bet again.”

Captain Blue gave a low whistle. “A novel view of what seems to me like little more than a harmless game of chance. And anyway, what you’ve just described is really a matter of just working out what the odds are. Bookies are better at it than punters – that’s all.”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. You *can’t* work out the odds. Working out the odds when you’re playing with dice is child’s play, because all you have to do is count up all the various possible outcomes and the associated probabilities. That’s easy, because of the way dice are made. But how do you work out the odds of an event which isn’t repeatable?”

Blue frowned. “Don’t follow you.”

“There’s one hell of a difference between working out the odds of throwing a six on a die and working out the chances of a horse winning a race. In the first situation you *know* all the factors that govern the event and their respective probabilities. In the second, you don’t. Classical probability theory is based on the concept of the repeated trial – for

example, you imagine throwing the dice a large number of times and counting up the number of them that you get a six – but you can't do that where a horse race is concerned, because it's only going to be run once. Same applies if you're talking about the next presidential election, or the object of the next Mysteron threat. In the first situation we can all agree on what the odds are – but in the second we can't, because there *is* no correct assessment of the odds. Each person has his own assessment – and the only measure of how good or bad those assessments might be is the number of broke bookies compared with the number of broke punters. Which reminds me – I want to put ten dollars on Roadrunner in the Epsom Derby next Sunday. Would you remind me to give it to Pat when I next see him, Adam?"

Blue looked at her incredulously. "Roadrunner? He hasn't got a snowflake's chance in hell! You're throwing your money away, honey." He leaned over conspiratorially. "But if you want to make a fast buck, try putting it on Melodramatix." He tapped his nose. "Dead cert."

She shook her head. "Pat's offering 20 to 1 on Roadrunner, whereas I figure he's worth far lower odds than that. Melodramatix is likely to put on a good show, sure – he's 4 to 1 favourite, which is pretty much my assessment of him too. But that means the expected profit's almost exactly offset by the chance of him failing to win. All of which goes to illustrate what I was saying – namely that there's no right answer to questions like that. Just *my* right answer, and *your* right answer. And Pat's right answer, of course – which on past form usually ends up being righter than either yours or mine, probably because *he's* the one who decides the odds. Having said that, *this* time I've got the advantage of a bit of inside knowledge."

"Straight from the horse's mouth, I suppose?"

"Better than that. Straight from his owner's mouth – and unlike the horse, *her* mouth speaks English. Even if it *is* with a plum in it."

Scarlet raised an eyebrow. "One of Rhapsody's relatives, by any chance?"

Symphony grinned.

"Nearly right. Rhapsody refers to her as her aunt, but actually I gather she's not actually a relative - just a close family friend. She's dropping in on her this afternoon, and called her up yesterday to arrange the time. She mentioned that I'd probably be betting on the Derby next week, so she gave her a little inside info - which she passed on to me."

She glanced at her watch, gathered up her papers and got up to leave. At the door she turned and winked back at them.

"Roadrunner, suckers - remember where you heard it first."

§

"What do you make of my little addition to the artistic décor, Dianne? I had it brought down from my bedroom last week – do you think it works?"

While her hostess poured the tea, Dianne Simms contemplated the full-length painting of the young woman on the wall in front of her, automatically noting the neckline of the bodice, the hairstyle and position of the hands.

“Early nineteenth century; painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence if I’m not mistaken. Ruffs weren’t made in that style before 1805, and that dog in her arms is a French Butterfly Spaniel, which fell from favour in England around 1815 on account of Napoleon’s unpopularity in the aftermath of Waterloo. I’d say about 1810.”

The older woman joined her in front of the painting, placed one of the two cups down on the table in front of her and peered over the top of her *pince-nez* at the portrait.

“A fraction later, I fancy. That patterning of lace on the sleeves didn’t become *really* popular until the Marchioness of Winchester wore a creation like it at court during the autumn of 1813, having brought it back with her from a holiday in Venice. The summer of the following year they were all the rage.”

“She’s very beautiful. Is she an ancestor of yours, Auntie Pen?”

The other shook her head thoughtfully.

“I don’t actually know. I suppose it’s likely - I’ve been told that there’s a resemblance in the eyes and cheekbones, though I can’t see it myself. It’s obviously been set on this estate: the summer house in the background on the left was still standing when I was a little girl, and those five oak trees behind the lake are still there – though the artist has taken a few liberties with their positions. Do you think I’ve put it in the right place, by the way? My bedroom’s décor is more suggestive of the early 1820s, whereas I feel the wallpaper and the ceiling down here both add to the early Regency *ambience* that I want to create down here.”

Dianne glanced upwards at the intricate designs on the ceiling, recognising the style as belonging to the same decade as the painting. Her hostess was right – the painting was definitely cast in a better light as a result of the move.

“You really do have a superb artistic sense, Auntie. This ceiling’s new, isn’t it?”

The older woman nodded.

“An opportunity not to be missed, my dear. When the surveyors came round last spring they had a few uncomplimentary things to say about the old one – health and safety or something like that. We have to have the place checked over every five years because of the tourists, you know. No certificate, no tourists.”

“So you had it completely redone?”

“Quite so. I never *really* liked the old one – the room was rebuilt after the wing was hit by a missile that ran out of fuel before it reached its target in 2029, and though they tried to recreate the original style afterwards, I don’t feel they got it *quite* right. This one is far closer to the photographs we have of the room dating from the previous century, and we’ve no reason to believe that the design had been materially altered before that back to the time the wing was built.”

“It’s as perfect a facsimile of Regency décor as I’ve seen anywhere.”

“Oh, my dear! You wouldn’t *believe* the fuss we had with the Department of the Environment when it was finished. A little man in a pin-striped suit came down from London, told us that we’d got the period wrong by more than a decade, and insisted that we’d have to have it *completely* redone. I sent him away with a flea in his ear after giving him a copy of my great-grandfather’s book on the subject. Which reminds me, I must get it back some time: it’s a first edition. Never live in a listed building, my dear – they’re far more bother than they’re worth.”

“*You* live in one, Auntie Pen!”

“Ah, but this one’s been in my family for over three hundred years. One has to do one’s best to maintain it - *noblesse oblige* and all that. I’m not exactly renowned for my republican sentiments, but it seems to me that the French have a far more sanguine view of restoring old buildings than we do. Take that glass pyramid in the Louvre, for example. Can you imagine the English doing something that imaginative?”

Dianne grinned. “I’ve a French friend back at base who’s never had a good thing to say about it. She reckons it ought to be knocked down and replaced with an icosahedron to maximise the space available for displays.”

“My point exactly. The French are at least prepared to experiment – to try to *improve* on their heritage. The English have this silly fixation with trying to set it in amber. If one were to take that attitude to its logical conclusion, we’d all still be living in castles with no windows, and I’d be visiting my doctor every week with rheumatism.”

Dianne grinned. “Yes, I suppose it is all a bit of a façade, isn’t it – we try to combine state-of-the-art functionality with superficial historical accuracy. On which point, if it isn’t a silly question, do you mind if I ask why the crystal knob on the top of your teapot is flashing? I mean, it’s awfully pretty and all that, but isn’t it just a trifle incongruous on an otherwise apparently genuine Josiah Wedgwood?”

The other spared the offending utensil an unconcerned glance.

“Goodness me, Dianne – didn’t they teach you *anything* about brewing a drinkable beverage at Roedean? I’d suggest that your parents write to them at once and demand the return of your final year’s fees, but they’d probably think you needed the money – and that would never do, would it? A really *good* cup of tea can’t be rushed, you know – the water has to be allowed to infuse naturally through the holes in the teabags, and in my experience *that* has to be timed precisely. My little alarm clock tells me when the time is up. *So* convenient when your memory’s as bad as mine.”

Her younger companion arched an eyebrow, glanced at the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece, raised her own cup to her lips and sampled the contents thoughtfully.

“You poured this cup no less than twelve minutes ago, Auntie – and your own immediately afterwards. If there’s any more tea in there it’ll be stewed to death. If I might be so bold, I’d suggest that your ‘little alarm clock’ needs servicing.”

Her hostess considered the point.

“Perhaps you’re right, my dear. I’ll get it seen to at once. Your father would never forgive me if I imposed a cup of stewed tea on you, would he?”

She stretched forth a languid arm and gave a little tug on the bell-pull. After a short delay the twin doors in the far wall opened, and an elderly man wearing the livery of a butler emerged.

“You rang, m’lady?”

“Yes, Parker - I’m afraid the teapot is playing up again. Would you take it away and do whatever it is you do to it when it starts beeping at inconvenient times?”

“Yes, m’lady. Doubtless the mechanism ‘as malfunctioned. I’ll ‘ave a word with the manufacturer about it. Would you and Miss Dianne be wantin’ another cup?”

“Thank you, Parker. Shall we make it Earl Grey this time, Dianne?”

Her younger companion acquiesced with a gracious nod, and the old retainer lifted the tray and withdrew. Her companion watched the door close behind him.

“Good old Parker – I really *don’t* know what I’d do without him. He’s *awfully* good with my little gadgets, but he’s not as young as he was. He’ll probably want to retire one day, and I can’t possibly run the place on my own. Actually, I’m rather thinking of emigrating, you know.”

“You can’t be *serious*, Auntie! I mean, where would you go?”

“Oh, some friends of mine have a little place down in the South Pacific. It’s *delightfully* sunny, and they tell me there are *lots* of things to do down there. They’ve asked me several times, and I confess I’m beginning to think seriously about it.”

The doors opened again, and the butler emerged once more into the room.

“Beggin’ your pardon, m’lady, but there’s a call for you. An Hamerican gentleman of your hacquaintance wishes to speak with you on a matter of some himportance.”

Auntie Pen arched an eyebrow.

“Goodness gracious – I wonder what on earth *that* can be all about. Would you excuse me for a few moments, my dear?”

“Of course, Auntie. In fact, I’ll take the opportunity to call one of my friends back at base, if you don’t mind – we’re meeting up in London tomorrow, and I need to arrange a rendezvous.”

“By all means, my dear – the nearest videophone’s just out there in the entrance hall.”

“It’s all right, Auntie – I’ve got my own communicator. Thanks anyway.”

The older woman rose out of her chair and walked out of the room; her butler following her. Dianne waited for the door to close, then reached into her handbag and extracted a compact transceiver, which she activated. Selecting Captain Scarlet’s frequency, she was in the process of raising it to her lips when a discordant vibrating wail screeched from the little device, making her jump. Frowning, she hurriedly turned down the volume, then switched it off and on again, but without success. She was in the process of shaking it when the door opened and her hostess walked back into the room. Dianne grinned and held up the little transceiver.

“It seems you’re not the only person with faulty electronics, Auntie. Have you got a source of radio interference around here?”

The other shook her head.

“I don’t think so, unless it’s very recent. Brains checked... that is... a friend of mine who understands these things had the whole area swept a few months ago when my videophone started giving all my callers red faces. When I bought a new one the problem went away. Perhaps you’ve spilt some tea in it, my dear. I’m afraid I’m going to have to leave you for a little while – my friend wants me to do something for him which really can’t wait. It’s awfully inconvenient, I know, and I’m really very sorry – would you mind holding the fort until Parker and I get back?”

Dianne shook her head with a smile.

“No problem, Auntie. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, not really – it’s... something that requires my personal attention. Do help yourself to the videophone, my dear: the only red faces on it nowadays are those of creditors whose bills haven’t been paid yet.”

“Thanks – I will. Do you mind if I wander around? It’s not often I get the opportunity to admire one of the best private collections of 18th century porcelain in the country.”

“Oh, by all means, my dear. You’ll find the rest of the Wedgwood collection down in the vaults at the moment – I’ll tell Parker to deactivate the alarms from the car as soon as we’re on our way. You know how to get in, don’t you?”

“You and your gadgets, Auntie Pen! Yes, I know how to get in, thanks.”

She picked up the transceiver again and reactivated it, only to be met with the same discordant vibrating whistle as before. Turning it off, she quit the morning room and made for the hall, where she sat down at the terminal and placed a call to Cloudbase, working her way through three separate layers of security protocols before getting through to Lieutenant Green.

“Rhapsody! Hi there – you got communicator problems?”

She grinned and nodded. “Seems so, Lieutenant. How did you know?”

He frowned. “I’ve got something *very* strange appearing on these instruments. You tried to place a direct call to Captain Scarlet about ten minutes ago, and another one just a few moments back, yes?”

“That’s right. You’re telling me that you registered both calls on Cloudbase?”

The frown deepened. “Something like that. As you know, whenever anyone accesses Spectrum’s global communications network the intended recipient’s transponder is triangulated by satellite. Normally that’s done automatically, but your last two calls got rerouted to my board because the satellites apparently couldn’t locate Captain Scarlet’s transponder.”

She raised an eyebrow. “But he’s right there on Cloudbase, isn’t he?”

Lieutenant Green nodded. “Yes, he is. In fact he’s standing right beside me – he came up to the control room when he received your earlier transmission. He tells me it sounded like a song-thrush being strangled – isn’t that right, Captain?”

The screen angle changed slightly, and Scarlet’s features appeared on Rhapsody’s screen.

“Rhapsody – good to see you! I thought perhaps you’d run into trouble of some kind.”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. No problems here to speak of – just some sort of fault with this transceiver, by the look of it. Is it something we can diagnose online, Lieutenant? I’m going to need it to talk to Scarlet up there tomorrow.”

Lieutenant Green considered. “Well, according to these instruments, your transceiver was trying to respond to *two* acknowledgements from Captain Scarlet simultaneously – which would explain the interference signal you heard. One of them obviously came from Cloudbase, but the other one must have come from somewhere else – probably somewhere in your immediate vicinity, since it must have been triggered directly by your transceiver. Have you got anything down there that could be interfering with it?”

She frowned. “Auntie Pen tells me that a technically-minded friend of hers checked the place out a little time back, and found nothing – and anyway, it doesn’t seem likely. Foxleyheath is one of the most idyllic little places you could imagine: you’d have difficulty getting planning permission to build an electronic mousetrap, let alone anything capable of interfering with *our* equipment. Did you say that it’s trying to respond to a signal that it *thinks* is Captain Scarlet’s?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay – so what would happen if you deactivated Captain Scarlet’s cap for long enough for me to try placing the call again?”

Lieutenant Green grinned. “Brilliant! We’d be able to give you an immediate fix on whatever it is that’s causing the problem. You’re in the wrong business, Rhapsody – would you give me your cap for a few minutes please, Captain?”

Scarlet duly took off his cap and handed it to the lieutenant, who reached inside it and fiddled with it for a couple of seconds.

“It’s offline, Rhapsody. Would you try the transceiver now, please?”

“Right you are.”

She fished the transceiver out of her bag again, and switched it on. This time she got a completely different response: a single, faint regular bleeping that was just audible above a cacophony of hissing and crackling. On the videoscreen in front of her she could see Green’s expression of puzzlement deepen.

“That’s a Spectrum transponder authentication signal, Rhapsody. It’s not simply a matter of interference – it’s interpreting that signal as if Captain Scarlet were actually in your immediate vicinity. Give me a few seconds and I’ll get you a fix.”

“How accurate can you make that, Lieutenant?”

“With at least twelve Spectrum navigation satellites triangulating on it? I can tell you where it’s coming from to the nearest ten centimetres in all three spatial dimensions. Keep it turned on – I’ve got the co-ordinates coming through now. It’s... 45.8 metres to the north of you, 16.3 metres west and 10.3 metres below your current position.”

“One moment, Lieutenant – I’m still trying to work out which way is north down here – I can’t see the sun at the moment...”

“No problem, Rhapsody – just take a few steps in any direction. I can track you from here, and feed you directions as you go. That way I can tell you whether you’re getting warmer.”

“Okay, Lieutenant.”

She got up from the videophone and started walking back into the morning room. Ten paces into her journey she was stopped. In her hand, the transceiver beeped, and she keyed in a short sequence to bring Lieutenant Green into the conversation that the device assumed was now taking place between herself and Scarlet. Holding it to her ear, she could just make out his voice above the background crackles that accompanied the transmission between herself and the phantom signal.

“That’s not right, Rhapsody – you’re moving to the east of it. Turn 90° to the left and take maybe a dozen paces.”

She turned, and started walking with measured strides. The change in position took her on a course parallel to the wall of the morning room towards the front door.

“Now turn to the right and take another six paces.”

She did so, and found herself facing a staircase.

“You’re virtually on top of it, Rhapsody.”

She shook her head in puzzlement. “I can’t see a thing, Lieutenant. I’m standing in the entrance hall of the house I’m visiting, looking directly up the main staircase.”

“It’s beneath you, Rhapsody. My readings indicate 4.28 metres below your present position - that’s about one floor down. Is there a basement?”

“Yes – of course! Auntie Pen’s got a wine cellar down there: it’s adjacent to the vaults where she keeps a lot of her valuables. I was actually going to go down there to have a look at her pottery collection just before all this started. Give me a few minutes, Lieutenant.”

She made her way over to the full-length portrait of one of Penny’s male forebears on the far wall, studied it for a few seconds, then reached up and touched the rings on three of his fingers in sequence. Stepping to one side, she waited as the central section of the floor descended slightly, then slid away to one side to reveal a set of stairs leading into the ground directly beneath. She grinned – it was her older friend and mentor’s *penchant* for little architectural surprises that had made visits to Foxleyheath Manor so enjoyable before her own career commitments began to impinge increasingly upon her free time. *Penny thinking about emigrating?* She found herself wondering whether she could persuade her parents to make an offer for the place. Eagerly she descended into the cellar, pausing only to flick the light switch on the way down.

The musty, dank aroma of the dust of ages touched her nostrils as she reached the bottom of the stairs, where she found herself surrounded by row upon row of wine bottles that seemed to fade into the darkness as distance of the shelves from the light overcame the power of the solitary bulb to illuminate them. Once more, she raised the transceiver to her lips.

“Which way now, Lieutenant?”

“Take five steps in any direction, Rhapsody.”

She walked in the only direction open to her – towards the back of the cellar.

“That’s it, Rhapsody. Now - about three times as far again.”

She set off again, counting a further eleven paces – at which point she stopped.

“You’re just three metres away from it, Rhapsody – you should be able to see it now.”

“No joy, Lieutenant. I’m standing directly in front of the rear wall of the cellar.”

“Whatever’s causing it is on the other side of that wall, Rhapsody. There must be a way through - can you see a door?”

“No, Lieutenant – there’s nothing. Just plaster that looks as if it hasn’t been cleaned in centuries. There’s an old circular iron plate in the wall on the left with some sort of embossed design in the shape of an “S” on it – probably the end of some form of strengthening beam. That would be consistent with there being a chamber beyond... Hang on a mo – I’m going to see if I can get a closer look at it.”

“Take care, Rhapsody – if that wall’s several centuries old it could be unsafe.”

“It’s okay, Lieutenant – this strengthening beam looks as if it’s worn pretty well – it’s rather rusty, but it looks basically sound ... good grief - I don’t believe it!”

A scuffling sound emanated from the transceiver; when it ended, Scarlet’s voice had replaced Lieutenant Green’s at the other end.

“What is it, Rhapsody? RHAPSODY! What’s the matter, Rhapsody?”

“Still here, Captain. Just a bit taken aback, that’s all. I’ve just worked out why that end of the strengthening beam looked familiar – that embossed circle with an S on it. It’s a Spectrum logo.”

“WHAT? Are you sure, Rhapsody?”

“Do you think I wouldn’t recognise a Spectrum logo when I see one? That’s what it is, I tell you! What an incredible coincidence!”

“Coincidence my foot! You tell me your transceiver has locked onto a Spectrum homing signal, and then you find our own logo three metres from the source of it? I don’t believe in coincidences that wild, Rhapsody!”

“What else can it be? This beam’s obviously been here for centuries! Maybe we borrowed the design from some historical symbol – I don’t know. Don’t go away – I’m going to try to clean it up a little.”

She reached forward to place the palm of her hand on the rusty old plate – then snatched it away instantly with an involuntary shriek as if she'd been stung.

“Rhapsody! What's wrong?”

“The plate's rotating, Captain! I seem to have activated something behind the wall: the plaster's beginning to crumble! I think the wall is... yes... the wall is built onto some sort of sliding mechanism. It's descending into the ground, and the plaster's disintegrating as a result. There's some sort of chamber behind the wall – can't see what's in it yet, but there's definitely something...”

“Rhapsody – get out of there at once, do you hear? At once!”

“It's all right, Captain – there's no obvious danger, though there seems to be a lot of mist inside – I can see inside now... God, it's cold... there's... good grief! Captain – there's a body inside! Male... young... dressed in strange clothes - early 19th century I think... it's so cold – I can't breathe... it's... **Oh My God!**”

§

“Beggin' your pardon, m'lady, but there happens to be an 'elijet on the front lawn.”

“Really, Parker? My goodness - I *do* hope the pilot hasn't been so careless as to allow the front skids to dig into the turf: we only had it mown last Thursday, as I recall. Are you able to identify the markings at this distance?”

“I believe the aircraft in question belongs to the Spectrum horganisation, m'lady. Ain't they the outfit wot Miss Dianne works for?”

“Why yes, Parker - I do believe you're right. Perhaps they need her back on that flying aircraft carrier or wherever it is that they live in something of a hurry. And unless I'm mistaken, isn't that also one of their interceptors over there on the drive?”

“I believe it is, madam. I may 'ave to speak to the young lady wot's standing be'ind it – it's blockin' the entrance to the garage.”

The occupant of the rear seat suppressed a smile. “Later, Parker. I think perhaps we'd better find out firstly what this is all about. Stop the car just over there, would you?”

The pink Rolls glided to a halt to the left of the main entrance just as a stretcher was carried out of the house. Parker clambered out of the driver's seat and opened the door for his aristocratic passenger in time for her to greet a man in a bright red uniform striding purposefully towards her.

“Good afternoon, er...”

“Captain Scarlet of Spectrum, ma'am. May I ask if I'm addressing Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward?”

“You are, Captain. Would I be correct in assuming that this is not a social call?”

Scarlet inclined his head. “Your ladyship would be correct in making that assumption. There's been an accident involving one of our officers at this house.”

Lady Penelope's bland smile clouded.

"Dianne, I assume? Can you tell me what has happened, Captain?"

Scarlet frowned. "We're not certain yet. She was talking to us on one of our transceivers when she lost consciousness. Our medic believes she inhaled a toxic substance: we're still trying to determine its composition and the reason that she was exposed to it."

"Where did this happen, Captain?"

"In a wine cellar beneath the main staircase, ma'am."

Lady Penelope raised an eyebrow, the accompanying expression an unusual combination of obvious concern and something else that Scarlet couldn't quite place.

"Indeed? But we've nothing that could... well, that is to say, there are no toxic substances on the premises – apart from the wine, of course – are you *certain* that she was found in the cellar, Captain?"

"Absolutely, ma'am. Perhaps if your ladyship would care to..."

"Auntie... Auntie Pen!"

The fragile voice from the direction of the stretcher caused Scarlet to break off in mid-sentence. Both he and his companion strode over to the source of it, where Rhapsody's smiling face peered up at them, her eyes obviously having some difficulty focusing.

"Paul! How... how did you get out? Never mind... you're safe... that's what matters... And... Penny! Hello again, Auntie Pen. Sorry about the mess. I think I may have broken one or two of your bottles of Château Lafitte '29. Wall fell down on top..."

The voice faded away, and her head rolled over onto its side as Doctor Fawn came out of the front entrance at a run, carrying a clipboard on one hand and a hypodermic in the other. Hurrying over to the stretcher, he undertook a rapid examination of his patient's eyes and throat before straightening up and nodding in evident satisfaction.

"She's going to be okay. It's only concussion – the gas doesn't seem to have had any lasting after-effects."

"*What* gas, Doctor?"

Fawn glanced down at a set of notes attached to his clipboard.

"The analysis isn't complete yet, but we think it's supersaturated pentahydroxine, which is essentially the same substance as the coolant used in the Angel interceptors' main thrusters. If so, it's harmless, if a little unpleasant."

Scarlet frowned. "We developed that coolant ourselves, didn't we, Doctor?"

"So the colonel informs me – why?"

"So what's a sample of it doing in a wine cellar in a stately home in southern England?"

Fawn shook his head. "No idea. Your department, not mine."

He squinted at Scarlet for long enough for the latter to begin to feel distinctly uncomfortable.

“Remarkable. The resemblance is quite astonishing.”

“Would you mind telling me what you’re talking about, Doctor?”

Fawn blinked at him. “What? Oh, sorry... of course, you don’t know, do you? Perhaps you’d better come this way – it should be safe enough now.”

Lady Penelope glanced up from the stretcher. “May I accompany you also, Doctor... Fawn?”

Fawn frowned. “I hardly think it would be...”

“I *really* do think I should. We keep a lot of... security equipment in the vaults, and I wouldn’t want your personnel risking their safety by triggering any of it, you understand. I would be *quite* mortified if the well-being of any member of your team was compromised.”

Scarlet considered for a moment, and then nodded.

“I’d very much appreciate it if you *would* accompany us, your ladyship. There are a lot of things we need to understand, and since it’s your house...”

“Thank you, Captain – I’ll be happy to help your investigation in any way I can.”

She cast a sideways look at him, frowned and regarded him with apparent puzzlement.

“Excuse my asking, Captain, but have we met before?”

It was his turn to look puzzled. “I don’t think so, your ladyship. If we have, then I’m afraid the occasion eludes me.”

“But I’m *sure* I know your face. Could it have been at the regimental dinner at Combermere Barracks last Septem... no, that’s not it... Never mind – it’ll come to me eventually. This is the scene of the accident, is it?”

The three of them had reached the open stairwell leading down into the wine cellar. Fawn stepped forward onto the first step and turned round.

“Before we descend, I must warn you that there’s a body down there, Lady Penelope. It was concealed behind the wall that collapsed on top of Rhapsody... I mean Dianne... and seems to be perfectly preserved, despite the chamber in which it was found having been sealed up for an as-yet undetermined period.”

Lady Penelope raised an eyebrow. “How absolutely frightful...”

“There are a number of – how shall I put it? – peculiar features about it that we don’t understand.” He regarded her speculatively. “If you’d prefer not to accompany us...”

Her ladyship shook her head and smiled.

“Thank you – I appreciate your concern, Doctor, but I really would prefer to see this mystery through. Please don’t be concerned for my sake - I promise I shan’t faint. Would you lead on?”

Doctor Fawn continued to regard her for another couple of seconds, then reached a decision and turned to walk down the stairs, with his two companions close on his

heels. As she reached the final step, Lady Penelope stopped and looked with astonishment at the scene that met her eyes. Two small portable arc-lights had been erected at the end of the cellar, and were trained on the chamber that lay beyond the remnants of the plaster that now covered the floor.

“Well! *That* little cubby-hole certainly wasn’t there the last time I came down here! It’s as if the whole cellar’s been extended by several metres! How very convenient... I’ll be able to buy in several more cases of Moët & Chand...”

The flippant remark died in her throat as she took in for the first time the contents of the casket that lay in the little alcove before them. Quietly she stepped forward to take a closer look at the body that lay inside, and Scarlet heard a sharp intake of breath. She turned to face him, her expression unreadable, but clearly at a complete loss for words.

“What is it, your ladyship?”

By way of an answer she slowly stepped to one side to allow him an unrestricted view of the contents of the casket. He raised an eyebrow and move forward to look at the corpse – and discovered that he was looking at... *himself*.

§

Lieutenant Almond took her seat at the round briefing table and glanced around with interest at her colleagues. To her left sat Captain Blue, to her right yet another of Spectrum’s five air aces: this one had long auburn hair and a somewhat aristocratic bearing, though the open smile and the mouthed ‘Hi’ that she returned to Almond’s betrayed no suggestion of snootiness. Opposite her, Doctor Fawn was busy shuffling his notes, while Captain Scarlet was sitting to his left, glancing over his shoulder at their contents.

At literally the instant the second hand of the old-style analogue clock above the doorway crossed the vertical position the door opened, and Colonel White walked in. Almond instinctively shifted her position in her chair to rise to her feet, curtailing the movement at the last instant as she belatedly realised that she was the only person at the table about to stand. Clearly this was a very different culture to the one she was used to, though she did not miss the significant detail that all the muttering had instantly ceased, and that the C-in-C of Spectrum was the sole object of everyone’s attention from the second he had entered the room. The high regard in which he was obviously held was almost tangible – evidently only the formalities normally associated with that respect had been dispensed with.

The colonel took his place at the centre of the table and sat down, taking in the various officers at a glance, his gaze resting on Lieutenant Almond for perhaps a fraction of a second longer before moving on. He had no notes, but immediately addressed the officers present without preamble.

“Members of Spectrum, thank you for being able to attend this briefing at such short notice. I would like to welcome Lieutenant Almond to Cloudbase; the lieutenant is an expert in the science of neural computing, and it is on account of this accomplishment that I have asked her to join us this afternoon. I have convened this meeting at short notice to consider the implications of the astounding and as-yet inexplicable discovery in the

basement of an English country house yesterday afternoon. As you all aware, a body whose physical characteristics bear a striking resemblance to those of Captain Scarlet has been recovered from a concealed alcove in the cellar of a stately home at Foxleyheath, which is a village on the Sussex/Kent border about 30 km south of London. The body appears to have been walled up for a considerable period of time. It is perfectly preserved, and is dressed in clothes that both its owner and Rhapsody here have confirmed were worn by young men during the late Georgian period of English history – that is, between approximately 1800 and 1815.”

Colonel White paused, under cover of reaching for a glass of water, but in reality to gauge the reactions of his audience so far. None had shown any visible reaction save for an air of expectant concentration: perhaps a measure of the extent to which contact with the Mysterons had broadened their minds over the last three years.

“If this were not remarkable enough, Cloudbase’s forensic team has determined that three items of Spectrum equipment, namely a radio communications amplifier, a high-energy torch and a portable seismograph, discovered in the same chamber are identical to equipment currently in use by Spectrum personnel. Not only that; we have compared the serial numbers of these artefacts in the cellar of Foxleyheath Manor with those of corresponding components on board Cloudbase at this time.”

He gestured towards three pieces of equipment which had been arranged on the floor against the far wall of the briefing room.

“Examination of each piece of equipment reveals that the serial numbers match exactly those of their counterparts recovered from the cellar. This much is already known by most of you, since you were all involved in the exercise we conducted this morning to track down these items on Cloudbase. We have, however, one additional piece of information of which you will *not* be aware, though I suspect that many of you will have been contemplating the possibility in your own minds. For that, I will now ask Doctor Fawn to address this meeting.”

The doctor rose from his seat and surveyed his audience before he spoke, instinctively gauging their reactions, like the colonel before him.

“You are all familiar with the awesome powers of the Mysterons – at least, those that we have encountered to date. Those powers include the ability to recreate an exact likeness of an object or person. For this reason alone, the presence of Spectrum equipment bearing current serial numbers in the walled-up alcove of a cellar strongly suggests a connection with the Mysterons. It is therefore natural and obvious to ask therefore the body found there is a Mysteronised construct. The possibility occurred to me immediately after its discovery, and I performed a routine series of tests on it at the earliest possible opportunity thereafter. I can tell you now that it is indeed an exact duplicate of Captain Scarlet. That duplication extends to the cellular level as indicated by all standard DNA testing procedures – in effect, the body *is* that of Captain Scarlet.”

“I assume it is the body of a Mysteronised construct, Doctor Fawn – is that correct?”

“The body is impervious to X-rays, yes. However, the fact that the body is, or at least appears to be, that of Captain Scarlet presents us with a problem. With the possible exception of Lieutenant Almond, you are all aware that Captain Scarlet is *already*

physically indistinguishable from a construct. We therefore have no obvious way of determining whether the body is under the control of the Mysterons. Until it's revived, that is."

The full impact of Doctor Fawn's final throwaway remark did not sink in for perhaps half a second, and Scarlet – who had been privately briefed on the situation by Fawn himself before the start of the meeting – found himself wondering whether the good doctor had done it deliberately for effect. If so, Fawn had just demonstrated a talent for timing second to none.

"*Revived?* Doctor Fawn - are you saying that it may be possible to revive this body? But it was my understanding from what you've just said that the body is likely to be over two hundred and fifty years old!"

"Yes, Colonel. However I maintain that it *can* – with a very high degree of probability - be revived. As I stated earlier, from a physiological point of view the body *is* that of Captain Scarlet – and Captain Scarlet is, as we all know only too well, virtually indestructible. I believe he would have recovered from whatever caused him to be placed in the casket within a few hours had he not succumbed to the pentahydroxine gas that still filled the walled-up alcove when Rhapsody broke into the chamber. Pentahydroxine is a variant of the physiological and neurological inhibitors that are currently used in mainstream cryogenic research – the use to which Spectrum puts it as a coolant for its interceptors is something of a by-product. The only reason this body was *not* restored to life is that it was effectively frozen before it could recover."

"How soon, Doctor? How long will it take to revive it?"

Doctor Fawn frowned.

"That is not so easy to predict. Although Captain Scarlet has in the past demonstrated the ability to effect a complete recovery irrespective of any treatment I give him, this body has been cryogenically frozen for over two and a half centuries. The pentahydroxine has therefore permeated every cell in its body. Conventional resuscitation from cryogenic freezing requires that the patient be kept for a minimum of two weeks in an intensive-care environment, with every aspect of the life-support system being kept under constant human surveillance and computer-control. I would be extremely reluctant to deviate from that procedure."

Colonel White nodded slowly.

"We'll be led by you in this matter, Doctor. What is the current status of the body?"

"The body is currently in life-support in the medical wing, and is being kept in conditions as similar as possible to those in which it was discovered. I have not attempted to initiate any form of resuscitation procedure, and will not until so directed."

"Thank you, Doctor. Comments, anyone?"

Captain Blue leaned forward.

"It's a booby-trap, Colonel – and it's on this base. We should get it away from here at once: the pulsator and champagne incidents provide ample evidence of how much chaos

the Mysterons are capable of causing whenever one of their creations is brought onto Cloudbase.”

Colonel White nodded.

“The point had already occurred to me – which is the reason I refused permission for the three pieces of equipment recovered from the cellar to be brought here. I made an exception in the case of your apparent doppelganger, Captain Scarlet, because of the evident and immediate need for medical facilities to be made available. Doctor Fawn - have you been able to build the safety procedures into your equipment that I requested?”

“Yes, Colonel. The intensive-care facility is already programmed to respond to any physiological changes of a patient. That capability has been interfaced to the automatic ejection facility. If the temperature of the patient changes by as much as one degree, the body can be ejected from Cloudbase within ten seconds.”

Captain Blue shook his head.

“I still don’t like it, Colonel. We’ve no solid evidence that a Mysteronised construct’s temperature necessarily changes prior to a detonation. Only the video recording of Captain Brown’s attempt on the life of the World President provides any evidence of a temperature change – and we could be misinterpreting that.”

Colonel White considered, then nodded.

“I take your point, Captain. The body will be transferred to a land-based facility at the earliest possible opportunity. Doctor Fawn – do you know the location of the nearest facility which is equipped with cryogenic resuscitation equipment comparable to our own?”

The answer was immediate. “There are only three in the world, Colonel. Mercy Hospital, San Francisco; the Cryogenic Research Department of the University Hospital in Kiel and the ECRA laboratories outside Cape Town.”

Colonel White reached over and flicked a switch.

“Lieutenant Green – what is Cloudbase’s current position, please?”

“Over Lucerne in Switzerland, Colonel.”

“Lieutenant – move Cloudbase immediately to a position over Kiel in Germany, please.”

“SIG, Colonel.”

“Doctor Fawn, please organise the transfer of the body of Captain Scarlet’s duplicate to the University Hospital upon our arrival. Please arrange for the facility to be cleared of all non-essential personnel as soon as possible: Lieutenant Green will arrange authorisation directly from Futura if and when this is required. Captains Scarlet and Blue will accompany the body when it is transferred to the University Hospital. Thank you, Lieutenant Green.”

He leaned forward and deactivated the communicator, then leaned back and resumed his former pensive pose.

“This appears to be the first time Spectrum has encountered a Mysteronised human construct – if indeed that *is* what we are dealing with here – without any evidence of a corresponding death. Having said that, the person who appears to have been duplicated on this occasion is our own Captain Scarlet here – and he *has* been killed by the Mysterons. Could it be that the Mysterons are capable of creating *more* than one exact likeness? And what is the significance of the circumstances under which Captain Scarlet’s double was discovered? We appear to have a lot of questions, ladies and gentlemen. I would appreciate your views on any or all of these questions. Rhapsody – you have a point to make?”

The English Angel nodded vigorously.

“The clothes in which Captain Scarlet’s double was discovered must surely be significant, Colonel. Taken together with the evidence of the sealed chamber and the cryogenic gas, it’s difficult to escape the conclusion that the Mysterons have discovered some way of manipulating time. The only other explanation that occurs to me is that the whole thing’s one gigantic hoax.”

Captain Blue shook his head.

“To what end? Your discovery of the duplicate was a pure accident – it couldn’t possibly have been prearranged. And anyway, hoax or not, we still have to explain the DNA match. If it *is* a hoax, it’s a pretty elaborate one. No - the Mysterons have *got* to be behind it. By an incredible coincidence, we’ve stumbled on some sort of Mysteron plot.”

Fawn held up a small bundle in his hand.

“We also discovered this. It was lying on the floor of the chamber in which we found the body, behind one of the banks of equipment.”

He passed Colonel White a sheaf of faded handwritten notes. The colonel squinted down at the first page, and began to read:

Conversation upon the subject of the determination of the nature of light

Spent evening last in company of charming young woman of foreign extraction. Most knowledgeable on many subjects; held forth with her at length upon possibility of devising means by which speed of light might be determined. Proposed creation of intricate arrangement of mirrors upon cliff or other high place in neighbourhood of lighthouse, that might be fashioned the conjunction of rays emanating from the same source but cast upon two paths of differing lengths. Would have me believe that patterns of light and dark might be thus formed, not unlike those ripples to be observed upon surface of a pond...

Colonel White stopped reading and looked up.

“It sounds as if it was a rather intense conversation. I thought they spent all their time having parties, arranging infidelities and playing whist.”

Fawn shook his head.

“Not all of them. There was an active scientific community in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, consisting for the most part of aristocrats with time on their hands and money to spend on their interests. They called science ‘natural philosophy’ in

those days – in fact the word ‘scientist’ wasn’t even invented until around 1840 – but that’s certainly what they were. But as I was saying, what makes this document interesting is the subject matter. It goes on to provide a fairly accurate description of what’s now referred to as the Michelson-Morley experiment for determining the speed of light. This isn’t really my field, but I’ve had time to do a little reading on it, and a friend of mine in the Experimental Engineering Department has been able to take me through some of it. It seems that Michelson and Morley were a couple of American professors of physics who performed the experiment around 1879. From it, they derived a remarkably accurate estimate of the velocity of light, and Michelson went on to try to use the apparatus to detect the passage of the Earth through what was called the ‘luminiferous aether’, which was believed at that time to be the substance through which light passed. His failure to detect it was a major factor in Einstein’s first groundbreaking paper on Relativity, which was written some 25 years later.”

The colonel raised an eyebrow.

“So how does this concern us? I imagine any number of science museums would be interested in this document, but...”

“There are two factors that make this particularly interesting. The first is the date. Forensics tell me that this document is of the same vintage as all the other artefacts found in the hidden chamber, namely around 1810, give or take five years. That would mean that this mysterious young foreign woman that the writer refers to was some sixty years early with her description of the experiment.”

“And the other?”

“The other factor is the author. The notes are unsigned, but I’ve had facsimiles of them sent to a number of scientific authorities for their comments. Two of them tell me that the handwriting is unquestionably that of one of the most renowned scientists of that era - Sir Humphry Davy. And what he got up to during his career *does* fall into my field.”

“Again, no doubt fascinating, but why is that relevant to our investigation?”

Doctor Fawn leaned forward in his chair.

“Davy was a genius in the fields of electrochemistry. In addition to discovering a number of metals, including magnesium, calcium, strontium and barium he discovered nitrous oxide – laughing gas - among many others, and worked for many years investigating their medical value. The body found in the crypt in Foxleyheath was preserved in a gas whose precise properties we’re still trying to determine – and these notes were found in the same room. I can’t believe that’s a coincidence, and I’ve therefore instructed my team to find out everything they can from Davy’s publications and known correspondence from that period – we may find something to help us with our investigations.”

He flicked back the document in his hands to the final page, and peered at it.

“There’s one thing more. It may be nothing, but we had a word with our physics experts when we returned to Cloudbase about it, and they nearly jumped out of their chairs in excitement. Could I ask you to read the final paragraph, Colonel?”

Colonel White raised an eyebrow, took the document and read:

My fair companion insists upon the notion that we shall not find it, and urges me to seek the reason why it should be so. I confess it perplexes me – my head spins with the fantasies which she presses upon me – but I have resolved that I shall speak with my young assistant at the Institution on the matter. The lad is yet ill-educated but mightily keen, and mayhap he will see light where I perceive only darkness.

He handed back the document and raised his eyes questioningly.

“The context of the paragraph suggests to our physicists that the thing that Davy’s mysterious companion doesn’t believe he’ll find is actually the *aether* itself – and that this is nothing short of astonishing.”

He glanced down at his notes.

“This paragraph also provides us with a fairly accurate date. The Institution to which he refers would have been the Royal Institution in London, where Davy was hired as a lecturer in 1801. About ten years later he was temporarily blinded during an experiment, and hired a young assistant to help him. The name of that assistant was later to become known throughout the scientific world - Michael Faraday.”

Colonel White raised an eyebrow.

“Indeed? Even I’m familiar with Faraday – he discovered electricity, didn’t he?”

Doctor Fawn nodded.

“Faraday went on to become one of the greatest experimentalists of all time. My friend in Engineering tells me that on the strength of the contents of this document it’s just *possible* that he could have created the equipment necessary to perform the Michelson-Morley experiment seventy years early, though the consensus is that he’d have needed a lot of help making the mental adjustments needed, and even then there’s no way he would have understood the implications of it.”

Captain Scarlet frowned in puzzlement.

“But Faraday *didn’t* do that, did he? I mean, if he had, obviously we’d have known about it.”

Captain Blue leaned forward at the table.

“I’m unhappy with all this. I’m with your buddies in Engineering, Doctor: it’s one thing to anticipate an experiment, but quite another to anticipate its outcome – particularly when the concepts involved clearly didn’t exist at that time. We did several courses on developments in physical concepts during my test pilot days, and if there’s one thing that really comes home to you, it’s that every new discovery only takes place after one hell of a lot of false starts.”

He gestured in the direction of the bundle of papers, which were now lying on the table in front of them. “That sounds suspicious.”

Colonel White looked up.

“Are you suggesting that this document is a forgery, captain?”

Blue shook his head slowly, frowning.

“Not if we’re accepting that the chamber really *has* been sealed all these years. But suppose the body really is that of Captain Scarlet, wouldn’t that suggest something like... well, time travel?”

Doctor Fawn pulled a face.

“Aren’t we getting a little carried away here? I mean, time travel belongs firmly and squarely in the pages of those sci-fi novels that Symphony reads all the time – nobody’s ever suggested that it could actually be *possible*. All those paradoxes... you know, the ones about going back in time and murdering your grandfather...”

Lieutenant Almond raised a hand.

“May I speak, Colonel?”

Colonel White suppressed a smile – it was a *long* time since anybody had ever requested permission to throw in their pennyworth into one of these talkshops.

“Of course, Lieutenant. This is a discussion forum – I’m looking for contributions from anybody and everybody present. You have a point to make?”

She nodded.

“I think so. My own field is concerned with the replication of the human neural functions in non-sentient systems. Included among those functions are the abilities to collate historical data and to project future courses of action from them. To such systems every scenario is as real as any other – it is therefore possible to simulate the effects of any historical change. Such capabilities are used every day in such applications as war games, for example. But computers also have the ability to investigate the effects of future changes on past events in a way that human brains cannot – because of the complexity of the scenarios that unfold.”

“Don’t you mean the effects of *past* changes on *future* events, Lieutenant?”

She shook her head.

“No – not at all. As I just say, to a computer every scenario is as real as any other. It is perfectly possible to program computers to accept the concept of time travel as established fact, and to investigate the consequences of that assumption. In such a scenario, a future change *can* affect a past event.”

Captain Scarlet frowned.

“Er, could you expand on that a little, Lieutenant?”

“I give example, yes? When I am undergraduate we play a computer game in which a player takes part of the ruler of a city in which time travel is an established capability. Object of the game is to advance the interests of the city by careful manipulation of the available resources – just like many other similar games of simulation, but with one key difference.”

“And that was...?”

“That it is possible to change the past in accordance with a given set of rules. For example, Doctor Fawn mentions just now the well-known paradox of someone going back in time and killing one of their ancestors. In the game I tell you about this is possible. If

the player goes back in time and kills his ancestor, then he himself is never born, so he cannot go back in time to kill his ancestor, so his ancestor is not killed and he is born so he can go back in time again and kill his ancestor. This is a paradox, and for many years people use this to say that therefore time travel cannot take place. But it does *not* prove this. All it proves is that the paradox cannot be resolved within the formal system in which it exists. To resolve the paradox, we have to redefine the formal system.”

Captain Blue rolled his eyes.

“Formal systems again! But wait a minute, Lieutenant... the formal system we’re talking about here is the Universe – it’s not just some computer game. You can’t just change it...”

She shook her head.

“You misunderstand. We do not change the Universe – we change our understanding of the rules which *define* the Universe.”

Blue shrugged. “Same difference, surely?”

“Not so! Professors Michelson and Morley discover that the speed of light is constant regardless of the speed of the person who measures it. *That* is a paradox in the Universe as we understand it in the late nineteenth century. So! Einstein redefines the laws by which the Universe functions in such a way that this effect is a natural consequence. This is Relativity.”

“So... what you’re saying is... that we have to redefine our understanding of the Universe to allow for the paradox of the dead grandfather – is that it?”

Lieutenant Almond nodded vigorously.

“This is correct. Two contradictory scenarios exist, so we accept this, and explore the consequences of doing so. We see that *two* alternate realities emerge – one in which the ancestor is killed, and other in which he is not. Each reality causes the other to come into existence. Both are real, but each precludes the other. In effect, they alternate – you could say that each ‘exists’ with mutual exclusivity and probability one-half. This is the simplest non-trivial scenario.”

Silence. It was finally broken by a low whistle and a muttered comment from Captain Blue.

“If that’s the simplest one, then what do the more complicated ones look like, for God’s sake?”

“Would it help if I were to continue, Captain?”

“Er, sure. Sorry, Lieutenant.”

“In computer simulations, the number of scenarios multiplies to astronomical proportions as each action affects many others as predicted by the so-called butterfly effect. An analysis of all the possible outcomes generates patterns of differing likelihoods, in which certain events occur with relatively high frequency, and others occur with relatively low frequency. The patterns that emerge can be interpreted as multidimensional probability distributions with a temporal element. Such analyses are beyond the capability

of the human brain, but *not* beyond the capability of modern artificial neural computing systems. I myself have played this game many times. I have found that although precise outcomes cannot accurately be predicted, it is nevertheless possible to anticipate to a certain extent the patterns that will emerge – just as it is possible to visualise the general structure of a fractal image without having to evaluate the function that will generate it at every point on the graph.”

“So... what’s the point you’re making, Lieutenant?”

“I wonder whether perhaps this view of the Universe is more than just a computer game. A change in history changes the present, as we already know. We now visualise an *alternate* present – one in which Faraday discovers Relativity almost a century before Einstein would have done. Such a change would have a profound impact on the development of the advanced civilisations. Atomic power would have been developed much earlier; space travel undertaken decades before *we* started experimenting with rockets. Who knows what wonderful things we might have achieved by this point in our history?”

Colonel White raised a glass of water to his lips, and put it down again with a thoughtful air.

“As usual, we seem to have too many questions, and not enough answers. But it seems to me that we can to an extent separate the purely theoretical from the practical – at least for the time being.”

He looked down at the sheaf of papers in his hand.

“Who was this mysterious foreign woman who met Davy that evening? Was she simply a very far-thinking person, as Davy evidently believed? Or was there something more sinister going on? If Captain Scarlet has been projected through time in some way that we don’t understand, perhaps he wasn’t the only one.”

“Isn’t there one rather obvious point that we’re overlooking, Colonel?”

“What is that, Captain Scarlet?”

“I *haven’t* been projected through time. If I had, obviously I would remember it, wouldn’t I?”

Captain Blue inclined his head thoughtfully.

“Is it possible that the Captain Scarlet currently being resuscitated comes from one of the Lieutenant Almond’s alternate universes?”

Rhapsody shook her head slowly.

“If I followed Lieutenant Almond’s argument earlier, Captain Scarlet almost certainly wouldn’t *exist* in an alternate universe – because of the butterfly effect. *Everything* would be different – that’s right, isn’t it, Lieutenant?”

Almond nodded vigorously.

“That is so. Captain Scarlet almost certainly would not exist – or if he did, the person given that colour designation would be a different person. Even Spectrum itself might not exist.”

Colonel White stood to address the group.

“Members of Spectrum – as always, this forum would appear to have thrown up some intriguing speculations. And I would like to add that I’m impressed with the demonstrable capability of everyone here to think ‘outside the box’, as the expression goes. Perhaps there’s something to be said for this recent programme of psychometric testing that has been imposed on us by the Military Strategic Planning group – though I’ve always argued that my officers were selected on the basis of their abilities in that field: the nature of the challenges we face demands nothing less.”

He paused, and took a sip from the glass of water in front of him before continuing – a gesture that the longer-serving officers present recognised as providing him with a few seconds to assemble his thoughts into a plan of action.

“As usual, it is apparent that we need to understand the situation in which we find ourselves a lot better than we currently do. We could of course take the simple course of waiting for Doctor Fawn’s team to resuscitate the patient and then interrogating him when he returns to consciousness, but this will take several weeks, and I’m reluctant to allow the trail to run cold in the meantime. I therefore want a team sent back to the scene of the discovery of the second Captain Scarlet in Foxleyheath. The team will conduct a thorough investigation at the scene of the discovery. That investigation will include a search of the records of the stately home in which the discovery was made – assuming that the owner has no objections – to try to find out if there are any contemporary documents that will help us to understand what happened there all those years ago.”

He took another sip from his glass.

“Each of you has a role to play in this investigation. Captain Scarlet and Captain Blue will return to Foxleyheath to spearhead the investigation. They will start with the concealed chamber in the basement of the house, and endeavour to determine whether any other clues exist either within the house itself or in its immediate vicinity that might have a bearing on the case. Rhapsody Angel will accompany them to act as liaison between the team and the owner of the house, with whom I understand she is already well acquainted. Rhapsody will also act as our archivist in this investigation, with responsibility for attempting to uncover any documents from the period in question that might have a bearing on this mystery: her possible sources of information will include the house itself, the Royal Institution in London, scientific journals of the period and local history societies. Lieutenant Almond, you will also join the team in the capacity of computing consultant: it will be your responsibility to determine the true nature of the equipment occupying the cellar, and to determine approximately how long it has been there. Please file requisitions for any specialist equipment you need.”

Lieutenant Almond considered.

“I think gravimetric and seismic sensors will be required to determine how long the cellar is undisturbed. May I take the portable seismic sensor that has been matched to the one recovered from the cellar?”

The colonel considered for a moment, and then nodded. “I don’t see why not, Lieutenant. It’ll save us the inconvenience of requisitioning another; in fact I recommend that you take all three items – both of the others are likely to prove useful also.”

He glanced down at a hastily set of scribbled notes, and turned to his chief medic.

“Doctor Fawn, you will accompany the body of the second Captain Scarlet to Kiel, where you will supervise the resuscitation process. Lieutenant Green will contact... Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward, is it?... to inform her that Spectrum wishes to continue to investigate the circumstances of this bizarre affair, and that we would appreciate it if she would assist us with our enquiries. I could of course simply have her ladyship evicted from her house without difficulty, but I see no reason to demand cooperation if she would like to help us voluntarily. Yes, Rhapsody?”

The Angel shuffled in her seat.

“May I ask to be allowed to speak to her first, Colonel? I have a feeling that she’d be only too happy to help out if we give her the opportunity to offer. She’s a lot sharper than she looks, and she loves a little action every now and then – in fact, it was she who first suggested to me that Spectrum might offer me a career path that would suit my temperament. I think she could be genuinely helpful.”

Colonel White nodded appreciatively.

“So much the better. By all means, Rhapsody – but bear in mind that I can and will force the issue if I have to, so use every persuasive talent you have. This operation will commence as soon as we know her response, so please contact her as soon as possible following this conclusion of this meeting.”

He looked around the room.

“Are there any other questions? If not, then I’ll bring this briefing to a close.”

They all filed out of the conference room. Rhapsody headed straight for her quarters, and Doctor Fawn walked away with Colonel White, talking animatedly about the practicalities of the task ahead of him, leaving the two captains and Lieutenant Almond standing in the corridor. Scarlet turned to the slightly-built young woman and grinned.

“It would appear we’re going to be working together again, Lieutenant. You might want to do a little packing – missions tend to get moving rather quickly around here. When the Colonel says he wants us off the base as soon as possible, he means it.”

Almond grinned up at him.

“Is not problem. I have not *unpacked* yet – all that is required is that I rearrange contents of suitcases. Will take very little time. I go and do it now, yes?”

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea. Most colour-designation personnel keep travelling bags permanently packed for occasions like this – the only downside is that most of the male officers forget to change their contents from one mission to the next. Symphony usually reminds Captain Blue here, but then *he* forgets to remind *me*.”

Captain Blue glared at him.

“I do nothing of the kind! Pay no attention to him, Lieutenant – I’ve just got no wish to embarrass him by suggesting that he can’t remember anything as simple as changing the contents of an overnight bag. Of course, if he *can’t*, that’s his own lookout.”

Almond looked down to hide the smirk that was creeping onto her face – they were obviously fast friends as well as partners.

“I go now and pack, yes? What is procedure for leaving Cloudbase please?”

Captain Scarlet glanced at his watch.

“You’ll receive a call in your quarters thirty minutes before departure, Lieutenant. Until then, I suggest you get a little sleep. It’ll be quite a long flight.”

She nodded sagely. “I will do this.”

She set off for the elevator, leaving the two captains alone in the corridor. Captain Blue regarded his partner speculatively.

“So what did you make of that briefing, Paul? Don’t tell me that you’re not bothered by all this business of discovering the frozen body of another Captain Scarlet – it’s not the sort of thing that you can dismiss as being of academic interest if you just happen to be the original.”

Scarlet considered.

“It’s not as disturbing as you seem to think. I’ve had to come to terms with so many incredible things since the Car-Vu incident that at the moment this feels like just one more. And anyway... why should I be concerned? I mean, whatever happened to him obviously hasn’t happened to me.”

“Unless of course...”

“Unless what, Adam?”

Captain Blue looked at him through narrowed eyes. “Unless it hasn’t happened *yet*.”

Scarlet looked at him curiously. “You don’t *really* believe in this time-travel idea, do you, Adam?”

Blue shrugged. “When you’ve eliminated the impossible...”

“*Have* we eliminated the impossible? I’d say that time-travel *is* the impossible.”

“Have you got a better idea, Paul? I know I haven’t.”

“But, I mean... time travel... that’s just pure science fiction, isn’t it?”

Captain Blue pulled a face.

“Three years ago we’d have said that the Mysterons themselves were pure science fiction. And you could argue that the Mysterons have *already* demonstrated an ability to indulge in time travel of a sort. They manage to reproduce a perfect *living* replica of a person who has already been killed. Isn’t that like reversing time in some way?”

“Well... yes, I suppose so, but from what we’ve seen of them, that’s just a matter of a few minutes – maybe an hour at the most. We’re talking about an interval of centuries here.”

“So? We’ve no idea what their true capabilities might be. Perhaps they can reverse time over far longer periods than we’ve given them credit for. I don’t know – I just think we shouldn’t dismiss the possibility, that’s all.”

The sound of brisk female footsteps made them turn to see Rhapsody striding towards them with a broad grin on her face.

“No problem – she’s agreed. In fact she’s done better than that – she’s invited us all to stay in the house for the duration: we’re to be her guests. Subject to one condition.”

“And what’s that?”

“That she’s allowed to join in the fun. I told you she enjoys a little action every now and again.”

Scarlet scowled. “Rhapsody – this isn’t a jolly, for heaven’s sake. It’s a serious investigation – are you sure she can be relied upon to understand that? If she starts making a nuisance of herself I’ll have her evicted myself...”

“Oh, don’t be such a stuffed shirt, Paul! She’s perfectly reliable – that debonair flippancy of hers is really a bit of an act. She’s got all her marbles, I assure you. In fact I’ve often wondered whether she’s a bit more clued up on things like international politics than she lets on – she seems to know just about everybody who’s anybody – and as I said, she talked me into considering a career in Spectrum long before anybody else had even heard of them. Next thing I knew, Spectrum had head-hunted *me*. I’ve often wondered about that – you know how cagey Colonel White is about anything to do with security. She’ll be okay – believe me.”

Scarlet peered at her closely, and then broke into a grin.

“All right, Rhapsody – I believe you. Let’s see how it goes, eh? I don’t suppose you’ve ever stayed in an English stately home before, Captain Blue?”

Blue shook his head. “Can’t say that I have, now you come to mention it.”

Scarlet grinned.

“You’re in for a treat. Not that this is a jolly, of course...”

§

“And through here we have the second dining room. If you will now to step to the right, you will pass the portraits of my great grandfather, Sir Tristram de Vere Creighton-Ward and his wife, Lady Miranda. The fabulous jewel around Lady Miranda’s neck is none other than the Sutton Courteney Sapphire, which was immortalised by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his famous Sherlock Holmes story ‘The Blue Carbuncle’, which he wrote whilst enjoying a shooting holiday with Sir Tristram here at Foxleyheath Manor during the long hot summer of 1895. Over there on the west wall you can still see the burns suffered by the wooden panelling during the great fire that engulfed the house in the early years of the nineteenth century. Legend has it that one of my ancestors broke down the doors leading into the library with his bare hands to rescue his lovely young bride, who was trapped by the flames on the other side, sacrificing his own life to save hers...”

Captain Blue glanced across the room at Scarlet and Almond, who had moved ahead to examine the faint burn marks upon the antique dado. He stifled a yawn and looked pleadingly at Rhapsody, who scowled at him furiously as Lady Penelope turned back to

face her guests once more, noting with a delighted smile the look of rapt attention on his face.

“I don’t imagine you get the opportunity to visit many stately homes when you’re living up there in the sky, Captain Blue. This must be a rare treat, I’m sure.”

Blue nodded vigorously. “I couldn’t have put it better, Lady Creighton–Ward.”

Her ladyship beamed.

“This is *great* fun – I haven’t conducted the tour myself for simply *ages*. If you’d now all like to walk through into the library I’ll be able to show you the priceless Makariev Triptych and Great Uncle Trevor’s world-famous collection of rare beetles, which is the most extensive in the United Kingdom outside the Royal Entomological Society at Ebury Gate in London. The collection is a great favourite among our younger visitors, but we keep it locked away on account of the exhibits being somewhat... portable. I’ll just go and get the key to the cabinet.”

She disappeared into a side room, and Rhapsody took the opportunity to hiss in Captain Blue’s ear.

“You’re not supposed to call her Lady Creighton-Ward, Adam. You’re supposed to say ‘Lady Penelope’ or ‘your ladyship’ when you address her directly – I explained all this during the flight, remember?”

Captain Blue peered at her with bleary eyes.

“Did you? No – I can’t remember at all. *Why* aren’t I supposed to call her Lady Creighton-Ward, dammit? That’s her name, isn’t it?”

“No, it *isn’t!* You’d only call her by her surname if she was the wife of a knight, a baronet or a life peer – but since she’s inherited the title in her own right she’s Lady Penelope. Or ‘your ladyship’ if you prefer, though that’s really only if you want to be formal. Paul does it instinctively, but that’s because he’s a stickler for formality.”

“Why ‘*your* ladyship’, then? I mean, she doesn’t *own* the ladyship, for heaven’s sake!”

Rhapsody sighed in exasperation.

“She’s the *custodian* of the title, Adam. When you use it you’re not talking to her; you’re talking to the rank of nobility that she occupies – and the rank of nobility is her ladyship. So you say ‘your ladyship’. Just like you say ‘your majesty’ when you’re talking to the King. Don’t you see?”

“But you just said you’re talking to the guy! So why don’t you just say ‘Hello Mr. King’? Seems obvious enough to me.”

“That’s just because you’re an American! Look, I *know* you lot told George the Third where he could shove his sceptre in 1776, but when you’re over here you do it our way, right? Oh, I give up! Come on – there are only two more rooms to go after the next one.”

She tugged at his arm to get him moving again, and dragged him into the library into which Scarlet and Almond had already passed, and where Lady Penelope was waiting for them.

“Hanging high above the fireplace, we see the crest of the Creighton-Wards. The crest was granted by the College of Arms relatively recently, in 1839 during the First Afghan War in which my great-great-grandfather, Brigadier Josiah Paul Creighton-Ward, distinguished himself fighting alongside Lord Uxbridge. The motto beneath the arms is written in Latin, and is said to have been inspired by the dying words of his mother.”

Scarlet peered upwards into the gloom above the fireplace, where the text beneath the great shield could just be made out in the darkness.

“*Dulcedine Necis Concinnitas*. I haven’t translated any Latin since my schooldays, but isn’t that something to do with sweetness and death?”

Lady Penelope nodded thoughtfully.

“We’ve interpreted it in the tourist brochures as ‘Elegance, Charm and Deadly Danger’, but the original meaning has been lost in the mists of time. It’s true that the first word translates as ‘charm’, but it could also mean ‘allurement’ – and you’ll have noticed the dative or ablative ending, Captain? That suggests ‘to, for, by, with or from... charm or allurement’, so the first two words could mean something to do with ‘death by allurement’, or perhaps ‘death from allurement’. Likewise, *concinnitas* is usually translated as ‘elegance’, but it could also mean ‘harmony’. There’s also a genitive ending on the second word, so the whole expression could mean ‘Through allurement, the harmony of death.’”

Involuntarily, Rhapsody shivered. “But what could *that* mean, Auntie Pen?”

Lady Penelope affected a delicate shrug.

“I’ve no idea, but I confess that I’ve always felt that the true meaning is deeper and darker than the more straightforward one we tell the tourists about. It wouldn’t be at all surprising – we’ve actually got some quite bloodcurdling traditions in the family, most of which I’ve deliberately omitted from the guidebook so that the visitors don’t blame me for giving their children nightmares. For example, it’s said that one of the local poachers once tried to ravish one of my female ancestors in the very woods bordering this estate. Fearful of losing her honour, she resorted to rather desperate measures to defend herself.”

“What did she do – threaten to have him transported to Australia or something?”

“Oh good heavens, no – the story goes that she blew his head off.”

Captain Blue grinned at her in astonishment. “You can’t be serious, Lady Penelope! That’s not a true story, surely?”

“Who can say? There’s one thing that tells against it though, which is that the incident was supposed to have occurred in the middle of the night – and *no* woman in her right mind would have been wandering around in the woods at night-time in the early 19th century. It was an exceptionally dangerous era – far more brutal than the romantic view of it that’s grown up around it since. However, it’s certainly true that there’s a long-standing familiarity with firearms in our family. Do you remember the Grafton Monorail project, Captain?”

“You mean the American coast-to-coast fully-automated transport system that came to grief some fifteen years ago? Yes, I remember reading about it – why do you ask?”

“Just before the system became operational, Warren Grafton approached me in an attempt to obtain financial backing for his project. When I refused, he sent a couple of his less-than-law-abiding business associates down here to burgle the house. Parker and I sent them packing with a pair of machine guns.”

Captain Blue laughed out loud. “*WHAT!* I thought you weren’t *allowed* to own firearms in this country!”

Lady Penelope looked back at him with an expression of mild embarrassment.

“Well, I suppose in the heat of the moment I must have forgotten to tell the police. By the time they arrived the two gentlemen in question were trapped in my car in the grounds, and I was far too worried about the damage to the upholstery to get around to making a statement. To their credit, the police did actually try to follow it up a few weeks later, so I invited the Chief Constable of Surrey around for tea to apologise. He was *very* understanding about it, dear man.”

Captain Blue suppressed a grin. Yes, it *would* be easy enough to stop a police investigation in its tracks when all you have to do is smile at the guy who organised it. He glanced at his watch through eyes that he was having increasing difficulty focussing, grimaced and involuntarily stifled a yawn.

“Would you be very offended if I took myself off to bed, Lady Penelope? It’s been a long day, and we really need to get started pretty early tomorrow.”

“Oh! Forgive me, Captain – I’d quite lost track of the time. But of course – I’ll get Parker to bring you a nightcap. What would you...”

Blue smiled and shook his head.

“Thank you, your ladyship, but I reckon I’ll be asleep ten seconds after I hit the sack – and anyway, nightcaps cause me to oversleep. I want to get cracking on our preliminary gravimetric survey of your wine cellar with Lieutenant Almond as early as I can tomorrow morning. Could I ask what time...”

“Is breakfast? Breakfast will be served in the dining room between seven and eight o’clock, if that’s convenient to you all. It’s simply *ages* since I’ve had company at that time in the morning – I *do* hope you can make it, though I’ll *quite* understand if you’re a little jet-lagged. Parker’s moved your luggage up to the bedrooms on the first landing: you’re the sixth along on the left, Captain Blue. Lieutenant Almond is fourth on the left. Dianne’s the third on the right – I’ve put you in the Alice Keppel room, my dear. Captain Scarlet, you’re in the King Edward VII room – that’s along the corridor, down the passageway, first left, then second on the left after that. If there’s anything that any of you need, just ring the bell by the bed: Parker will be up and about for the next half-hour. Lieutenant Almond, Captain Blue – let me show you to your bedrooms; Dianne, you may need to point Captain Scarlet in the right direction – it isn’t the easiest room to find.”

She led Almond and Blue away, leaving Scarlet and Rhapsody together at the bottom of the staircase. Scarlet jerked his head towards the landing at the top of the stairs, and pulled a face.

“Looks as if we’re not going to get the opportunity to put these olde worlde four-poster beds to good use on this trip, does it? Could be a bit embarrassing if one of us gets caught

walking around in the middle of the night: all these doors look a bit too similar for my liking.”

Rhapsody eyed him enigmatically.

“Oh, there could be a way round that problem – but only if I feel like telling you what it is.”

“What do you mean?”

She grinned.

“Auntie Pen’s a wily old bird. Alice Keppel was Edward VII’s long-term mistress, remember? Both of them were regular visitors to Foxleyheath Manor at around the turn of the last century – it’s one of the little snippets of information in the guidebook. Penny told us the names of the rooms just now not only to make sure we manage to find the right ones, but also to remind *me* that there’s a secret passage connecting the two bedrooms which, although they lead off different corridors, are actually situated back-to-back. She showed me where to find the secret switch when I came to visit once as a little girl – and I can guarantee you won’t find the one on *your* side, Paul! So if I decide I want a good night’s sleep tonight, you won’t see me until tomorrow morning. I *told* you she had all her marbles, didn’t I? Sweet dreams!”

Scarlet glared at her.

“So why have you just told me all that, if you aren’t thinking of dropping in after lights-out? That’s just being vindictive!”

Her eyes twinkled with amusement. “Not a bit of it! *That* was just to remind you not to take me for granted.”

She kissed him lightly on his cheek and tripped off up the staircase, leaving Scarlet to stomp his own way off to bed.

§

Still savouring the taste of his first cup of coffee of the day, Captain Blue dropped easily down from the last rung of the ladder into the cellar, and walked smartly over to where Scarlet and Almond were hunched over the console.

“You’re right – there are no buildings of any substantial size for at least a kilometre to the east, and it’s pretty obvious that you wouldn’t expect to find any. The woods lie off in that direction, and didn’t we see a lake down there in the middle of them when we flew in, Paul?”

Scarlet nodded. “That’s right - I remember being surprised at how large it was. Can’t remember whether there were any buildings surrounding it, though I’d think it was unlikely. I saw a small jetty on the side closest to the house, but that’s all.”

Lieutenant Almond removed her earphones and frowned.

“Nevertheless it is definitely as I have said, Captain. The gravimetric signature is of a far wider circumference than the immediate vicinity of this cellar and the alcove. If this

projected only *under* the house I should not be surprised, but it does not. It extends *away* from the house – from the wall over there.”

She pointed into the darkness behind the steps that led down into the cellar. Blue followed the direction of her finger and frowned.

“But that’s completely unrelated to the alcove, surely? The body was found here: what can *that* wall have to do with it?”

She shook her head. “I am sure I do not know. But should we not investigate? Perhaps we find more frozen Spectrum captains behind the other wall, yes?”

Blue grinned, considered, then nodded. “You’re right of course. But let’s do this logically, shall we? After all, it could be the foundations of an old building that was demolished and abandoned years ago. I’ll get Rhapsody to track down a set of plans of the house and the estate – there must be one somewhere. In the meantime you carry on taking readings: see if you can become more precise about what *type* of construction it is.”

She nodded, donned her earphones once more and turned back to her console. Scarlet glanced at the monitor once more to get his bearings and reached for his cap.

“I think I’ll go for a short walk into the woods. Let’s see if we can find any evidence of anything above ground, shall we? If that doesn’t help we could take the magnacopter up for a look around: sometimes it’s possible to see the outline of foundations that can’t be seen from ground level.”

He strode over to the ladder and ascended into the light that flooded down from the hallway above. Captain Blue continued to watch Lieutenant Almond tapping away at her keyboard for a few more seconds, then turned to the ladder and began to scramble up it after his companion.

§

Rhapsody jumped as Captain Blue entered the little office in which she had installed herself, hurriedly replacing a miniature portrait into the drawer of the desk in front of her as he walked in. He caught the guilty expression on her face and grinned at her.

“Hard at work, I see?”

She glared at him, and indicated several piles of paper neatly laid out on the desk. “Actually, yes I am. In this pile over here I’ve got all the documents I can find relating to the actual building of the house. Over here is some correspondence concerning that fire some time around the early 1800s that Auntie Pen mentioned last night, and that pile over there relates to the acquisition of the lands that comprise the estate. It occurred to me that the cellar might possibly predate the house itself, so I wanted to find out who owned the estate before Penny’s ancestors. I’ve drawn a blank on that one though – it looks as though it was virgin woodland before the Creightons acquired it some time around 1765.”

She picked up a piece of paper and squinted at the faded writing on it.

“This is one of a number of letters to the Creightons from the neighbouring landowners complaining about the number of gypsies and vagrants on and around the estate. It looks as if poaching was a real problem for them right up until the early 1830s, when a change in the law called the Enclosures Act effectively put a stop to it. Before that the estate was a bit of a war zone after dark, with all the landowners trying to protect their pheasants from poachers. The gamekeepers were every bit as vicious as the people they were trying to keep away, and there are records here of several suspicious fatalities on both sides.”

“But you’ve found nothing relating to our problem, I take it?”

She frowned. “I’m not sure. That fire I mentioned looks promising, inasmuch as it evidently severely damaged the house. Unfortunately this correspondence doesn’t make it clear whether the cellars survived, which is a shame, since it might have given us an earliest possible date for the body to have been hidden in the alcove.”

He nodded. “On that point, Lieutenant Almond thinks she may have discovered evidence of some subterranean construction work adjacent to the cellars we already know about. Could you get Lady Penelope to find you any plans of the house that she might have? We want to know if it’s documented and accessible before spending any time investigating what could be a red herring.”

“No problem. She’s very organised with her paperwork – as indeed she is with all her collections. Talking of which…”

She opened the drawer, extracted the tiny painting he’d seen her replace a few minutes earlier and held it up to his gaze.

“This is a miniature, painted on ivory. They used to be very popular with fashionable young ladies during the Regency era. Many of them had likenesses of their young beaux painted on them so that they could carry them about on their persons. Penny’s got quite a collection of them.”

Blue shrugged. “It’s very pretty. Do you reckon Symphony would like to photo-imprint a holiday pic of me on a blank one sometime?”

She grimaced. “*Look* at it, Adam! Doesn’t the picture remind you of somebody?”

He raised an eyebrow, took it from her hand and squinted at it, his expression slowly turning from vague curiosity to interest of a more intense kind.

“Well?”

His eyes met hers. “It looks rather like Paul, doesn’t it?”

She snorted. “It looks *exactly* like Paul! I’ll ask Penny about it when I see her about the house plans – maybe she can tell us who it…”

She stopped in mid-sentence and look up slowly at Captain Blue, strangely unsurprised to see him looking back down at her, his own eyes widening with comprehension.

“Adam, surely you don’t think…?”

“Rhapsody - why not? We’ve found a body that appears to be his. One of the questions we’re trying to answer is how long it’s *been* there. If that miniature really *is* of

him – and if it's genuine of course – it's the first piece of circumstantial evidence we're found to support the theory that he really has been transported though time somehow. We ought to get it flown to Cloudbase for forensics to take a look at it."

She nodded.

"I'll arrange for it to be on the next flight back. Talking of Paul, do you know where he is? I haven't seen him since breakfast."

"He's gone for a walk to see if he can find any evidence of Almond's little discovery above ground, though I don't imagine he'll find anything: whatever it is, it's probably had a couple of centuries for the grass to grow over it. Would you be able to take us up in the magnacopter for a short flight over the estate later if he comes back empty-handed?"

She grinned. "Of course! There's a limit to the amount of time I can sit in here reading documents without seeing a little bit of action! Just let me know when you want to go."

"Okay, though it'll probably be this afternoon at the earliest. In the meantime, have fun with the archives here – there looks like enough dust on them to keep you sneezing for a week."

She stuck her tongue out at him, and he beat a hasty retreat back downstairs in the direction of the cellar.

§

Captain Scarlet glanced up at the treetops that increasingly concealed the morning sunshine from his view as he strode onwards into the woodland to the east of the stately home, and breathed in the morning air – there was just a suggestion of saltiness in it, reminding him of the proximity of Foxleyheath to the south coast.

Twigs and branches crackled beneath his feet as he walked on, and he found himself increasingly having to watch his step as the ground grew increasingly rough and rugged, with the brittle broken remains of countless generations of trees and bushes strewn all around. Clearly the woods hadn't been subjected to any form of human attention for decades, if ever.

The glint of water caught his eye through the trees, and he changed his direction slightly to make directly for it. The ground beneath his feet became increasingly less firm as he approached the water's edge, and he changed direction once more to head for a slightly raised clearing in the forest, perhaps fifty metres from the water's edge. The clearing was overhung by a single massive oak tree with a vast gnarled trunk and solid insanelly twisting branches that radiated from it in all directions.

Finding himself wondering why the clearing had never become overgrown he perceived the answer almost instantly: the roots of the tree broke the surface in several places, simultaneously solidifying the ground and preventing any other undergrowth from establishing itself. The roots beneath the ground were almost certainly far more extensive than the foliage above it, he realised. The tree was obviously centuries old, and gazing up into those obscenely twisted branches he found himself inwardly shivering – the image of a hangman's rope suspended from the lowest one suddenly and inexplicably sprang into

his mind. Might it ever have been used as a hanging tree at some time in the distant past? It was not impossible.

Shaking his head to clear the ghastly vision, he rapidly scanned the ground for any sign of bricks or other human artefacts, but saw none. Turning his attention once more to the lake that sparkled through the trees, he strode away from the clearing and down to the water's edge, where he knelt down and dipped his fingers into the cold green liquid. Stagnant.

Rising again to his feet, he slowly walked along the edge for perhaps a hundred paces before turning once more back into the woods, again searching in vain for anything beneath his feet to indicate a long-forgotten construction at any time in the past. Mentally shrugging he began to retrace his steps, stopping to glance with distaste at the ancient tree on the edge of the clearing just once more as he passed it.

§

“Transmitting five three-second pulses at 60 kHz in ten seconds... mark!”

Lieutenant Almond flicked the switch on her portable console, checked the readouts and leaned forward.

“Receivers online and ready, Captain Blue.”

She watched the dials intently as the five beeps echoed over her headphones, waited a few more seconds, and then ran a Fourier analysis on the waveform that had flashed up in front of her.

“We are registering harmonics in the 15-20 kHz frequency band, Captain. It is extremely faint, but there is definitely a resonance. I am reading a spread of frequencies, indicating a large metallic structure at a distance of approximately 500 metres, probably connected to this cellar by some form of metallic conduit.”

Captain Blue looked up in astonishment. “Metallic? But this cellar's at least as old as the house! Nobody built metal-lined tunnels those days – your readings must be wrong, Lieutenant.”

She shook her head. “Not wrong - the patterns cross-check with the onboard database. Perhaps the owner builds an extension to her home, yes?”

Blue frowned. “Lady Penelope insists that she wasn't aware of the alcove before Rhapsody opened it – and this tunnel you've just discovered extends away from the house from an adjacent vault that must have been built at the same time. It's surely *got* to be the same age as the original cellar – if not older. This one gets more interesting by the minute... ah! That's her now, if I'm not mistaken. Let's ask her about it, shall we?”

The sound of dainty footsteps descending the stairs heralded the arrival of their host, who stepped delicately over the cables that snaked across the floor of the cellar to reach the team. Upon reaching the two officers, she lifted a pair of spectacles that hung around her neck to her eyes and peered at the gadgetry in astonishment.

“What a remarkable looking piece of equipment, Captain! Might one ask what it does?”

Blue grinned.

“Sure! It’s a gravimetric distortion sensor, your ladyship. It detects minute fluctuations in spacetime caused by local variations in the mass of the Earth: we’re using it to try to map the full extent of the labyrinth of cellars under this house.”

Her ladyship frowned.

“Wouldn’t you find a map a trifle less cumbersome? I have copies of three surveys of the house that have been conducted at various times since the house was built, the most recent being about 50 years ago – in fact, I gave Dianne a copy of it just this morning. I went through a bit of an architecture phase and spent simply ages using it to explore the place when I was in my teens: it seems to be remarkably accurate.”

Blue nodded, holding up a photocopy.

“I know – I asked her to ask you if we could take a look at it. However, what we appear to have found doesn’t feature on it, Lady Penelope. Our instruments are showing a substantial tunnel leading from somewhere in the vicinity of these cellars away from the house in an westerly direction – that would take it directly under the lawn at the front of the house in the direction of the lake.”

Her ladyship’s eyebrow effected a modest ascension.

“Goodness gracious – what a discovery! Well I never: I wish I’d known about that when I had my birthday parties when I was a young girl, Captain – it would have made a *wonderful* hiding place, wouldn’t it!”

“You quite certain you weren’t previously aware of it, your ladyship?”

“Good heavens, I shouldn’t think so! I mean, I’m *sure* I’d have remembered something like that, wouldn’t I?”

“Is it perhaps possible that whatever this construction is, it’s something to do with your wine cellar, Lady Penelope? Something your family had built at some time in the past and forgot to tell you about, perhaps? Captain Scarlet’s about to go for a short flight over the grounds with Rhapsody to see if we can spot anything from the air, but obviously you know the place better than anyone.”

Lady Penelope peered over her glasses at the wine rack that covered the wall.

“Well, I really *wouldn’t* have thought so – though I’ll admit that my father did sometimes start knocking things down when he got bored. I never forgave him for demolishing the summer house, you know – I used to run out to it after high tea to read my comics in it after they were delivered from the local paper shop on Wednesdays. I suppose it’s just possible...”

“Our readings indicate that there’s a large metallic structure at the end of it, Lady Penelope – and that the tunnel itself is also made of metal. Could your father have had that built?”

“I would hardly have thought so. He really was *far* better at wrecking things than creating them, I assure you. Would you like some tea, Captain?”

“What? Oh – sorry, your ladyship! Thank you... yes, I could do with one.”

“We have Lapsang Souchong, Dragon Eyes Black, Ginger, Mango de l'Indochine...”

Blue’s face clouded just a fraction. “Just with milk, please.”

A look of mild shock flashed across Lady Penelope’s face slightly faster than her ability to suppress it.

“Oh! Well... in that case... perhaps you’d like Darjeeling?”

“Darjeeling would do just fine, thanks.” He waved one of his hands to attract the attention of the young female lieutenant who was still listening intently to her headphones, and raised the other to his lips in a drinking gesture. She grinned and nodded vigorously.

“Could you make that two, your ladyship?”

“Of course, Captain – I’ll get Parker to bring them down shortly.”

“Lieutenant Almond doesn’t take sugar either, so he needn’t bring any down, thanks.”

The ghost of a smile flickered across Lady Penelope’s lips.

“Actually, I’m not totally sure we even *have* any sugar in the house. Ten minutes, Captain?”

“That’s great – thanks.”

Lady Penelope ascended the stairs into the hall and walked over into the study, where she quietly closed the door before stepping over to an oak bureau against the far wall. Simultaneously pushing and twisting one of the handles in a peculiarly precise gesture, she turned to face the opposite wall just in time to see one of the paintings apparently screwed to it revolve 180 degrees into a semicircular indentation, revealing a monitor. By the time the half-revolution was complete, it had lit up to reveal the face of a man with curly hair and a dimple on his chin – a face which broke into a delighted grin as he recognised the caller.

“Lady Penelope! Hi – what’s up?”

“Hello, Scott. I’m sorry to bother you, but I think we may have a little problem here. It would appear that Spectrum are slightly more efficient than we gave them credit for: I think they’re about to make that little discovery we rather hoped they wouldn’t. May I have a word with Brains, please?”

§

The door to the study opened, and Scarlet’s head popped though, just in time to catch a barely-stifled yawn emanating from the person sitting behind the desk.

“Rhapsody! How is it going?”

She glared back at him.

“How long are you going to keep me cooped up in this office, Paul? In the Amber Room we’ve got access to every information channel on the planet; more electronic amusements that you’ll find in any computer games superstore and enough physical exercise aids next door to keep us in better shape than most professional models. Here I’ve got one pen to play with that clicks when I press the top of it. I swear I’ll go to seed if I have to spend another day in this place!”

He grinned, allowing his eyes to flicker over her sleek contours.

“Not too much chance of that, I think! But I’m here to ask if now’s a good time to go for that flight over the estate that Captain Blue spoke to you about this morning. He’s going to be tied up with Lieutenant Almond all day down in that cellar, but I’ve got just over an hour before we have to report in to the colonel. Any chance we could manage it before then?”

Without changing her bored expression she languidly reached out to a desk diary that was acting as a paperweight on top of one of the piles of papers and casually flicked through it, her features an uncannily accurate parody of those of their hostess.

“I dare say I could just about fit you in... how would right this minute suit you?”

“Perfect!”

He opened the door and gestured for her to precede him out onto the landing, down the stairs and out of the front door, where the magnacopter was still parked on the tarmac next to her ladyship’s pink Rolls Royce. Scarlet looked at the car and grimaced.

“Isn’t she embarrassed to be *seen* in that thing?”

His female companion giggled.

“Yes, *it is* a bit of an eyesore, isn’t it? But she obviously loves it: she’s had it as long as I’ve known her, and I’ve got to admit it’s a delight to be driven around in. One thing I’ll say for it – at least nobody ever forgets her! Come on – let’s get airborne.”

They scrambled up into the cockpit, and Rhapsody rapidly ran through a series of pre-flight checks while Scarlet strapped himself in. By the time he’d finished doing so, her fingers were hovering over the vertical lift control; an expectant look on her face. He grinned and nodded, and she immediately propelled the magnacopter fifty metres into the air, adjusting her microphone as she did so.

“Where to, Captain?”

He pointed towards the east, where the distant glimmer of water could just be seen through the trees of the woods through which Scarlet had walked earlier that day.

“That way! Slowly please, so we can watch for any indentations or colour changes on the ground that might indicate the foundations of a building that no longer exists.”

She nodded, and edged the magnacopter into a forward movement at about twice the pace of a brisk walk.

“Will this do?”

“That’s great! Record the whole trip using both conventional and infra-red cameras, will you?”

She leaned to her left and flicked three switches in rapid succession. “No problem. I can conduct a seismic scan at the same time if you want – it’s not as sensitive as Captain Blue’s GMD analysis, but it might throw up something.”

“Good idea! Would you?”

“Already doing it – I guessed you’d probably say yes. Is that the sort of thing you’re looking for?”

He followed the direction of her pointing finger at the monitor in front of them, where a small octagonal blob could just be made out, then compared it with his view out of the window, which revealed no sign of it at all.

“Could well be. Do you reckon that’s the foundations of her ladyship’s demolished summer house that she mentioned?”

Rhapsody shrugged. “If it is, at least we know the equipment’s working. Not that it’ll pick up anything more than about a metre beneath the surface. We’re almost at the edge of the woods – do you want to go on?”

“Yes – take us all the way to the lake please, then circle and return to the house on a parallel track. I want to scan at least two hundred metres to both sides of a straight line from the house to the lake.”

She nodded, and tilted the control slightly, causing the magnacopter to drift to the right as it began to pass over the tops of the trees. Scarlet stretched forward in his seat and looked down thoughtfully at the wood below as it passed beneath them, muttering quietly to himself.

“Weeds...”

Rhapsody blinked, and tapped her earpiece. “What was that, Paul? I thought you said something about weeds!”

He grinned at her.

“I did! Every time I go up in an aeroplane, I look down at the trees on the ground as we fly over them – and every time, the realisation hits me that they’re nothing more than very large weeds. If I were God I could just reach down and rip them out of the ground as easily as you or I would pull a weed up by the roots. There’s nothing like being able to see them from a bird’s eye perspective to put them into context... hey, wait a minute! What’s that down there?”

She stretched to her right to share his view.

“Clearing in the woods by the lake. Why?”

He frowned.

“Not sure. Something looks different to how I remember it from this morning – can you put us down at the edge of it?”

“Sure! Hang on!”

The magnacopter rotated slowly in the air, slowly descending into the gap in the trees, coming to a rest twenty metres from the gnarled oak that Scarlet had regarded with such

superstitious foreboding earlier that day. On this occasion, however, he barely glanced at it, but dropped down onto the ground nearby and trotted over to the centre of the glade, where Rhapsody joined him a few moments later.

“What’s up, Paul?”

He knelt down on the grass, swept his fingers lightly over it and raised his hand to his nose.

“What do you make of this?”

She took his hand, smelt it, and then looked carefully at the grass beneath their feet.

“Vertical thrust blast. A VTOL craft with a single vertical jet has taken off from here – quite recently too, I’d say. You can see the blast area where the grass has been automatically sprayed with coolant to prevent it catching fire. The smell’s unmistakable, but the stuff evaporates completely within four hours above twenty degrees Celsius. It’s pentahydroxine.”

Scarlet looked up sharply.

“Not possible. We developed that compound ourselves, and it’s still on the top secret list. If any of our people had been here we’d obviously know about it – you must be mistaken.”

She shook her head decisively.

“No I’m not – but I suspect *you* could be incorrect in assuming that Spectrum are the only people using it. Something very similar was a key component of the landing gear of the very first Zero-X mission almost fifteen years ago, and *they* were being advised by a top-secret group of external consultants working within the hypervelocity aviation field. There could easily be a few private interest groups using the stuff.”

She knelt down and peered closely at the grass.

“No doubt about it – the discoloration is caused by the reaction of the pentahydroxine with the chlorophyll. If you squint at it you can see the patches where the photosynthetic reaction has been temporarily inhibited.”

He nodded. “That’s what I thought I saw from the air as we flew overhead – the slight discoloration of the grass. But I’ll *swear* that discoloration wasn’t there when I walked through this clearing first thing this morning.”

She looked up at him quizzically. “Are you quite sure, Paul? It’s not difficult to miss it at ground level if you’re not looking for it.”

He shook his head decisively.

“I’m positive. Spotting things like that becomes second nature after you’ve been through basic combat training at West Point. Something’s been and gone since I was last here.”

He peered into the trees at the edge of the clearing for a few minutes, but saw nothing.

“Come on – let’s get back to the house. Perhaps Lady Penelope knows something about it – it’s on her property after all. There’s probably a very simple explanation.”

They clambered back aboard the magnacopter, and Rhapsody once more propelled it into the air, guiding it onto the parallel path they'd discussed earlier. The trip back to the manor took slightly under fifteen minutes, and they alighted just as the front door opened and their host walked through, smiling genially.

"Ah, Captain Scarlet and Dianne! I *thought* perhaps you'd been for a little flight to see the local fauna and flora – the rhododendrons are *so* pretty at this time of year. Did you by any chance see my little arboretum at the back of the house adjoining the patio? You know, I keep promising to send your mother some clippings from my azaleas, Dianne – perhaps you could take some with you to give to her when you leave?"

Rhapsody returned the smile, equally graciously.

"I'd be delighted to, Auntie Pen, but I shan't actually be seeing them for quite some time yet. Perhaps you could just email her the DNA sequence – they've just bought a new synthetic biosystem replicator, I believe."

Lady Penelope's smile clouded just a fraction.

"Oh dear – I'm afraid I *really* don't understand such things at all. Parker's always telling me that I ought to get an SBR encoder, but I really can't see the point when all you need is a nice sharp pair of scissors. I always like to send my guests away with a few cuttings, you know: it gives me an excuse to ring them up a few days later and explain how best to cultivate them. Oh – I'm so sorry! I haven't introduced you yet to a friend of mine who's dropped in for afternoon tea... shall we go into the drawing room?"

"With pleasure, Auntie! Do I know him?"

Lady Penelope appeared to ponder the question, and then shook her head.

"No, I don't think so. He's not from around here; in fact he only flew into Heathrow from New York this morning."

She led the way back into the house, and through the hallway into the room beyond, where Captain Blue and Lieutenant Almond already sitting talking to a man of approximately Lady Penelope's age, wearing a pair of heavy spectacles.

"Brains – may I introduce Dianne Simms, and Captain Scarlet of the Spectrum organisation? Dianne and the captain are two more of my guests currently staying with us in the course of a little investigation here that requires them to be spending a considerable amount of time in Foxleyheath, so I decided to spare them the purgatory of several nights at one of the local hostelries. And this is... well, everybody knows him as Brains, so that's how I'll introduce him – if that's all right with you, Brains?"

The man nodded with an almost comical nervousness. "Oh... yes! I-I wouldn't want to-to stand on ce-ceremony, er, Lady Penelope. Brains will d-do just fine."

They all shook hands, and Scarlet and Rhapsody joined the little group, seating themselves next to Lieutenant Almond on the couch and accepting the proffered cups of tea.

"Ca-Captain Blue here h-has just been telling me that you're here on official business, Captain – would it be... er... impolite of me to-to ask its nature?"

Scarlet gestured dismissively. “Just a routine problem with our communications system – there appears to be some equipment in the vicinity that is interfering with our own. Perhaps Captain Blue has already explained...?”

He glanced across at his friend sitting opposite, noting the barely perceptible shake of his head. Evidently little to no information concerning the true nature of their mission had been exchanged – which was probably just as well. Best to change the subject as quickly as possible - and the best form of defence being attack...

“So what brings you to England, Mr, er... Brains?”

Lady Penelope leaned forward and added a little milk to her tea.

“Brains is my family’s... financial advisor. He’s got a head for figures second to none, haven’t you, Brains?”

The nervous man with the glasses nodded. “Analysing data is what I d-do best, Captain.”

Captain Blue laughed good-naturedly. “Perhaps I could hire your services on behalf of my father, Mr. Brains! He’s got no end of problems with the tax authorities in Boston right now.”

The other shook his head – perhaps a fraction too vigorously, mused Blue.

“I’m af-afraid not, Captain: I only handle the, er, one account. I’m sure that Lady P-Penelope would be able to, er, recommend a good firm of ac-accountants...”

The conversation meandered on, returning several times to financial matters in which Captain Blue seemed to have suddenly developed an almost morbid interest, and lasting another half an hour before a meaningful glance towards the door from his colleague made Scarlet realise that Captain Blue wanted to have a word in private. He put down his empty cup and leaned forward.

“Forgive me everyone, but we need to recalibrate some equipment down in the cellar before we start the next series of tests. Captain Blue – could you help me please?”

Blue inclined his head. “Sure. Lady Penelope – would you excuse us?”

“But of course, Captain.”

The two captains stood and walked from the room, Scarlet closing the door behind them as they quit the drawing room. As soon as it was shut he looked quizzically at his companion, but Blue shook his head and continued walking down the hall. Only when they were around the corner and halfway down the next corridor did he stop.

“Something’s bothering me. It’s about that guy in there – ‘Brains’.”

Scarlet nodded grimly.

“I thought so. What about him?”

“I’ve seen him before. Years ago when I was still in the WAS, a brilliant academic came to give us a lecture on the mechanics of hypervelocity propulsion units. Most of it went straight over my head – he was so far ahead of his time that it sounded like pure science-fiction, but I kept all my notes and handouts on the off-chance that I might

understand them one day. I was actually flipping through them a couple of months back – and some of the very recent developments in that field bear one hell of a resemblance to some of the things he was talking about way back then. Paul, I’m sure that’s the guy. His name’s Hackenbacker – Professor Hiram J. Hackenbacker, I seem to remember was how he was introduced to us. I often wondered what became of him, and vaguely assumed he invented something to make him rich and retired on the proceeds, but that didn’t quite ring true: somehow he struck me at the time as one of those boffins who’s more interested in pure science than in using it to make money.”

“You’re quite sure, Adam?”

“Positive – you don’t forget a stutter like that! Remarkable that he’s made such a strange career jump. I almost asked him about it in as many words just before you arrived, but my suspicious nature kicked in, and I’ve just spent the last half-hour trying to get him to open up about his life, as you obviously noticed. The implication is that accountancy is all he’s ever done – and whenever I started trying to get technical, her ladyship just butted in and changed the direction of the conversation with some irrelevant inanity. It was almost as if she didn’t want me to pursue it. Paul, I’m suspicious.”

Scarlet shrugged. “About what? Even if it’s the same guy, he’s got a right to do whatever he wants with his life. Perhaps he blotted his scientific copybook in some way. I daresay we’ve all got a few skeletons in our closets that we’d prefer were kept in there.”

Blue nodded. “I know. But I think I’ll call Cloudbase and get Lieutenant Green to run a check on him anyway: career history, academic papers, last known whereabouts, that sort of thing. In the meantime, when you go back in there would you ask Lieutenant Almond to join me down in the cellar as soon as she can? While you and Rhapsody were out we made quite a lot of progress: we’re actually very nearly ready to try opening it up.”

Scarlet nodded, and returned to the drawing room where Rhapsody was standing by the wall pointing out some feature of one of the full-length paintings on the wall to the other people present. Following the direction of her finger, he saw that she was inspecting a ring on the subject’s hand.

“Paul – welcome back! Look at this - isn’t it romantic? She’s wearing a Claddagh ring. That’s a ring with a heart and a crown on it: you wore it with the heart facing away from you if you were unattached, and the other way if you were spoken for – just the way she’s wearing it here. Sometimes a man would buy his girlfriend one so that when they were reunited after a long time apart they’d be able to recognise each other. I think that’s just *so* sweet.”

Scarlet peered at the strange object, and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“Presumably they didn’t have very good memories in the early 19th century! I don’t think *I’d* forget what somebody that important looked like.”

She pulled a face. “Things were different then, Paul! Couples were often betrothed in their early teens, and then got separated for years at a stretch because the poor boy got sent away to fight or something. He was often away for simply ages – it’s hardly surprising that they wouldn’t recognise each other when he came back again. It happened all the time – all the folk songs of the period tell of stories like that around the time of the Napoleonic wars. What do you think about her hairstyle? Do you think it would suit me?”

Sparing the swept-up blonde tresses of the woman in the portrait one cursory glance, he shook his head.

“Styles of that period don’t do anything for me at all, Rhapsody – I’ve always preferred long hair. You keep it just the way you’re wearing it now, okay?”

She pulled a face. “That’s the trouble with men – *no* imagination! One of these days I’ll just change it – and I’ll bet you take one look at it and tell me that I ought to have had it done like that years ago.”

He grinned.

“Very unlikely! So if you *do* decide to change the style then on your own head be it – literally! By the way, Lieutenant Almond, Captain Blue asked me to request that you join him in the cellar as soon as it would be convenient. I understand things are getting interesting down there.”

Almond glanced down at her empty teacup and grinned. “This is so – I think maybe we discover very interesting things today. I go and help downstairs if you excuse me, Lady Penelope?”

“Of course, Lieutenant. Will you have another cup, Captain Scarlet? Or does duty call upon you to desert us also?”

Scarlet shook his head. “There’s little enough I can do down there at the moment: the technology is Lieutenant Almond’s baby, and Captain Blue understands it better than I do. I think I’ll have another cup if I may.”

He sat himself down in the chair that Lieutenant Almond had just vacated, and turned to face the bespectacled man opposite.

“So do you find that recent advances in neurocomputing technology have had a significant impact upon the world of financial services, Brains? The military are finding more applications for the things than they know what to do with...”

§

Lieutenant Almond looked at the cemented wall speculatively, her eyes flickering over the cracks, looking for any kind of pattern that might herald a concealed entrance.

“The passage is behind this wall, Captain. The distortion sensor indicates this structure is no more than two centimetres thick. Behind it there is nothing for a further six hundred metres.”

Blue nodded thoughtfully. “And do we know what’s at the end of this passage?”

“A large metallic structure. The composition of the metal is not registered in the databank, but the tunnel is lined with metal of the same composition.”

Blue raised an eyebrow.

“Strange, that. I thought we’d got every known metallic element and alloy ever invented registered on this gizmo. So – how do we get inside it?”

He stepped up to the wall and tapped it.

“Sounds solid enough. Can you scan this wall for structural anomalies, Lieutenant? We’re trying to find any indication of a secret passage.”

She nodded. “Is not problem. I subject brickwork to high-frequency electromagnetic oscillations and measure resonance in local spacetime. Then we superimpose gravimetric echo on visual display to look for stress patterns. I think maybe this help.”

“Will it take a long time, Lieutenant?”

She shook her head. “Not long time – I set it up at once. Will take just a few minutes: I do it now, yes?”

“Yes please, Lieutenant.”

She started typing rapidly at her keyboard while Captain Blue lightly traced his fingers over the wall. After a few moments he turned back to his companion, a perplexed expression on his face.

“It looks genuinely old. It *is* genuinely old, for heaven’s sake! And yet so was the concealed entrance to the alcove that Rhapsody discovered – and behind that was an assortment of pieces of equipment that couldn’t possibly have been made more than ten years ago! You know, the more I think about it, the more I reckon the time travel idea is on the right track. Remember those pieces of Spectrum equipment – the torch, the signal booster and the seismograph – that we found in the alcove? They weren’t just *like* our own, they were *identical* to our own, right down to the serial numbers! Could it be that they’ve been transported back into the past somehow?”

She looked up.

“Maybe is possible – I do not know. But I also ask myself why. Is equipment left there by accident? Or is it put there for us to find it?”

Blue shook his head.

“No idea. But one thing I *do* know – we’re going to have a far better idea what this is all about when we can get through this wall and take a look at whatever’s at the other end of that tunnel... ah! Have you got something, Lieutenant?”

She nodded vigorously.

“I think so. Would you inspect this display please, Captain Blue?”

Blue joined her at the console, and peered over her shoulder at the monitor in front of her, upon which a faint image of the brickwork could be seen.

“Here we see the imprint of the structure as it is recorded by electromagnetic frequencies within the visible range... that is to say, the wall as we see it. The sensor is however also capable of displaying the same imprint as it is recorded at the same frequencies adjusted for the minute distortions in spacetime created by the application of gravimetric pulses, which we are seeing...” She flicked a switch, and the image flickered momentarily. “...now.”

Captain Blue squinted at the screen and frowned. “It looks exactly the same to me.”

“Not exactly the same. I now superimpose the two images – please watch.”

She turned a dial slowly, causing the image to brighten slightly. As they watched, a vaguely rectangular outline began to form in the middle of the screen. She grinned with satisfaction.

“I think we find door. But where is handle?”

Blue blinked, and glanced up. “What was that, Lieutenant?”

“Door without handle is not logical. We must look for handle.”

She rose from the console and stepped back to the far wall, where she stood silently for several minutes, quietly contemplating the brickwork in front of her. Blue frowned.

“What are you looking for, Lieutenant? I don’t imagine it’s going to have a little sign on it that says ‘Door Handle’ on it.”

She shook her head.

“Door is built for people to go through. So somebody must want to go through. How do they know what to do to open door? I think there must be...”

She stopped in mid-sentence and walked over to the wall, where she singled out two bricks, about a metre apart, and pointed to one with each hand.

“I think these bricks are not correct. Lengths of bricks in every alternate row follow first six numbers in Fibonacci Series repeated many times, and bricks in every other row follow same sequence in reverse, offset by three bricks. Except these two bricks, which are wrong size. I think maybe here is door handle.”

Captain Blue grinned. “I’ll take your word for that, Lieutenant! So... assuming you’re correct, what do we have to do to... turn the handle?”

She shook her head. “I do not know! I just know that these two bricks are wrong.”

Captain Blue shrugged. “Seems to me our options are limited. Either we push them or pull them. And of the two, it seems to me that the more likely is...”

He extended his hands and pushed both bricks, first gently and then with increasing pressure. Suddenly he felt the wall give slightly, and stepping hurriedly back, watched in amazement as a complete section of it slowly rotated a quarter turn to reveal the anticipated tunnel beyond. Grinning with satisfaction, he turned just in time to see Scarlet descending the steps into the cellar.

“Ah, Captain! Want to do a little exploring?”

Scarlet contemplated the opening in astonishment. Picking up a torch from the pile of equipment by the side of Lieutenant Almond’s console, he strode over to the opening and shone the beam into the darkness. Apart from a series of concentric halos that glinted back at him to show irregularities in the circular walls, a slight upward curvature about fifty metres beyond the entrance prevented the beam from reaching the end.

“Any idea where it goes, Captain Blue?”

Blue nodded. “We’re reading a substantial metallic structure almost a kilometre away: it seems logical to assume that’s where it leads. It obviously starts with a slight downward

angle, and we're already beneath the so I imagine we're going to be quite deep underground."

He peered at the entrance once more, grunted, and then walked over to the pile of equipment and extracted a portable seismograph.

"It looks safe enough, but I think we'll take along a little insurance, just in case. Also would you bring the signal booster please, Lieutenant? That tunnel looks as though it's likely to be a good reflector of radio waves."

He walked over to the entrance and joined the other two.

"All right, everybody. Let's go see what we can find..."

§

The width of the North Sea and most of Germany away, Doctor Fawn deactivated the videoscreen and walked swiftly back to the hermetically-sealed isolation unit in which his patient lay.

"Captain Scarlet? Captain Scarlet - are you able to hear me? I know you're unable to respond verbally, but we can detect minute changes in your life signs: if you can hear me, think about trying to speak. Our instruments will register any fluctuations in the impulses in the neural pathways that control your vocal chords."

He flicked a switch to change the display to a schematic resembling a circuit diagram of extreme complexity, selected an area to magnify it and watched it with unblinking eyes, muttering to himself. Captain Magenta peered at the diagram and blinked, shaking his head in bewilderment.

"Well, Doctor?"

Fawn frowned. "I'm not sure. Under normal circumstances I'd have said it was far too early, but if it really *is* Scarlet we're dealing with here then the rulebook simply doesn't apply... The readings are barely off the baseline, but I think something's beginning to register. If I'm right, we'll need to be ready to transfer him to cryogenic resuscitation adjoining the main operating theatre on the sixth floor at short notice. Get onto them and request that the CRU is activated and fully manned within the next twenty minutes, would you? Follow that up immediately with a formal notification by email: I don't want any administrative delays if we find we *do* need it."

"S.I.G."

Magenta nodded and left the room, and Fawn turned back to his patient once more.

"Well, Captain Scarlet - if that's who you are - we're ready for you. It's up to you now..."

For the next fifteen minutes he busied himself with the task of reviewing his patient's case notes from the last few days, before an insistent beeping from the console to his left made him look up sharply. Swivelling his chair, he reached out for the audio link and activated it.

“Captain Magenta? It’s definitely started. I’m going to need the CRU fully activated and functional within the next ten minutes... possibly sooner. We’re bringing the patient up now...”

Without waiting for a reply he deactivated the link and started barking orders to the orderlies assigned to the bed. Within less than twenty seconds all peripheral sensors and monitors to the bed had been disconnected from their base units, and the bed was being wheeled out into the corridor. Waiting for the elevator to descend, Fawn glanced down at his patient and unconsciously nodded to himself: no cause for alarm yet, though the premature start of the recovery had taken him by surprise. The doors opened, and he watched closely as the orderlies guided the bed inside, then punched the button to send the elevator speeding back upwards to the theatre floor. In less than fifteen seconds the doors slid aside once more, and they exited the elevator into a corridor physically almost identical to the one they’d left and had just begun the long walk towards the resuscitation unit when a red flashing light on the instrument panel caught Fawn’s attention. Glancing down with irritation at the apparent malfunction on the control board, he almost physically jumped with astonishment as he realised that the readings to which it was trying to draw his attention were genuine.

“What the HELL...?”

The instrument panel affixed to the side of the bed had burst into life, with at least four detectors simultaneously registering life signs that were growing stronger by the second. Peering down at his patient, his eyes widened in alarm: the man bearing Scarlet’s features was beginning to shake violently, his mouth attempting to speak through chilled gasps as he tried to respond to the life-giving warm air through which he was being conveyed.

“Emergency! You! Help me get this stretcher into cryogenic resuscitation AT ONCE!”

The gurney was propelled into the unit, noisily knocking aside the swing doors as it sailed through. Even before it had come to a stop alongside the specialist banks of equipment to aid the resuscitation process, Doctor Fawn was bending over the patient, reaching for the electrical connections to re-establish monitoring of his vital signs. Even as he did so, the eyes flickered open and began to focus. As Fawn watched, the obvious confusion written in them gave way to desperation, and the lips began to move with faltering movements...

“She’s here! She’s here... Doctor Fawn? Help her, Doctor... you must... she’s HERE!”

§

“Six hundred metres long, wasn’t it? Surely we must have walked that far by now...”

Almond shook her head. “We have walked fewer than four hundred metres. I count my steps – I have walked 458 paces, and I am quite short, yes? We continue to walk a little while yet, I think.”

Scarlet frowned. “Can we check that with SatNav?”

She shook her head. “SatNav is inoperative since we enter the tunnel. Something in the composition acts as an extremely effective reflector of radio waves – our cap microphones are also inoperative except for communication between ourselves. Even the signal booster does not help. I check three times.”

Scarlet grimaced, and shone the torch directly ahead of them, trying without success to make out any identifying features of the long tunnel through which they were walking. Apart from a slight regular corrugation, the walls were featureless, lacking any form of decoration in the form of either inscriptions or artwork that might offer a clue as to who created them, or why. The sound of their footsteps reverberated around them as they walked on, making them instinctively tread carefully and precisely, keeping unnecessary chatter to a minimum. Gradually a change in the pitch of the echoes became apparent, and Captain Blue, a few paces ahead of the other two, stopped momentarily and regarded Scarlet and Almond with questioning eyes – an expression that was returned.

“You feel it too, eh?”

Scarlet nodded. “Something’s changed. Something outside the tunnel, I think...”

He snapped his fingers. “Of course! We must have walked at least as far as the lake by now! We’re probably walking underneath it. But that would mean...”

His voice trailed away as he considered the implications. The length of the tunnel was 600 metres, and they must have walked almost that far by now... So where was the large metallic structure that Lieutenant Almond’s sensor had detected? *Underneath the lake...?* He raised the torch once more, and pointed it directly ahead. This time, instead of fading into the darkness, the beam struck something white and solid. Squinting, he realised he could also make out some form of insignia. Stopping momentarily, he glanced at the other two – was the mystery about to be solved? Turning to the front once more, he continued to walk on, consciously suppressing the instinct to hurry: if there was danger to be found anywhere, the end of the tunnel would be the obvious place for it to be waiting for them.

Slowly the door – if indeed that was what it was – loomed up in front of them, and he raised the torch once more to shine upon the insignia that it bore. It meant nothing to him, but beneath it in small precise letters were written the words:

ESCAPE HATCH 3

Enter Bulkhead Depressurization Code

Scarlet looked at Blue and Almond in astonishment.

“A aircraft? Crashed in the lake? Then the tunnel we’re just walked though...”

Blue nodded slowly.

“... must be some kind of escape chute. Or possibly a boarding tube – but why would it be so long? I mean, an aircraft wouldn’t need...”

He stepped up to the door and ran his fingers over it. On a whim he pushed... and was astonished to feel it begin to open inwards. He turned to look meaningfully at the other two, his expression taut.

“Come into my parlour...?”

Turning back to the hatch once more, he continued to push as it swung slowly inwards to reveal a small darkened chamber beyond. The glint of metal heralded the presence of a second door immediately beyond. An airlock? Motioning Scarlet and Almond to wait outside, he stepped into the small space and crossed to the second door, which again he pushed – this time without success.

“There’s a wheel to your left, Adam, just outside the torch’s beam. Try turning it.”

Blue took one look in the direction that Scarlet had indicated, and immediately shook his head.

“This is an airlock. It won’t open unless the outer hatch is secured shut. Decision time, everybody. Either we all enter it together, or we split up. Which is it to be?”

Scarlet stepped forward. “I’ll do it alone. If it traps me inside the worst that’ll happen is that I’ll be asphyxiated while you go for help. If the same happens to either of you, you could be killed. Once I’m on the other side of the inner hatch you can follow me.”

Blue considered briefly, then nodded. They swapped places, and Scarlet pulled the outer hatch closed behind him. Scarcely had the hatch closed than Blue’s epaulettes flashed red, and his cap mike swung into position, though Scarlet’s voice was barely audible above the blast of static that assailed his ears.

“I’m looking at a control panel in front of me on the other side of the outer hatch, Adam, and I’m assuming that it secures it. I’m about to activate the control that must be the one that does that. I’m letting you know in case something goes wrong and you have to force your way inside.”

“S.I.G. Captain Scarlet. Please describe every step you take to open the inner hatch: I may need to know how to open it in a hurry.”

“S.I.G. I’ve activated the control to secure the outer hatch: you should find that you now can’t open it.”

Blue pushed it as he had before; this time it didn’t budge.

“Confirmed. You should now be able to open the inner one by turning the wheel.”

There was a pause of perhaps half a minute, during which Blue could hear the sound of steady breathing and the occasional creak, indicating the turning of the wheel. Then...

“I’m through, Adam. It’s some kind of flying machine all right – but not one like I’ve ever seen before. There’s instrumentation inside that I don’t recognise, though the words are in English. You should be able to follow me through: it appears to be safe.”

Within ten minutes, Blue and Almond were through the airlock, and had joined Scarlet in surveying the interior of the machine in the light of the torch beams.

“Any idea what it is, Adam?”

Blue frowned. “If it’s an aircraft it’s of a type I’ve never seen before. It’s not even the sort of craft that might be a logical extension of an existing type. No - my guess is a spaceship.”

“But how the devil did it...?”

He held up his hand. “I haven’t got any of the answers yet. Let’s just put aside the question of how it got here, and how long it’s been here, for the time being, shall we? First things first. That looks like a control panel to the left of the door. Let’s see if we can find out what it does.”

He stepped over to the panel and inspected it in the light of his torch beam, his other hand hovering over the bank of switches and dials as he sought to decipher their functions. After a few moments he turned round, played the torch around the roof of the structure for a few seconds, turned back to the panel, smiled to himself and flicked four of the switches in rapid succession. Instantly the entire structure was flooded with light. He whistled in surprise.

“Illumination control panel – the schematic shows the positions of the lighting units in the roof. Didn’t expect them actually to be working though. Come on – let’s do a little exploring.”

They walked slowly down the corridor, pausing to inspect briefly each of a number of cabins that led from the main causeway. At the far end they stopped in front of a heavy metal door into which a substantial hole, just large enough for a man to pass through, had been cut. The edges of the hole were seared with scorch marks, and Captain Blue whistled.

“*That* was done with something having the power of a heavy-duty industrial-strength laser cannon. Looks like somebody wanted to get in there in a hurry: whoever did this would have been through that door in less than twenty seconds.”

Lieutenant Almond frowned, stooped down and picked up something from the shadows.

“Perhaps this is cargo ship. I find child’s toy.”

Scarlet looked at the miniature battle tank she held in her hands, and frowned.

“Interesting. Maybe they had children aboard, though whatever this vessel is, it seems to have a military feel to it to me. Leave it for the time being, Lieutenant. Shall we take a look inside?”

She continued fiddling with the device as the two captains stepped through the hole into the cabin beyond, her nimble fingers reaching into the undercarriage and prising off one of the side panels to reveal a block of solid-state circuitry within.

“One moment – I do not think this is toy. It looks more like...”

Scarlet’s face appeared in the doorway, his expression quizzical.

“Coming, Lieutenant?”

Almond stepped through the hole into the cabin beyond to join the two men, still absently weighing the toy in her hands. Blue nodded, his eyes darting around the room eagerly.

“Main control room. This is obviously the cockpit – look, this is the master navigation console; that one on the right must be the attitude control array, though I’ve never seen one like *this* before, and that console over there is obviously weaponry. Looks pretty sophisticated – it’s certainly not a cargo ship, Lieutenant. It’s some form of battle craft.”

He crossed over to the console he’d just identified as controlling the armaments and began to inspect it.

“Full complement of interceptors – forward and rear-facing, I think... ah!”

He sat down and began experimenting with the keypad. A few seconds later the screen above it blinked into life, and he muttered a grunt of satisfaction. A few moments later a menu appeared, and he began to work his way through a number of obvious combinations of keystrokes to make a selection.

“If I may, Captain Blue – I think perhaps...”

Lieutenant Almond placed the toy tank she was still carrying on the floor, leaned over his shoulder and dropped her fingers lightly onto the keyboard. A few seconds later a selection light appeared at the top of the menu, then rapidly moved down the list of options. Blue looked round at the rapt expression on her face, and grinned in appreciation.

“Like to sit down, Lieutenant?”

They swapped places, and she continued typing at the keyboard, at first falteringly but with increasing confidence as the minutes passed. Captain Blue watched the screens full of information as they followed each other with mounting interest.

“Online tactical sequencer... the command language is English at least, though the syntax is strange... automatic configuration control... online guidance... molecular disrupters – what? Molecular disrupters? Ever heard of molecular disrupters, Captain Scarlet?”

Scarlet shook his head. “Don’t think so. Maybe it’s just another name for another type of armament that we *do* know about. What’s *that* one all about, Adam?”

Blue frowned. “Laser cannon. Again, I’m not aware that we’ve got anything comparable, but the principle’s straightforward enough... *Jesus Christ!*”

Scarlet looked up in astonishment and concern – Captain Blue wasn’t prone to swearing unless something was *seriously* wrong.

“What’s up, Adam?”

Blue pointed at the display. “The power output of this device! It’s unbelievable! If I’ve understood these calibrations correctly – and I’m fairly sure I have – this ship is carrying a device that’s capable of beaming enough energy into deep space to blow a hole a mile deep in the surface of Pluto!”

“*What?* Are you certain about that?”

Blue shook his head as if to clear it. “Not absolutely – but I’d put a year’s salary on it. What do you think, Lieutenant?”

Almond nodded. “I concur. This is a power monitor that expresses the space-time disruption of the device into a percentage of the output capacity of the sun. If anything, I

would suggest that the assessment is an underestimate. From space, this weapon could melt a hole in the Earth's crust in less than one tenth of a second."

Scarlet crossed over to the bank of computers that were arrayed against the wall to the left of the door.

"Any chance we can download the memory banks, Lieutenant?"

She joined him, casting an expert eye over the connections, and shook her head.

"Not in the short term. Every panel I have inspected to date is of a design with which I am not familiar. I am satisfied that this vessel was not manufactured by any organisation of the World Government, and I do not think it can have been built by any of the few unaffiliated powers. There is not one connection here that I recognise... no, wait! This unit here..."

She paused, and peered at a small control unit that was perched on top of one of the work surfaces. Kneeling down in front of the console, she opened a panel and poked her fingers into the circuitry. A few moments later she extracted them again, this time holding a pair of crocodile-clips to which were attached a morass of wires soldered to a printed circuit board.

"This unit is not an integral part of the ship, I think. I am wondering if maybe somebody has been here before us."

Blue's eyes narrowed.

"Why do you say that, Lieutenant?"

"This is an asynchronous bitstream adaptive collation unit. We call them abacuses for obvious reasons – they are developed at CalTech some years ago to facilitate the interrogation of mutually incompatible neural networks: I am working as research assistant there at time of post-implementation development phase."

Scarlet frowned. "What does it *do*, Lieutenant? In English please."

"Permits data transfer between ship's computer and ours – I show you, yes?"

She took off her cap, extended a small connection from it and plugged it into one of the device's sockets. Flicking a switch on the side of the unit, she rapidly scanned the small display on its face.

"This unit has been used to scan the ship's central computer bank for data on propulsion units within last two months. I download this information to my communicator, I think."

She flicked another switch, waited a few seconds, then disconnected her cap from the device and put it back on her head.

"Cap now contains five terabytes of data on ship's propulsion technology. I upload this to Cloudbase as soon as communication capability is restored."

She peered at the circuitry and nodded to herself. "This is adaptation of model on which I work. The architecture of such devices was years ahead of its time: indeed, when I left to join Spectrum I still did not understand it fully. The consultant who was employed

as the solutions architect on the project was unquestionably a genius of the highest order. I would have given much to meet him.”

Scarlet considered. “Perhaps we should try to contact him. Apart from anything else he might be able to give us an insight into how one of his creations came to be inside a spaceship that’s apparently been at the bottom of a lake for the last three centuries! What was his name, Lieutenant?”

She frowned. “I think it is very strange that such a brilliant man should be so little known, even among workers in his own field. I hear his name mentioned only once – it was... Harken? Huckenbar? Hucklebuck...”

Captain Blue swung round, galvanised.

“*Hackenbacker? Hiram Hackenbacker?*”

She nodded vigorously. “Hiram Hackenbacker - that is correct. You know this man, Captain?”

Blue uttered a short sharp grunt. “Damn right I know him! We all had tea with him this afternoon – he’s the man Lady Penelope introduced to us this afternoon as ‘Brains’.”

Almond’s eyes opened wide. “*What? But... that would mean...*”

Blue nodded grimly.

“Yes, it *would*, wouldn’t it!” He turned to Scarlet, his face grave. “Something tells me we’ve got a BIG problem on our hands, Paul.”

Scarlet frowned. “I agree! But what does it all *mean*, Adam?”

Blue began pacing up and down the cabin, deep in thought.

“Well, for openers, it would have to mean that Lady Penelope almost certainly isn’t being straight with us. We stumble on an underground tunnel that leads from the basement of this house to some kind of alien spaceship at the bottom of her ladyship’s lake. Then before we’ve even managed to get inside it, this Hackenbacker guy, who just *happens* to be a world authority on both hypervelocity propulsion units and ABACUs – one of which we find actually *inside* it – turns up on the doorstep to have tea with her ladyship back there! That’s *not* a coincidence!”

Scarlet nodded slowly. “Yes, it does seem rather to be pushing credibility to the limits, doesn’t it? All right, I’ll buy it – though it seems a bit far-fetched to suppose that Lady Penelope is anything other than the scatterbrained hangover from a bygone era that she appears to be. But if she isn’t...”

His voice trailed away, and Blue took up the thought.

“... it would suggest some kind of conspiracy. A conspiracy of impressive proportions too. It would mean that this Hackenbacker guy already knows of the existence of this ship, and had already been inside it at least once; maybe for all we know many times. The presence of Lieutenant Almond’s abacus over there suggests that he’s been trying to access the synaptic traces of its neural systems – that is, he’s been trying to download the memory core of its main computer bank. And we know the guy’s a genius. Put that lot together and start speculating. To me, it spells trouble with a capital T.”

Scarlet frowned. “Aren’t you overreacting a little, Adam? We both spent a good half hour talking to him – he didn’t exactly strike me as the sort of mad scientist who would try to conquer the world with lethal viruses and death rays! Perhaps he’s just curious...”

Blue snorted.

“Appearances can be deceptive. I’m wondering to what use he might have put whatever he’s learned from this vessel. The technology of this ship is *way* ahead of anything we’ve got – even the metal the boarding tube is made from is unknown to us! Just think what a craft like this could be used for in the wrong hands – even the weaponry we’ve managed to understand in less than an hour is capable of decimating the planet! At the very *least* we’ve got to get both him and her ladyship into custody – protective or otherwise – and have Spectrum seal off the entire area around this house and its grounds until we’ve been able to establish the extent of the threat that it poses.”

He straightened up, his face grave.

“I’ve seen enough. We have to get clear of this vessel and report everything we’ve seen to Cloudbase as soon as possible. Shall we go?”

They filed through the burnt hole in the door that led into the control room, and returned to the hatch leading to the boarding tube. And stopped in front of it, catching each others’ confused expressions with narrowed eyes. The hatch was shut and sealed.

§

Doctor Fawn regarded his patient with increasing unease.

“You’re not making sense, Captain – and the effort you’re putting into trying to communicate with us is hampering your recovery. Please lie still – whatever it is that you have to say to us can wait...”

Scarlet shivered violently, trying to respond through lips that were still barely capable of framing the syllables that he wanted to utter.

“N.....no... can’t wait... must stop...”

The Spectrum nurse standing behind Doctor Fawn approached the bed carrying a hypodermic in her hand, and he squinted at it in alarm, trying to roll away from it. The doctor shook his head reassuringly.

“It’s a simple sedative, captain. It’ll help your body to recuperate – if you’ve really been frozen for a few centuries as Cloudbase’s physicists assure me you have, there can’t be anything that you need to tell us that can’t wait a few more hours.”

Scarlet’s body convulsed, and he tried once more to distance himself from the needle.

“Please... lis...listen... You must not...”

The words died away as the needle was inserted gently into his arm, and his body slumped into unconsciousness once more. Fawn frowned with concern, and turned to the orderly.

“He’s certainly very concerned about something, isn’t he? What did you make of all that, nurse?”

She shook her head. “There’s obviously something that he doesn’t want us to do, but I can’t make any sense of it. Is he usually this afraid of injections, Doctor?”

“No, he isn’t – he isn’t concerned about them at all. Hardly surprising when you consider his unique metabolism – no, I don’t think that was it. I think he just didn’t want to be put to sleep because he wanted to tell us something. And what was all that stuff earlier about *her* being here? Whatever it was, it was enough to have the effect of starting the recovery process prematurely, I’m certain of it. It was almost as if he *sensed* something in the corridor, wasn’t it? Something that frightened him so badly that it actually jolted him back to life...”

He glanced at his watch, and nodded.

“Whatever it was, we’ll know in a couple of hours – by which time maybe he’ll be in a better condition to tell us what this is all about. Let me know when he starts to regain consciousness, nurse. In the meantime I’d better report back to Cloudbase before the Colonel demands a status report...”

§

Captain Blue glared at the red light flashing on the console in front of him for the twentieth time, slammed down the lever and thumped the door in frustration.

“Nothing! It’s obviously been sealed from the outside.”

Scarlet frowned. “But why? Nobody even knew we had *found* the ship, let alone that we were inside it!”

Blue regarded him with sombre eyes.

“It looks as though somebody knows we’re here. Maybe they came down after us and found the tunnel leading from the cellar. Or maybe we triggered some form of alarm once we got inside. It doesn’t matter – the end result is the same. We’ve got two questions to answer – who and why. As far as the second one is concerned, I’d guess that the immediate reason is to prevent us from reporting back to Cloudbase on what we’ve stumbled across here. Whether it’s more sinister than that remains to be seen – after all, they can’t keep us here indefinitely. And as to the question of who...”

Scarlet raised an eyebrow. “Her ladyship?”

“Either her or that so-called financial advisor of hers. Or maybe both of them – I don’t know. Either way, let’s consider our situation. We’re not short of air down here, so we don’t need to worry about asphyxiating, but we’ve no food or water. We don’t know how long we’re going to be kept here, so we’ve got to find a way out before we begin to dehydrate. We’re okay for several hours at the very least, it seems to me – and by that time Rhapsody will presumably have started asking questions about where we are. So all we’ve got to do is wait a little...”

Captain Blue looked up sharply.

“They’ll have thought of that, Paul. Even if it’s this Hackenbacker guy on his own, he still knows she’s one of us. I’m getting worried – not for *us*, but for *her*.”

Scarlet regarded him thoughtfully.

“I can’t believe that either of them would harm her, Adam. Rhapsody’s a personal friend of her ladyship, and this Brains guy seems to be the mildest-mannered man imaginable.”

Blue shook his head.

“They’ve got to do *something*. They’ll realise that Rhapsody will come looking for us if we don’t show up this evening, though it’s probably safe to guess that they’ll have closed the door to the secret passage, so she won’t find us easily. But her *next* move will be to contact Cloudbase – and that will bring an entire squad of security personnel down on the place like a ton of bricks! They’ll anticipate that, so they’ve got to incapacitate her somehow – and *that’s* what I’m worried about. We have to warn her.”

Scarlet took a deep breath.

“Well, warning her isn’t possible – our cap mikes are still inoperative. Very well – we need to find a way to get through that door, everyone. I’ll take any suggestions...”

§

“I-I still don’t like it... er, Lady Penelope. I am confident that the ship still has... er, secrets that I have never, er, managed to unravel. I’m very much afraid they could possibly... er, stumble on something extremely dangerous...”

Her ladyship considered the point thoughtfully.

“We have to make sure they don’t have time to discover anything, Brains – or if they do, that they aren’t able to report it to their superiors. The gas we can release into the ship from my study will render them unconscious within five minutes, I understand, after which we can recover them and erase their memories using that substance you brought with you from Tracy Island. Are you able to deprogram this piece of equipment of theirs that discovered the underground conduit?”

Her companion peered at the control panel through his heavy spectacles.

“Oh, er, certainly! The device is, er... not particularly complicated – I can prepare a duplicate scan from which the signature of the, er... concealed entrance has been removed. The process will take about two hours. But what about your, er... fr-friend? Didn’t you say that... sh-she is a member of, er... Spectrum herself?”

“Dianne? Well, provided she doesn’t know about our friends’ little discovery down here I don’t see any reason to have to subject her to the same amnesiac treatment. But we’ll have to move quickly, before she comes looking for them. Come along, Brains – I think we’d better get started.”

She led the way up the stairs into the hallway and over to the study, closing the door gently behind them. Running her fingers along a line of grotesque miniature wooden gargoyles that adorned her writing desk, she picked out the seventh one and slipped her

index finger into its mouth. Silently the desk's roll-top cover descended to reveal a control panel with a monitor beneath, which flickered into life as they watched to show a panoramic view of the interior of the structure containing the three Spectrum officers. In the middle of the picture, the pacing figure of Captain Blue could clearly be seen, his head bowed deep in thought, while on the extreme left the diminutive shape of Lieutenant Almond could just be made out, apparently holding a small device which she was evidently discussing animatedly with Captain Scarlet. Lady Penelope considered the scene for a few moments, paused, and then reached for a dial.

“Concentration six, I think...”

§

Doctor Fawn glanced up at the faint sound that heralded the return to consciousness of his patient. Stepping quickly across the room, he leaned over the inert form of Scarlet, lying on the operating table, still fully clothed in the garments in which he was discovered.

“Are you able to speak, Captain?”

The patient's eyes slowly flickered open, still clearly betraying the effort needed to achieve even that amount of movement. Doctor Fawn raised a hand to his face, and gently brushed away the beads of sweat from his forehead.

“Are you able to tell us what is it that you were talking about earlier, Captain? Take your time – there's no hurry.”

“Where... where is...?”

“You're in Kiel Hospital, Captain. Kiel in Germany.”

“Kiel... yes... she... she died... in Kiel... must... stop...”

“Died in Kiel? Captain – who died in Kiel? *Who* died in Kiel, Captain Scarlet?”

“Killed... here... long ago... she... was shot...Mysteronised...”

Fawn leaned, his attention now fully focussed on his patient's words.

“Mysterons, Captain? Where? Here in this hospital?”

“Not... here... many years... ago... different... everything different...”

Doctor Fawn frowned. “Well, if there was ever any doubt about the patient's identity, there isn't any more. Conscious thirty seconds, and he's already talking about Mysterons.” He shook his head. “Obviously he's confused. And yet if the Mysterons are involved in some way... Captain Scarlet – are you trying to say that you sensed a Mysteron presence in the corridor outside this operating theatre earlier?”

“Different... time... different... universe...help her... save her... let her live...”

Fawn blinked. “You're still not making sense, Captain. *Who* is this person you want us to save? Who are you talking about?”

“Mysteron... find her...”

“Captain – *how* are we to find this Mysteron? Who is she? What does she look like?”

A warning beep from the side of the bed caused the nurse to step over to the console. A moment later she turned back and shook her head.

“We’re losing him, Doctor. He’s lapsing back into unconsciousness.”

Fawn frowned. “Can we keep him awake a few more moments, nurse? This could be important.”

She shook her head. “I do not believe he will respond, Doctor – and further drugs in this state might harm him permanently. The recommended doses are considerably lower than those already administered.”

Fawn considered for a moment, then looked down at his patient, now unconscious once more, accepting defeat.

“Okay – let’s wait. We’ll continue this conversation when you’re ready, Captain. Then maybe we’ll find out what this is all about...”

§

Lieutenant Almond frowned at the little device she held in her hands.

“I do not believe this is a toy, Captain. The electronics it contains are too sophisticated: they resemble the focusing armature of a high-intensity laser. I am thinking this is perhaps a weapon.”

Scarlet squinted into the gloom in the direction of the control cabin they had so recently vacated, where the illumination beyond the bulkhead leading into it cast the melted hole in the middle of it into sharp relief. His eyes returned briefly to the toy tank in her hands before meeting her own.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Lieutenant?”

Her eyebrows rose.

“Ach – it is impossible! Such a power output could not possibly...”

Her voice died away as the faint but unmistakable hiss of gas reached her ears, and her eyes widened in alarm. Simultaneously Scarlet’s eyes began streaming, and he began to cough.

“Gas! Lieutenant – is it possible that that thing you’ve got in your hands *is* the device that cut through the control room bulkhead? Quickly! We’ve only got a few seconds!”

She shook her head in bewilderment.

“I do not know! I cannot see how it is possible... it is so small...”

“Try to make it work! See if you can cut a hole in the hatch - it’s our only chance!”

She dropped to the floor, fumbling with the little tank, desperately trying to find a switch, a button, a lever... anything to activate it, pointing the gun turret upwards towards the sealed hatch. In the corner of her eye she could see Captain Blue silently beginning to collapse into a heap on the ground, closely followed by Scarlet.

Suddenly there was a brilliant flash, and a dazzling beam emanated from the turret, bathing the hatch in a phosphorescent glow as the metal began to dissolve before her eyes. An instant later, a second glow became apparent through the rapidly widening hole in the hatch, and she realised with horror that the incredibly powerful beam had not only penetrated the first obstacle but had passed on through the metallic lining of the tunnel beyond. Before she could deactivate the little device, a sizzling blast of steam forced its way back into the ship, closely followed by a trickle, and then a torrent of water. Belatedly she realised that the beam had cut a sizeable hole in the top of the boarding tube, and that the lake was now pouring down into both the tube and the ship.

§

On the monitor, Lady Penelope watched, appalled, as the water continued to pour into the ship's galley. Within seconds it was up to the ankles of the three Spectrum officers; a few moments later it was up to their knees.

“Come along, Brains – we have to help them...”

She rapidly turned the dial back to and beyond its original setting, swung round in her chair... and found herself looking down the barrel of a compact pistol, held rock-steady at eye level by a young woman with auburn hair.

“Please sit down, Auntie. I dislike the bangs these things make just as much as you do, but I beg you not to think that I won't use it if I have to. Where are my friends, and what have you done to them?”

Lady Penelope shook her head urgently.

“My dear Dianne – we really don't have time for this. *Please* put that gun down – your friends are in very great trouble, and I'm trying to help. I'm afraid it's partly my fault that they got into this mess in the first place, but that's beside the point now – we have to get them out of there as quickly as possible, and I can hardly do that if you won't allow me to rise from this chair, now can I?”

Rhapsody gestured towards the control panel.

“I was walking past the door when I heard you mentioning my name. You've just tried to asphyxiate them, haven't you? Why? And where are they?”

“My dear, the gas was perfectly harmless, and it's being extracted as we speak – but if we don't get them out they may drown. They're in a spacecraft underneath the lake, and it's filling rapidly with water. If you don't believe me, look for yourself.”

Rhapsody looked down at the monitor, and caught her breath as the reality of the situation unfolding in front of her eyes became clear. As she watched, the three officers beginning to haul themselves up and help each other to move away from the hatch, seeking and finding higher ground towards the rear of the ship.

Lady Penelope turned to the nervous-looking man at her side.

“Brains – are there any compartments they'll be able to seal themselves in back there to protect themselves from the rising water?”

The other considered, then nodded.

“Er, yes, Lady Penelope – the... the weaponry section can be sealed fr-from the inside, but the, er, air supply will be... severely restricted...”

“How long, Brains? How much air will they have?”

“App... approximately two hours. Three at the most.”

Rhapsody looked at her friend with widening eyes.

“Auntie – what have you *done*? We have to get a Spectrum emergency recovery squad down here as soon as possi...ugh!”

The sentence was never finished, as she found herself caught in a vice-like grip from behind, simultaneously disarming and incapacitating her with seemingly effortless ease. Lady Penelope rose from her chair, extracted an expensive-looking powder puff from her handbag, opened it and held it gently over Rhapsody’s nose until she lost consciousness a few seconds later.

“Thank you, Parker.”

She looked down at his young female captive, now hanging in his arms like a puppet with cut strings. “I’m dreadfully sorry, my dear – I truly am – but I’m afraid we really *do* have to do this my way...”

She turned away from the unconscious Angel, returned to her chair, leaned forward and pressed a button on the console in front of her.

“Calling International Rescue...”

§

Captain Blue looked around the compartment into which they had all escaped from the torrent of water cascading into the ship, and tried to estimate its volume. Two hours? Three? The water was already beginning to trickle into the compartment around his feet, and he reluctantly pulled the bulkhead closed and sealed it.

“That’s it – our clock’s ticking. Either we find a way out of here that enables us to rise to the surface of the lake, or we remain here until someone finds us. I suggest we see what equipment we’ve got that could help us to survive. Lieutenant Almond – do you still have that laser beam projector or whatever it is?”

She nodded, and held up the little toy tank. “I still have it. I try it on the roof, yes?”

He shook his head. “No. We don’t know if this compartment lies directly beneath the upper part of the hull. If it does, we’d probably drown, and if it doesn’t, we could find ourselves in a worse situation than we are now, with no means of separating ourselves from the rising water. Let’s see what else we’ve got here.”

He walked over to a bank of futuristic-looking equipment stacked against the far wall, experimentally flicked a switch on a nearby computer console, and was somewhat surprised to see the screen burst into life.

Scarlet joined him at the console, and frowned.

“All this equipment seems to be in a far better condition than the supposed age of the ship would suggest. Do you think our stuttering friend back at the house has been making regular spring-cleaning trips?”

Captain Blue started keying in commands in the same syntax as those found to produce results in the command cabin.

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Quite an Aladdin’s cave, isn’t it? I can access the main databanks from here, and... ah! There it is – the tactical ops targeting array. According to this, we should be able to fire most if not all of the ship’s weapons from here just as easily as from the bridge. Perhaps we can attract someone’s attention up there with a few pyrotechnics. Lieutenant Almond – could you assist me please? I need to determine what – if anything – we can activate without blowing up the ship.”

Scarlet looked up in surprise. “Would we be risking that?”

Blue nodded. “We’re underwater. The ship was built for combat in space or in the atmosphere - the shockwaves caused by the attempted launch of a physical object could destroy us – it would be like firing a torpedo against a solid brick wall at point-blank range.”

“Is there any chance we could actually raise the ship off the bottom of the lake?”

He shook his head.

“None at all – I’ve just tried. All engines are inoperative – the ship belly-flopped into the lake following a total failure of all thrusters and sank to the bottom. We couldn’t lift her so much as a millimetre without carrying out extensive repairs – but to do that, we’d need to get her out of the lake. Chicken and egg situation. Unless...”

“Unless what, Adam?”

Captain Blue frowned, deep in thought.

“We’d only have to get her to the surface, wouldn’t we? After that we could cut our way out of this compartment with that toy tank of Lieutenant Almond’s. I’m wondering if maybe we could program the laser on the hull to slice through the nacelles that contain the main thrusters. Without the extra weight the ship might just float off the bottom. Any chance, Lieutenant?”

She frowned.

“Not good, I think. The system is protected by very complex security program. I need time to decipher – impossible to say how long.”

Captain Scarlet smiled grimly. “We’ve got about three hours before our air runs out, Lieutenant. Not that I’m trying to put you under any pressure...”

§

“I’d say they’ve got about three hours before their air runs out, Brains – and Thunderbird Two will arrive with Thunderbird Four in two hours and twenty-five minutes. It’s going to be close.”

Lady Penelope's companion looked up from his console with a sombre expression on his face.

"Actually, it-it isn't only the, er, time factor that is worrying me, Lady Pe-Penelope. I am concerned about the, er, location in which they have taken refuge. It houses a direct link to the main weaponry fi-firing controls. If we could only, er, get to the cockpit I could disable it, but there's no longer any means of entering the sh-ship other than from Thunderbird Four. For that re-reason I've requested that Virgil allow me to ac-accompany Gordon when he descends to the sh-ship – I can board Thunderbird Four from the jetty after Virgil has, er, dropped the pod. It's vitally important that all the computing systems are sh-shut down, and Gordon will be otherwise occupied."

Lady Penelope regarded her companion thoughtfully.

"Are you saying they could accidentally make matters worse for themselves, Brains?"

The bespectacled man nodded nervously.

"It's p-possible. If only we ha-had a communications, er, link to the ship's interior, I could warn them, but we don't – and the first they will know that we're trying to rescue them will be the s-sound of Thunderbird Four cutting through the hull. If they panic..."

"How much damage could they do, Brains?"

"I'm afraid I, er, don't know! I've n-never been able to crack the security system that protects the w-weaponry control array. I just know that if they succeed, the consequences c-could be, er, very grave indeed."

Lady Penelope relaxed visibly. "Well, that doesn't sound too worrying, Brains. If *you*'ve never worked out how to do it, I don't imagine they'll have much better luck..."

§

Lieutenant Almond exhaled, frowning with concentration.

"I have now isolated the arming mechanism and targeting array, Captain Blue. The primary firing sequence is encrypted using a variant of the Diffie-Hellman procedure: identifying the prime factors used to construct the key could take days, even using the computing power available to us from this console."

Captain Blue scowled. "We don't have days, Lieutenant. Just getting this far has taken almost two hours. We've got sixty minutes at most – so either we find a way to bypass the security system or we're dead."

She shook her head. "Is not possible. Too many combinations."

Scarlet frowned. "But you could actually *do* it, given enough time?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Number of possible prime factors is very large, but not infinite. Is limited by storage capacity of the onboard computer – but this does not help. I find records of previous attempts to crack this code here. They tell of searches taking many days."

She punched a sequence of keys, and a tabular array appeared on the screen in front of them.

“This column shows solution, and this column shows time taken to crack code. You see how long this takes? Is too long, I think.”

Scarlet squinted at the screen and pointed. “What’s that column on the far left, Lieutenant?”

She followed his finger. “Is date of search. Why?”

“Because it seems to me that there’s a pattern there. Can you plot the time taken to crack the code against the date the attempt was made?”

“No problem. One moment please.”

Her fingers flew across the keyboard. Seconds later the table was replaced by a crude graph, across which a myriad of symbols were scattered in a vaguely sinusoidal wave. Scarlet nodded.

“I thought so. Though why there would be a relationship between the date and the time, I can’t...”

Blue chuckled. “I can. I think somebody’s been careless in their choice of encryption key! They’ve usually picked one of roughly the same order of magnitude as the last – probably too lazy to turn more than a few pages in their codebook. Lieutenant – would there be a simple relationship between the size of the prime factor and the time it would take to crack the code?”

She frowned. “This depends on algorithm used to search for prime factor. If search starts with smallest possible factor and works upwards, then maybe yes.”

Captain Blue nodded with satisfaction.

“That’s what I thought. Look at the graph – the last attempt found a solution about four-fifths the way between the bottom and the top of that wave. Suppose we began a search about two-thirds the way between the smallest and the largest one found so far, and worked upwards. Would that shorten the search?”

She nodded. “Yes... but is still a very wide range of possible solutions to cover. And we cannot be certain that we start in the right place...”

“It’s better than nothing – and it could be the only chance we’ve got. Do it, Lieutenant.”

Lieutenant Almond nodded, and her fingers started flying across the keyboard.

§

Doctor Fawn observed his patient closely as he slowly raised a glass to his lips.

“Be very careful, Captain: take extremely small sips, and take your time swallowing. Nobody has ever been cryogenically frozen for anything like as long as you have and survived – and I’m not at all sure you’d have done so yourself had it not been for

your unique constitution. Though I have to say that your innate healing process seems to have kicked in now; all your life signs are stabilising. I'd say another hour and you'll be back to normal."

Scarlet nodded. "I feel fine, Doctor – if still a little cold. What were you saying earlier about what I was trying to say as I was recovering consciousness?"

Fawn frowned, watching his patient for any signs of the panic that had earlier assailed him.

"Something about a Mysteron, Captain – a female Mysteron. And it was really bothering you. As if you were somehow sensing her presence in the corridor outside the operating theatre. Your reaction was sufficiently volatile to bring about a premature initiation of your body's recovery from cryogenic stasis. I'd be avoiding discussing this with you at all if it wasn't for the possible consequences of a Mysteron presence in this hospital. Your ability to sense..."

Scarlet shook his head.

"Don't worry, Doctor – she's not here now. She couldn't possibly be – so why I would have sensed her presence here I've no idea."

Fawn looked at him sharply. "Do I gather you know who she is, Captain?"

Scarlet's eyes lost their sharpness, and he looked beyond the medic into the middle distance.

"Yes, Doctor. I know who she is. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I know who she *was*."

The doctor frowned. "She's no longer a threat, then?"

Scarlet blinked out of his reverie, and turned back to face him again.

"I don't think she was *ever* a threat, Doctor. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I'm wondering if any of us would be here now if it hadn't been for her. There's so much more I would like to have known about where she came from, and why."

Fawn peered at him. "Captain Scarlet – who *was* she?"

Scarlet shook his head, and lay back against the pillow.

"Don't worry about it, Doctor - it doesn't matter now. It was all a long time ago..."

§

"Thunderbird Two is about to overfly the house, Lady Penelope."

"So I see, Brains. Parker will drive you over to the lake: you'll need to get aboard Thunderbird Four just as soon as it emerges from the pod. There's a small jetty that you can use as a landing stage – the water should be deep enough for Gordon to navigate."

The scientist nodded.

"Getting down to the ship should take no more than a few minutes, and Thunderbird Four's laser cutting equipment should enable us to gain access to the, er, interior within ten

minutes at most. We know from our previous re-research on the metal from which the ship is constructed that conventional equipment would be ineffective, but our laser cutters are constructed from blueprints found inside the ship's own d-databank."

Lady Penelope watched as the sleek Rolls-Royce emerged from the garage and glided down the drive towards the house, where she and her companion stood at the main door awaiting its arrival.

"Tell me, Brains – how many lives do you think the knowledge we've obtained from your researches on that ship has saved over the years?"

Her companion considered.

"Certainly hundreds, Lady Penelope. Possibly th-thousands. Time after time our ability to effect a rescue depends, er, critically on our equipment being s-superior in some regard to that of the conventional rescue services. Faster, lighter, tougher, more durable – sometimes all four. And we are still learning all the time – the value of the data contained in the ship's memory b-banks is beyond computation. It is extremely fortunate that we discovered it before..."

"... before somebody else who might have put it to a less worthy use. I know, Brains."

She glanced at her watch as the car's gull-wing door rose to admit the scientist.

"Once you board Thunderbird Four, you'll need to work quickly, Brains. The oxygen will be becoming extremely depleted in that compartment by now..."

§

Lieutenant Almond tried to focus on the screen through increasingly blurred vision.

"I now have access to the exceptionally powerful laser cannon that we found earlier, but there is something that concerns me. These settings indicate that the cannon is operational already."

Captain Blue peered at the screen with difficulty.

"That's impossible. Where would it be trained? Anything in its path would be incinerated!"

She nodded, her breathing increasingly laboured.

"I... know this. And yet these instruments indicate that the beam is not only active, but has been functioning on minimal power for long time. I do not... I do not know for how long."

Scarlet shook his head to try to clear it.

"Maybe we could use... the beam to vaporise enough of the water around this vessel to create steam to attract attention. Do we know the location of the actual cannon itself, Lieutenant?"

She tuned to the keyboard and resumed interrogating the system for a few more moments.

“The cannon is located immediately above this compartment, on the external hull of the vessel. I have trained it on the main engine section, though I cannot... I cannot be certain that the aim is correct...”

“We’re out of time, Lieutenant – do whatever you can. Can you activate it?”

She shook her head. “As I say – the computer believes the cannon is already active. But I can increase the strength of the beam – shall I do this?”

Blue nodded. “Only a minimal amount – remember what we discovered about the potential of this thing earlier? I don’t want to risk blasting anything at the other end of the solar system to atoms. Take as long as you need to get it right, as long as you get it working as soon as possible, Lieutenant.”

The faintest ghost of a smile flickered across her lips.

“I try not to vaporise any planets while being as quick as I can. I increase power... now!”

Her hand moved falteringly towards the control as she struggled to concentrate on the screen ahead of her. Her fingers scraped the dial, and a faint hum became audible.

“Is... working – but I do not know how we see effect...”

Blue shook his head.

“We can’t. We’ll just have to try increasing the power in stages and hope we’ve got it right. Do it, Lieutenant.”

She reached out and turned the dial once more. The pitch of the hum rose slightly, and she looked questioningly at Captain Blue through increasingly blurred eyes.

“Again, Lieutenant.”

She turned to the control with an effort, and reached towards it. As her fingers touched it, her eyes closed and her head went limp. Without a sound, she collapsed at the console and sank slowly to the floor, her hand dragging past the dial as she did so. Instantly the pitch of the hum increased alarmingly, and an intense vibration began to build up inside the compartment. Simultaneously a wisp of smoke began to emanate from the console. Attempting to shout a warning, Scarlet staggered over to the unconscious girl and dragged her away from the instruments, rolling her over towards the wall and attempting to shield her with his body as flames started to spring out of the console. Seconds later it disintegrated in a shower of explosions, hurling Captain Blue across the room and against the far wall, where he lost consciousness just seconds after Scarlet and Lieutenant Almond, together with a pile of equipment into which they had collided, faded away into thin air...

§

Rhapsody slowly regained consciousness to discover herself deposited on a luxurious Louis XV *chaise longue* in the corner of Lady Penelope’s living room. On the other side of the coffee table, her host was seated in her favourite armchair, regarding her thoughtfully.

“Hello, my dear – welcome back to the land of the living. I’ve most awfully sorry about that, but it really was *very* necessary that you didn’t delay the rescue. I’m afraid you’ll just have to take my word that there simply wasn’t time to explain. Please don’t worry about your friends – they’re being rescued as we speak.”

Rhapsody shook her head in bewilderment.

“Auntie – what is going on here? What *is* this thing at the bottom of your lake, and why have you gone to such enormous lengths to prevent us from finding it? I mean, you didn’t even know it was there yourself until we told you about it! What’s going *on*, for heaven’s sake?”

Lady Penelope inclined her head apologetically.

“I’m afraid I’m guilty of a little deception there, my dear. We’ve known about the ship for many years – even though we’ve never been able to discover where it came from, or how it came to be there. Brains has managed to discover many of its secrets over the years, but the flight recorder was irreparably damaged in the crash, and he’s therefore never been able to access the ship’s log. But what we *do* know about it is that it originates from Earth – but not the Earth we know. It’s an Earth with a completely different history to ours – one in which mankind has made scientific advances that are decades, if not centuries, ahead of our own.”

“But that’s crazy! What do you mean, it’s not from the Earth we know? Are you saying it’s come back from the future?”

Lady Penelope shook her head.

“Actually, from the data we’ve been able to extract from its computer banks, it appears to have been built in the year 2047, which is over 35 years ago. No: it doesn’t come from the future at all – and yet it incorporates technology that makes ours look distinctly primitive in comparison. Brains tells me that it originates from what he calls a ‘parallel universe’ – which I don’t understand at all, even though he’s tried to explain it to me several times. I just accept that it exists – and I’m *extremely* glad that it does, because over the years it’s helped to save thousands of lives.”

Her friend’s matter-of-fact tone had the effect of causing Rhapsody’s anger to begin to evaporate. Despite herself, she arched an eyebrow. “How?”

“By allowing us to use the technology it contains to help mankind. I was present when the ship was discovered, you know. It was my sixteenth birthday party, and we were playing sardines – all rather silly really. I’d hidden myself away in the cellar, and I was found by a friend of mine – an awfully clever friend who was visiting us from America at the time. You met him over tea yesterday afternoon.

“We were trying to find a better place to hide when he stumbled across the secret door that concealed a passageway under the lake. I still don’t really understand how he realised it was there – apparently the brickwork had been constructed using some sort of mathematical pattern which he recognised. The pattern told him which brick had to be moved to open the door, so he tried it, and it worked...”

“Well anyway, to cut a long story short, our first reaction was to keep the secret to ourselves. I didn’t want to tell my parents because I thought they’d probably just go to the

police about it, and I wanted to explore it on my own first. But Brains was already talking to a family friend of my father's about an incredibly ambitious scheme of his to help humanity – and he could see that such a scheme could actually be put into practice if the secrets the ship contained could be unlocked. I managed to persuade Mummy and Daddy to invite him to come and look after the house for them while they were flying away on holiday for a few days so that he and Brains could find out more about the ship at their leisure. I was supposed to be going away with my parents, but I pretended to be ill at the last minute so I could join in the fun.

“That decision changed the course of my life. Even in just the space of an afternoon, Brains discovered that the ship contained examples of technology that even *he* couldn't understand properly, and we realised that so much time would be needed to investigate the ship thoroughly that Mummy and Daddy had to be told about it. We called the hotel at which they would be staying, and left a message asking them to contact us as soon as they landed.”

Her eyes fell, and her smile faded.

“But they never did. The plane in which they were travelling crashed on landing, and nobody was able to cut their way into the wreckage before the engines exploded. If a well-equipped rescue team been on-hand quickly enough, maybe they might have been saved – but it arrived too late. If I'd been on board, I would have died too.”

She looked up again, and regarded her young friend sombrely.

“That was the catalyst, you know. If we had any doubts about what we were about to try to do, that tragedy dispelled them. And we *did* make it work. We really did.”

Rhapsody shook her head. “Auntie – I still don't understand. What *was* this grand scheme your friend had? Who *are* these friends of yours?”

The older woman smiled.

“Some wonderful people, my dear. Some very, very wonderful people. Would you let me get you a glass of mineral water, my dear? That little personal protection device of mine makes one's throat awfully dry, doesn't it?”

Rhapsody nodded angrily.

“Yes, it *does* just a bit! And talking of which, you really don't imagine you're going to get away with this, do you? It seems to me that you've done your absolute best to thwart this mission from the outset! I mean, what on earth can have possessed you to *do* such a thing? We're officers in a World Government organisation, and here you are treating us like a bunch of crooks out to steal your little secret! I'm *really* sorry, Auntie, but I've got no possible option open to me than to turn you over to my superiors once this is all over. This is a world security matter, for heaven's sake...”

Her friend regarded her thoughtfully.

“Oh, I don't deny that I've been a little high-handed, my dear, but it really *has* been done all for the best, you know. I *do* wish I could make you see that. But let me go and get you that drink – I'll be back in next to no time.”

She left the room, returning a few moments later holding a decanter of water and a glass, into which she poured half of the contents. Sitting down on the *chaise longue* beside her, she handed it to Rhapsody, who took it gratefully and gulped it down with a vengeance.

“Thanks, Auntie. Look, this isn’t personal at all, honest. It’s just that I have my duty, and you’ve wilfully obstructed and endangered a Spectrum operation. Please understand – I’m really and truly sorry.”

Lady Penelope nodded and smiled.

“Oh, I do understand, believe me – and I don’t blame you at all, my dear. I wouldn’t have expected you to do anything else – indeed, I’d have been quite surprised if you had reacted in any other way. But you must see the problem from *our* perspective. That ship at the bottom of my lake possesses enough firepower on board to destroy the Earth and everyone on it several times over. To say nothing of a great deal of information stored in its computer banks that would enable any reasonably clever schoolchild to assemble some extremely nasty little biochemical weapons in less time than it would take for them to eat their lunch. We simply *can’t* allow it to fall into the wrong hands – even the hands of people who sincerely believe that they’d only use it for the good of the human race. We’ve considered many times the advisability of destroying it completely to make sure that never happens, but we’ve always held back on account of the possibility that we may be able to use it to benefit mankind further.”

“But we’re *Spectrum*, Auntie! We’re not a bunch of terrorists, for heaven’s sake!”

“My dear, your organisation answers directly to the World President, and to no-one else. You’re his Praetorian Guard, if you want to look at it in such terms. I seem to remember that I mentioned just before all this dreadful business started that I wasn’t renowned for my republican sensibilities – and part of the reason for that is that I’ve seen more times than I can count how dreadfully naïve people can be when electing their leaders. I ask you to consider what you would do if one day the world wakes up to the discovery that it no longer has an Augustus or a Claudius sitting in the Senate, but a Caligula. Will you be happy to follow whatever orders he gives you then?”

“We’re a military organisation, Auntie – and every one of us has taken an oath of allegiance to the administration in Futura which we will uphold to the limit. We will do our duty to... to... the democratically elected... assembly... oh, my head... what’s happening?”

Lady Penelope shook her head sadly.

“I’m afraid my mineral water contains one or two little ingredients over and above those one finds in the natural mountain springs at Evian, my dear. This particular variety contains an amnesiac drug that will erase from your memory everything that’s happened within the last forty-eight hours. It’s quite tasteless: the formula was extracted from the ship’s databank, and won’t be detected by any contemporary medical testing procedure, so Brains tells me. I’ll get Parker to carry you to your bedroom where you can sleep it off. Pleasant dreams, my dear.”

She reached out, took the empty glass from Rhapsody’s hand and placed it on the coffee table next to the decanter, then eased her back into the corner of the *chaise longue* as the Angel slumped once more into unconsciousness.

§

“Bring him in here, Gordon – Parker and I will look after him from now on. He’s been checked over by Thunderbird Four’s resuscitation unit, I assume?”

The other nodded. “He was on the point of losing conscious from oxygen deprivation, Lady Penelope, but nothing like enough to cause permanent damage. We’ve given him a mild sedative to assist his recovery: he should wake up in about an hour from now.”

The blond aquanaut, still wearing his scuba gear from the neck down, carried the unconscious body of Captain Blue into the living room of Foxleyheath Manor and deposited it carefully on the sofa. Lady Penelope ran an expert pair of hands over his body, checking in rapid succession his pulse, breathing and heartbeat, and nodded with satisfaction.

“He’s going to be all right, I’m sure. We’ll need to get him upstairs and into bed as soon as possible of course, but Parker and I can attend to that. Gordon - it might be prudent for you to radio Virgil at once and ask him to fly Thunderbird Two out of the area. I have a feeling that Spectrum will be arriving on the scene quite shortly, and I’ll have far less explaining to do if we haven’t got one of International Rescue’s aircraft hovering above my lake when they do.”

Gordon nodded.

“FAB, Lady Penelope. Thunderbird Four’s still in the lake, moored at the jetty, but I can submerge it by remote until they’ve gone. We still need to seal the damaged boarding tube to the ship and drain the water from it so that we can access the ship from your cellar, but that can wait until things have quietened down. In the meantime I think I’d better check on the status of the cellar itself. The entrance to the passage was modified several years ago to withstand a flood, but the seal has never been subjected to the real thing for obvious reasons.”

Her ladyship nodded.

“If you would, Gordon. I think we can have everything looking normal by the time Spectrum arrives, but I’m still extremely concerned about Captain Scarlet and Lieutenant Almond. I can’t see how I’m going to be able to prevent Spectrum launching an investigation into their disappearance without having at least *some* idea of what has actually happened to them myself.”

The aquanaut nodded sombrely.

“I know – I’ve been thinking about that. We managed to cut through the hull in time to rescue the captain just before he suffocated. When we broke through, he was repeating some incomprehensible tale about his two companions having just *disappeared* – apparently all three of them were trapped in the compartment, just as you said they were. Brains is aboard the ship now, trying to determine what actually happened. But until he’s got some answers, we’re just going to have to stall Spectrum somehow. Is the entrance to the cellar open right now?”

Lady Penelope nodded.

“Yes, it is. Go out into the corridor and turn right: you’ll be able to see the hatch when you reach the end of the hallway.”

The aquanaut left the room, and Lady Penelope regarded the unconscious man lying on the couch in front of her thoughtfully.

“Well, Captain Blue – I wonder what tales *you’re* going to be able to tell us when you recover consciousness...”

§

“Captain Blue will probably have told them that Lieutenant Almond and I simply vanished, Doctor. From *our* point of view of course, *he* vanished – but I’ve come to realise since then that what must have happened was that Almond and I were sucked into the wormhole’s entrance portal when the console exploded, together with a few items of equipment that we were carrying at the time – the torch, the portable seismic sensor and the radio booster.”

Scarlet paused, looking at the monitor displaying a complex amalgamation of medical graphics and data, and frowned. “Is that *really* the date, Doctor?”

Doctor Fawn glanced at the bottom of the screen, puzzled.

“Yes, Captain. Why do you ask?”

Scarlet lay rigid, an expression of intense concentration on his face.

“But... that’s the date that all three of us entered the ship! For all we know, whatever happened to us may not have actually taken place yet! Doctor – I need to speak to Colonel White urgently. Can you get me a link to Cloudbase?”

Fawn peered down at his patient doubtfully.

“Are you sure you’re feeling alright, Captain? What do you mean... ‘whatever happened may not have taken place’?”

His patient struggled to get his body into a sitting position.

“No time to explain, Doctor. It may just be possible to prevent all this from happening – I need that radio link immediately. Your communicator please?”

Doctor Fawn frowned, and after a second handed him a compact transceiver. Scarlet took it, squinted at it for a second and then punched in an access code. While he was waiting for a response he shook his head wonderingly.

“Seems like years since I used one of these things. Actually I suppose it’s only about three months, of course... Lieutenant Green? Captain Scarlet. I need to speak with Colonel White immediately, please...”

While he was talking, the door to the private ward opened and Magenta entered. Upon seeing Scarlet awake and sitting up he grinned and waved. Fawn motioned to him to be quiet, and took him to one side.

“He seems to be well on the way to effecting a complete recovery, Pat – as usual – but he’s not making a lot of sense. How long is it that they reckon he’s been lying frozen in that cellar? Wasn’t it supposed to be about two and a half centuries?”

Magenta nodded. “That’s what I was told. Why?”

Fawn shook his head. “A couple of moments ago he was talking about it only being a few months since he last used one of our transceivers. And just before you came in he was saying something about preventing his other self from doing something that he’s apparently already done. I’m beginning to feel distinctly disorientated myself...”

“Doctor Fawn?”

At the sound of Scarlet’s voice he stopped in mid-sentence and walked back to the bed where his patient sat with the deactivated transceiver in his hand.

“There seems to have been a little confusion, Doctor – the colonel thought he was talking to my counterpart in Foxleyheath at first, but that’s all sorted out now. Unfortunately it looks as though it could be too late. Cloudbase isn’t able to raise Captain Blue, Lieutenant Almond or my other self. If I’m right, that’s because they’re already inside the ship at the bottom of the lake – and the metal it’s made of is impervious to radio waves. I’ve requested an immediate Angel launch: if they can get there in time it may be that we can still prevent them from causing the...”

He checked himself, frowning in thought.

“Wait a minute. We never managed to find out why the hatch was closed. The suspicion was that the house’s occupant might have had something to do with it – or that stuttering guest of hers. The Angels could be flying into a trap – I need to talk to Colonel White again, urgently.”

He shook his head in confusion, looked up at the bewildered physician looking down at him, and lay back with a resigned expression on his face.

“I’m afraid this is going to take some explaining, Doctor...”

§

“I believe I have s-some answers, Lady Penelope – though not as m-many as I would like.”

Lady Penelope glanced out of the window, then back to the video screen built into her desk, where Brains’s face peered up at her.

“Any answers are better than none at all, Brains – and I’m afraid time is running out. I suspect that our friends may have missed one or two scheduled check-ins with their base, on account of my having just seen a Spectrum interceptor overfly the estate. I imagine that on the next pass it’ll be coming in to land. What are you able to tell me?”

The nervous scientist consulted a hastily scribbled set of handwritten notes.

“It would appear that at some time in its past, this ship has encountered a rupture in spacetime, Lady Penelope. The ship is emitting a low-intensity beam that has effectively

fused that anomaly to one of the ship's projected energy weapon s-systems, causing it to be dragged along with the ship in its passage through spacetime – rather like the propeller of a boat would create a wake as the boat passes through the water. It's happened because the weapons system was never shut down. The re-remarkable thing is that according to these instruments, the system has been in operation for the last 235 years.”

Her ladyship frowned.

“Does this help us to understand what has happened to those two poor Spectrum officers, Brains? I'm afraid an explanation of the science may have to wait until another time: at the moment I need something to tell Spectrum when they arrive.”

“Oh yes! Of course – I'm sorry. The effect is that the sh-ship possessed a direct physical link to another point in spacetime – and that point must be the event that caused the anomaly to come into existence in the first place. My guess – and it *is* only a guess – is that the two officers have been, er, transported back in time to the instant at which the wormhole was created. But where that event might have taken place, I have no idea.”

“Do you know if they're alive, Brains?”

The other shrugged helplessly. “I've no way of telling, Lady Penelope – and the laser cannon activation m-mechanism was completely destroyed in the explosion, so wherever it is that they've gone, we're unable to attempt to follow them. Even if I were able to repair or replace it, then maybe we could go after them, but b-building a replacement could take years – assuming that it's possible at all. If only we had more time...”

Lady Penelope shook her head.

“I'm afraid time is the one thing we're short of, Brains. We simply can't permit anyone to discover the ship – not ever. Our first priority has to be to prevent Spectrum from investigating further, quite simply to give us the time to determine what has happened to Captain Scarlet and Lieutenant Almond, and to bring them back if possible. If only we knew whether they were still alive...”

She checked herself, and frowned.

“One moment, Brains. How long did you say this laser device has been active?”

The other glanced at his notes. “The laser has been operating for the last, er, 235 years. Why do you ask?”

Lady Penelope nodded to herself and smiled with satisfaction.

“Because it answers both questions, Brains. Remember what started all this in the first place! They *are* alive – or at least Captain Scarlet is – and we know exactly where he is... because his body's been lying cryogenically frozen for about that length of time in the cellar underneath this very house. He's *already* been returned to us, Brains!”

“Yes! Of course! But what about Lieutenant Almond, Lady Penelope? We still don't know if *she*'s alive – and Spectrum will be every bit as concerned about her too.”

Lady Penelope inclined her head, her eyes narrowed in thought.

“Actually, I suspect that we *do* know – or at least we can make an educated guess, Brains. One of the problems that Spectrum will want to know the answer to is *how* Captain

Scarlet came to be cryogenically frozen in the first place: after all, nobody from that era would have had the scientific knowledge to perform such a feat, would they? But another person from *this* age might...”

She leaned back, deep in thought.

“I think we can infer that both of them are alive – in which case our task becomes reduced to that of attempting to return Lieutenant Almond to the present day, assuming that is possible, of course. Unfortunately, our problems *still* aren’t solved – because we can’t tell Spectrum any of this without them asking us how we’ve managed to work it out. Brains... many years ago, when we first realised how dangerous the ship could be if it were ever to fall into the wrong hands, Jeff directed that a number of preventative measures should be set up a safeguard against such a thing ever happening. Is that system still operational?”

“Yes, Lady Penelope – it’s ne-never been disarmed. But I, er, urge you to consider the consequences... the discovery that we’ve now just made is of such...”

“I know, Brains, I know. But I’m concerned that a scenario could arise as a consequence of what has just happened here in which we no longer find ourselves in control of events. I’d like you to set up an interface from the detonation control to an activation device that never leaves my person, if you’d be so kind. My signet ring would be perfect, I think.”

“But Lady Penelope – if the ship were to be destroyed, we would n-never be able to return Lieutenant Almond from wherever it is that she has gone...”

“We’re talking about one life – which may not even be in danger – compared with a very real risk to the lives of millions, Brains. I’m sorry.”

There was a pause; then the scientist nodded sombrely.

“I understand, Lady Penelope. I’ll set it up at once.”

Lady Penelope cut the connection, and stood alone for a few moments deep in thought. Then she returned to the drawing room, where she contemplated the unconscious Spectrum captain thoughtfully.

“Well, Captain Blue. You know all about our little secret, and also you’re the only person who *really* knows what happened to your fellow officers. I can’t allow you to share the former with anyone, but nobody will believe that you could possibly forget the latter. Which leaves me with a little dilemma...”

The sound of the front door bell brought her out of her reverie, and she listened intently as Parker’s uniquely affected upper-crust Cockney tones mingled with an unmistakably American female accent. Moments later, the door opened.

“A Miss Symphony Angel of Spectrum is ‘ere to see you, m’lady.”

A vivid image of the Foxleyheath Amateur Dramatics Society’s Christmas production of Cinderella sprang into Lady Penelope’s mind, and she suppressed a smile.

“Thank you, Parker. Would you show her in?”

“Yes, m’lady.”

The elderly butler withdrew, returning a few moments later accompanied by a young woman dressed in a flying uniform, carrying her helmet under her arm.

“Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward? Symphony Angel, Spectrum. I’m here to investigate the apparent disapp... *ADAM!*”

She dropped the flying helmet on the floor and ran across the room to the sofa upon which Captain Blue’s unconscious body lay. Cradling his head in her arms, she looked up at the house’s owner with obvious concern.

“What’s wrong with him?”

Her ladyship joined the Angel at his side.

“I’m afraid we’re not totally sure... Symphony. The fact of the matter is... well, we don’t really know *what’s* happened. There seems to have been some kind of an accident in which Captain Blue lost consciousness. Dianne’s a little disoriented also, so I’ve told her to go and have a little lie-down – she’ll be up and about shortly, I imagine. In the meantime, my... doctor has seen Captain Blue – he’s sleeping normally, I assure you.”

“Can I wake him up? Hey, Adam honey, come on...”

She shook him lovingly, and his eyes slowly opened. Seconds later his features cleared.

“Karen! Hey, what are you doing here?”

She stared back at him uncertainly.

“I’m here to find out what happened to *you*, Adam! We had a call from Scarlet – he told us to get over here and make sure you were okay. Something about an accident – he sounded real concerned about you! So when we tried calling you and couldn’t get a reply...”

He shook his head in confusion.

“Scarlet? But Scarlet was *here*, Karen! He disappeared – along with Lieutenant Almond... Karen, we’ve got to get a rescue under way at once...”

She shook her head.

“Scarlet’s already explained about Lieutenant Almond. I haven’t been given the details, but Colonel White told me specifically not to worry about them – we’ve got Scarlet’s word that she’s okay. It’s only Rhapsody and you I was told to check up on. I gather Rhaps is upstairs somewhere, but *you* sure don’t look too good...”

She looked up, and her eyes fell on the decanter and empty glass on the coffee table.

“Hang on, honey.”

She untangled herself from him, stepped over to the coffee table and poured out a glass of water from the decanter. Lady Penelope blinked, and then frowned.

“Actually, I’m not at all sure *that’s* a very...”

She checked herself as the Angel finished helping Captain Blue to finish the contents of the glass. Symphony put down the glass and looked up questioningly.

“What was that you were saying, Lady Penelope?”

Lady Penelope shook her head. “Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. Don’t let it worry you, my dear. It’s just that I think he might want to continue sleeping for a little while yet...”

§

“You do understand, Captain Scarlet, that what you have told me is quite incredible. Your story is quite simply the most fantastic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s the truth, Colonel.”

“Of which we have not the slightest shred of proof.”

Not one muscle of Scarlet’s expression changed. “Do you doubt my word, Colonel?”

Colonel White shook his head.

“No, Captain. I have no doubt that you’re perfectly earnest in what you’ve told me. At the very least, I am satisfied that *you* believe every word in this report. The problem I have is that there are several crucial inconsistencies between this document and the submissions I have since received from both Captain Blue and Rhapsody Angel.”

Scarlet shook his head. “All of which can be explained if we assume that both of them have been subjected to some form of artificially-induced amnesia. Colonel, we *have* to raid Foxleyheath Manor with a view to interrogating its owner – and quickly. I can see no other way for us to get the proof you’re looking for.”

Colonel White leaned back in his chair, regarding his officer thoughtfully.

“And if we were to do just that, Captain, are you confident that we would find this... this alien spaceship?”

“Colonel – *I know* it’s there. There’s a concealed passage leading to it directly from the cellar. Captain Blue and Lieutenant Almond tracked down the entrance to it using the gravimetric distortion equipment that was brought from Cloudbase.”

The colonel looked pensive. “Would you be able to open this secret passage yourself, if we were to re-enter the cellar?”

Scarlet shook his head. “I wasn’t there when the passageway was opened: Blue and Almond already had access to the tunnel when I joined them. I know that Almond managed to find the entrance by identifying and interpreting some form of interference pattern, but I’m not familiar with the technology. Captain Blue should remember this, of course, but it appears that he doesn’t – and I don’t know why. Even if I’m wrong about him having been drugged, he could be suffering from some form of naturally induced amnesia – possibly as a result of oxygen starvation inside the ship.”

Colonel White frowned.

“A ship of which he also has no recollection, Captain. And Doctor Fawn tells me that the medical he gave Captain Blue upon his return to Cloudbase showed no evidence of any alien substances in his bloodstream. As things stand at the moment, we only have your word for it that such a tunnel – or a spaceship at the end of it – actually exists at all.”

Scarlet nodded sombrely. “I know, Colonel. The only way to get the evidence is to move in – in force.”

Colonel White leaned forward in his chair and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“Spoken like a soldier, Captain Scarlet. However I have other aspects of this whole mystery to consider – and my own instincts tell me not to act precipitately. Let us consider the possible implications of our actions.”

Scarlet shuffled in his seat.

“With respect, Colonel, what is there to consider? Irrespective of the extraordinary chain of events that I’ve experienced, it’s clear that the Mysterons *have* found a way to travel into Earth’s past. Regardless of the question marks hanging over their agent that I’ve detailed in my report, their intentions *must* be considered hostile – surely this is obvious?”

Colonel White shook his head.

“Perhaps. But consider this, Captain – whatever the Mysterons might be doing, or might have done, we are still here, discussing a sequence of events that has *already* taken place. Would they not have used the opportunity to ensure that Spectrum never came into existence in the first place? Why have they apparently not done so? As I said, Captain - I am wary of acting too quickly in this matter. Not least because I fear that we may *ourselves* trigger some cataclysmic sequence of events by so doing.”

He stood up, walked over to the window and looked down on the clouds far below.

“Never have I been more sorely aware of the loss of one of my officers, Captain. I believe that Lieutenant Almond possessed an insight into the questions that we are attempting to answer that would have proved invaluable to us now. But Lieutenant Almond is gone – and if I accept the contents of your report in their entirety, she cannot return. We must therefore formulate a course of action and put it into effect without recourse to expert advice – and for that reason, I intend to learn as much about the circumstances of your incredible experience as I can before we do anything else. And that experience is inextricably linked to Foxleyheath Manor and, if your interpretation of events is accurate, its current occupant.”

“But Colonel...”

“No buts, Captain. Let us learn as much as we can about both the house itself and Lady Penelope herself before we act.”

He paused for a second, and then reached out to activate the communicator on his desk.

“Lieutenant Green? Would you bring me our file on Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward please?”

Two hours later, Colonel White put the file down on his desk and looked up thoughtfully. Noting the movement in his peripheral vision, Lieutenant Green closed the

scheduling package within which he was working and rotated his chair to face his commander.

“Is there any more data on Lady Penelope that you’re likely to need, Colonel?”

The colonel took his time replying.

“No, Lieutenant, I don’t think so. All of these files have a quite distinct flavour to them, in that they’re all far more remarkable for what they *don’t* say than what they *do* say. I’m more than familiar with the style of documents that come out of Whitehall: these are classic examples of reports that are written more to enable the officials who assembled them to claim that a proper investigation has been conducted than actually to report anything resulting from it that might create waves. The style hasn’t changed much since the days of Philby, Burgess and McLean well over one hundred years ago – which doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence concerning their reliability.”

He flipped through the file once more, then tossed it to one side.

“Her ladyship has been investigated several times by both MI5 and MI6, even though she is personally known to most, if not all, of the senior civil servants running the intelligence and counter-intelligence services. It’s perfectly obvious from these documents that British intelligence are at best unclear on what her true motivations are and where her true allegiances lie, though a number of favours that she’s done them in the past are alluded to in some detail. For example, I’ve just discovered something of which even *I* wasn’t previously aware, which is that the recommendation that we recruit one Dianne Simms into Spectrum originated not from Sir Jeremy Hodge as I had always believed, but from a close friend and colleague of his – and I’ll give you one guess what *her* name was! What these files *do* tell me is that there’s almost certainly considerably more to this than we’d previously believed – and that if we send in an official Spectrum-accredited investigation team as I had originally intended to do, we’re more than likely to find ourselves being blocked by the British government. Lady Penelope clearly has a *lot* of influential friends.”

Lieutenant Green frowned. “Surely Spectrum has the authority to override any local opposition to one of our investigations, Colonel?”

Colonel White cleared his throat.

“In theory, yes. In practice, however, the British are masters at hampering, delaying or sabotaging any Spectrum operation to which they take exception: it is a trait they’ve demonstrated repeatedly ever since our actions resulted in the destruction of the London Car-Vu. Nothing’s ever made explicit, of course – whatever we want to do just gets caught up in endless reams of red tape. No... I suspect we may have to adopt a rather more low-key approach on this occasion...”

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Colonel White relaxed in his chair, taking his time to admire the opulence of the décor. The blend of ancient and modern; the sumptuous luxury of the old counterbalanced by the simple functionality of the new. It was perfect.

“In addition to all their other accomplishments, your ancestors were clearly connoisseurs of the arts, Lady Penelope. And I perceive that you yourself follow in the same tradition in every respect.”

His host put down her cup of tea and regarded him with questioning eyes.

“You are familiar with the history of my family, Colonel?”

The colonel smiled apologetically.

“Not until very recently, I confess, your ladyship. You’ll forgive me for mentioning that as a consequence of the recent remarkable sequence of events at Foxleyheath Manor, I have had cause to look into the history of this estate. Rha... I beg your pardon... Dianne’s researches proved fascinating reading, and a number of documents I have requisitioned from government sources bear much of it out. I almost feel I have come to know your family personally. Their history of service to their country is well documented – as is of course your own.”

Her ladyship glanced up, her expression open yet questioning.

“Mine, Colonel?”

“Your charitable work, Lady Penelope. I’m not unaware of your activities on behalf of victims of natural disasters – or the extent to which you’ve personally persuaded the regional assemblies represented within the World Government to contribute both manpower and resources to those activities.”

Lady Penelope returned an embarrassed smile.

“Oh, well, one does what little one can. People seek me out in the name of their good causes, and I try to help in whatever way I’m able. I’ve been very fortunate to have been swept along in a number of such schemes. A feather on the breath of God, you might say.”

“I beg your pardon, Lady Penelope?”

Her ladyship glanced up, startled, and then smiled.

“What? Oh, I do beg your pardon, Colonel. I was just paraphrasing Hildegard von Bingen. *‘It pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God’*. Your comment about good causes reminded me of it: it’s been ages since I read any of her writings, but I’ve never forgotten that quote. It’s a reminder of how fragile and ephemeral we all are.”

Colonel White raised an eyebrow. “I’m afraid I’ve never heard of her, your ladyship. Who is this... Hildegard?”

“She was a twelfth-century visionary – a scientist, artist and theologian all rolled into one. Her writings brought all three disciplines together in a way that has never been equalled either before or since, and she looked to each for insights that would enrich her understanding of the others. She was my role model when I was young – not that I could ever hope to aspire to any of the wonderful things she accomplished during her lifetime, of course, but she gave me something to reach for.”

Colonel White considered.

“Perhaps you underestimate yourself, your ladyship. My files indicate that you tend to adopt a somewhat more proactive approach to your work than you suggest.”

Lady Penelope smiled.

“Perhaps. But I’m sure you didn’t come here just to talk to me about my charity work, Colonel. I imagine you’re looking for some answers to the little riddle of what happened in my wine cellar a few days ago – would I be right?”

Colonel White nodded.

“Your ladyship is of course quite correct. There are a number of unanswered questions still outstanding – not the least of which is what has happened to one of my lieutenants. Two of the other officers engaged in the investigation we conducted on these premises both appear to have suffered a remarkable loss of memory concerning the events which led up to her disappearance. The third – Captain Scarlet – on the other hand has been able to tell us a truly *remarkable* story. So remarkable, in fact, that I am almost inclined to dismiss it as a fantasy.”

Lady Penelope’s right eyebrow affected a modest ascension.

“But not quite, I take it?”

“Shall we just say that I would prefer to keep an open mind on the matter until I have had the opportunity to talk to you. It may be that this astonishing tale is simply an hallucination brought about by the singular experience to which he appears to have been subjected. And then again, it may not.”

Lady Penelope absently contemplated her signet ring for a couple of seconds before looking up at him, her bland expression having broken into a radiant smile.

“But of course, Colonel – in fact, there are a number of questions to which I would like to find the answers also; not the least of which is how poor Captain Scarlet apparently came to be buried in my cellar in the first place! It may be that your officers have missed something: perhaps a pooling of all the information at our disposal over a few cups of tea might prove mutually illuminating.”

She stopped in front of the painting of the beautiful young woman, contemplated it for a few seconds, and then turned round to face her guest once more.

“Actually, I was hoping that I might be able to persuade you to stay for a few days. I’ll do my very best to answer any questions you might have about this remarkable affair, and in return I’ll have the opportunity to show you around. There are some *lovely* walks around here, you know: that region isn’t known as the Garden of England for nothing, as I’m sure you’re well aware.”

Colonel White raised an eyebrow.

“Well... if your ladyship would not be inconvenienced by my remaining, it would certainly be most convenient from my point of view. Perhaps if I were to take a room at one of the hotels in the village...”

“Oh, I wouldn’t hear of it! The only place that offers a really good meal anywhere around here is the Poacher’s Pocket, but that’s been solely a restaurant since the Herricks

took it over, and it therefore no longer provides accommodation. You must stay here at the Manor: I've plenty of room, and guests are *far* too few and far between. In fact, I've just had the main guest room redecorated, and I'd be *delighted* if you'd do me the honour of being my guest for a few days."

The Colonel took his time before replying – this was just *too* easy.

"Well, it's true that I have rather a lot of unused leave... perhaps just a day or two..."

Her ladyship beamed.

"Excellent! Well, that's all settled then – I'll have Parker prepare the room for you at once – would you excuse me for a moment?"

She walked down the hallway and into the drawing room, where the elderly manservant was polishing a silver ornament.

"Colonel White will be staying for a few days, Parker. Would you make the King Edward VII suite ready for him please?"

"Very good, m'lady; I'll attend to it directly. Will there be anything else, m'lady?"

Her ladyship considered for a moment, her eyes once more on the painting of the enigmatic woman on the wall.

"Actually, Parker, I've rather come to the conclusion that the painting I moved down here a few weeks ago doesn't *quite* blend in with the furniture after all. Would you move it back into my bedroom some time during the next few days please? I think I'll sleep elsewhere until the work is complete – the Alice Keppell room, perhaps?"

"Yes, m'lady. A wise precaution if I may say so – shiftin' a painting the size of that one inevitably causes considerable disruption wot with the dust and all. The last time we shuffled them around I 'ad sneezin' fits for a week."

Lady Penelope nodded sympathetically.

"Quite, Parker. It would never do to have sneezing fits with a guest in the house, would it? Especially one as important as the Commander-in-Chief of Spectrum..."

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"*Cancelled* it? He *can't* have cancelled it!"

Rhapsody shook her head. "I tell you he *has*, Paul. He informed me that the investigation into whatever's in her cellar has been called off with immediate effect."

Scarlet shook his head in bewilderment.

"But that wretched woman is sitting on one of the biggest secrets of the 21st century, for God's sake! We've *got* to know what that spaceship thing is doing underneath her lake! From what I saw of it, it isn't even from this planet – or at least not this planet as we know it – and the technology it contains could provide us with our first real chance to take the War of Nerves back to the Mysterons on Mars..."

Rhapsody shrugged helplessly.

“I wouldn’t know about that – I’ve simply got no idea what you’re talking about, and neither has Adam! But I wouldn’t recommend that you try tackling him on the subject, Paul. He had that *‘Argue with me about this if you dare’* look on his face.”

Scarlet clenched his fists. “But Captain Blue *saw* it! He was *with* me, for heaven’s sake! And so was Lieutenant Almond, though obviously we can’t ask her – I can remember it as clearly as if it was yesterday!”

Rhapsody shook her head sympathetically.

“Look Paul, you’ve been though a lot – and it *wasn’t* yesterday. From *your* point of view it was over 235 years ago! I really think you ought to take it easy for a few days... being frozen in supersaturated coolant for a couple of centuries can’t have done anything for your health...”

“There’s nothing wrong with my health, dammit! I’m indestructible, remember? And my memory is perfect – it’s *yours* that I’m worried about! That bloody woman must have done something to the pair of you...”

Rhapsody’s face broke into an amused grin.

“Oh come off it, Paul! Penny’s been a friend of mine ever since I was knee-high to a grasshopper, as the expression goes. There’s no way she would ever hurt a fly – she’s one of the kindest people I know. You’ve obviously got the wrong end of the stick about all this, so I really *do* suggest you just take my advice and forget it, okay?”

She threw her arms around his neck and gave him an affectionate kiss on his cheek before turning on her heel and setting off down the corridor at a jaunty pace. At the doorway she stopped and turned, slapping her forehead.

“I almost forgot! Penny sent me a card. It arrived just this morning – on it she wishes you a speedy recovery, and invites us both to go and stay with her when we’re next on leave together. Here – have a read.”

Scarlet took the postcard from her without enthusiasm, scanned the elegant handwriting on the reverse side rapidly and handed it back.

“I’m really not keen on returning to Foxleyheath, Dianne. You go if you like.”

She looked at him closely. “Are you okay, Paul?”

He smiled back at her wearily.

“Oh, I’m fine. It’s just that I’d prefer not to see the place again. It’s a personal thing.”

She moved closer to him, and looked into his eyes with obvious concern.

“Paul – what’s wrong? Did something happen to you... when you were in the past? In fact, what *did* happen? I keep forgetting that the ‘you’ I’m talking to now is the same person I found in Penny’s cellar – and that somewhere between the day before yesterday and today you’ve made some kind of round trip into the past! And you haven’t spoken about it at all since Doctor Fawn revived you – Paul, why not?”

He avoided her eye, and looked down.

“I’d rather not talk about it, Dianne. Please don’t ask me to explain. It’s just that I... lost someone. Someone who came to mean rather a lot to me.”

“A woman?”

“Yes - a woman.”

“Was she pretty?”

He frowned with irritation. “Why is it that the first thing that a woman always asks about another woman is what she looks like? Yes – she was pretty. Satisfied?”

Rhapsody grinned. “Any woman wearing the dresses of that period would have looked absolutely *gorgeous*. I’ve always wanted one – if I’d known you were going, I’d have asked you to bring one back with you! I want one just like the picture on the other side of this card: did you look at it? It’s a reproduction of that fabulous painting in Penny’s drawing room – you know, the big one on the wall that you hardly looked at... Paul? *Paul!* You’ve turned as white as a sheet, Paul! What’s wrong?”

Scarlet was staring at the picture on the postcard in stunned disbelief, his hands shaking.

“Paul – what’s *wrong*? *TELL* me!”

Scarlet looked up, his eyes wet with tears.

“But... that’s her! Dianne – that’s *her!*”

Rhapsody shook her head in bewilderment.

“Paul – I don’t know what you’re *talking* about! *Who* is she, for heaven’s sake?”

Scarlet peered at her incredulously.

“Don’t you understand? She *wasn’t* killed! Dianne - that’s *Tina*...!”

End of Cycle Beta

To be concluded in Entanglement