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Stories by their very nature are  
creations of imagination and fantasy

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# REVENGE OF THE HRYM

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FRIENDSHIP SERIES BOOK ONE



## THE PROLOGUE

The Ambassador opened the box and withdrew the package.

"There's not much time. There are rumours."

"Rumours?"

"Yes, the Hrym is coming." At that moment, an explosion rocked the Embassy. A siren blared in the far distance, and the sounds of laser canons drifted in.

Lord Stiletto looked into the strange eyes, feeling the pain as the package was passed to him. "Guard it well my Friend." Stiletto barely nodded assent, still holding the gaze of the ancient statesman. It was as if now that his task was accomplished, the ambassador had no more reason to exist. "Goodbye," he whispered, and the light in the once powerful eyes faded before Stiletto's gaze, and then, went out.





## ONE

### THE RABBIT

All was quiet on the morning of the ball at the Steampunk Festival. Resplendent in their top hats, bowlers with goggles, bustled dresses and robot arms, the festival goers crowded the venue. Lord Stiletto stalked the halls of the Railway Museum looking for The Rabbit.

It was The Rabbit, whiskers twitching, who watched Stiletto from the shadows. He knew the man with the fabled book collection and the new robotic steam arm meant trouble.

The Girl with the Red Hair was speaking to author and adventurer, Gregory Cobblestone, sizing up the situation. To the world of Gavle, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Sweden, she was a maker and seller of unique Steampunk artefacts, but really, she was working for The Rabbit.

Surrounded by the huge steam trains like behe-

moths, waiting for the events to take place, Gregory sighed. *Where was Stiletto?*

Lord Stiletto was working his way around the halls, looking for books for his collection, but really keeping all his senses alert for The Rabbit.

The Rabbit was a multi-dimensional being of pure evil. It amused itself to take the form of a regular sized white rabbit, so beloved of young Earth children. Still, its manic pink eyes were said to drag you to insanity if you were to become locked into their gaze. It was looking for recruits for its intergalactic organisation. In each world it visited it found suitable adherents, and on Earth it was the world of Steampunk that threw up the best agents.

As well as looking for recruits, The Rabbit had other problems. It needed a source of plutonium for his ship's batteries and it knew that Sweden had hidden stores secreted in underground bunkers in the Gavle region. Far enough away from Stockholm, in case of leaks, but well protected by hundreds of metres of rock and lead shielding.

Unbeknownst to all except the Girl with the Red Hair, there was a secret entrance to the plutonium store hidden somewhere within the Railway Museum.

A young man, Henrik, dapperly dressed in a fine burgundy woolen frock coat, and silk top hat, was engaging Gregory in a long conversation, obviously trying to divert him from the machinations of The Rabbit. He asked if Gregory would read from his new book, but then grabbed the text from the surprised

author, and began to read it out loud himself, modulating his powerful voice to scramble the auditory neural signals of anybody within a ten metre radius.

Returning through the halls, Lord Stiletto felt a sudden warm, wet sensation at the back of his neck, that filled him with horror. Someone had slipped a squid into the gap between his collar and his neck. Stiletto felt the bite of hundreds of sharp suckers as they cut into his skin, crushing and choking him as he gasped for air.

The concealed blade in the rim of his pale grey top hat was in his sturdy grip as he sliced calmly through the grasping suckered arms, feeling cool copper-based blood mixing with his warm iron blood as it soaked into his spotless white shirt.

Stiletto returned to his suite. Showered and re-suited, with a carefully arranged cravat to cover his bruised throat, he was back down in good time for the evening's banquet.

Gregory and Stiletto were seated with Sarah, also known as Lady Bane, and Duke Magnus and Lady Susanna of Sweden. On Lady Bane's finger was a large silver ring in the form of a rabbit. The silver beast curled around her finger, its ears and feet standing proud. The significance was not lost on the two observant adventurers.

Next day, in the quiet of the morning, Lord Stiletto was up to his mind reading tricks. He had caught the thoughts of the Girl with the Red Hair in an

unguarded moment, and discovered the entrance to the plutonium cache.

Unknown to Stiletto, The Rabbit, up to his own mind reading tricks, had caught Lord Stiletto in an unguarded moment and discovered the entrance to the plutonium.

### Star Alert, Inter Galactic News Flash. Star Date 3469IO-\*3 ###

The promising planet, known to its inhabitants as Earth, blew up under mysterious circumstances. Breaking news suggests that terrorists initiated a chain reaction from a government plutonium storage facility which initiated a reaction that spread to the core of the planet.

Message ends.....

## TWO

### THE PACKAGE

Ironically, as it was epicenter of the source of the explosion that destroyed the Earth, the few who did survive had been located at Gavle, a small town on the eastern coast of Sweden.

“Thank God,” said Gregory, “for parallel universes.”

“You jest,” commented Lord Stiletto, puffing on his new pipe. He didn’t have tobacco in his pipe, which he pronounced peep, after a Sean Connery movie, but he liked to puff away at it as if it did. A skill he had learned from Eagle Cloud, an Apache chief who had taught him how to both track a mountain lion across barren mountain scree, and negotiate the spirit world.

“Deadly serious, old chap.”

“No, about God!”

“Don’t start that again.” And the matter, for the moment, was closed.

The two friends were sat on the sixth floor outside terrace of the café at the Ashmolean Museum in

Oxford. Lord Stiletto and Gregory had travelled forward in time to his library where they had enjoyed a well-deserved breakfast of scrambled eggs and oysters, and then returned refreshed to a parallel existence of the Earth, that conveniently, hadn't been blown up by The Rabbit. There was a package to be collected, and the message had indicated that it was to be found in the new Tutankhamun exhibition.

"But are you sure it was The Rabbit?" enquired Stiletto over his Earl Grey.

He flashed a quick hand signal to his friend, and as casually as possible, Gregory raised his gaze to the far corner, where the Girl with the Red Hair was openly sitting at a table, apparently absorbed in today's edition of *The Times*. If the Girl was here, then surely they must also be in the presence of The Rabbit.

"Split up," said Stiletto, leaving a generous tip on the table and walking immediately to the exit where he headed down the stairs to the second floor, and became very interested in the tea bowls and swords in the Japanese exhibition.

Meantime, Gregory finished his tea and cake, and also headed down the stairs, but went to the Tutankhamun exhibition on the third floor.

He was in one way, rather disappointed by the exhibition. He had hoped there would be some of the exhibits from the Cairo museum, but apart from a copy of the golden death mask, most of the exhibition related to Howard Carter and his team.

Walking straight up to one of the few genuine

Egyptian artefacts, a beautiful life size basalt statue, he tapped a fast rhythm on the left nipple of the ancient stone carving.

Where there had been smooth stone, an oblong section of the chest, about five centimetres wide, seemed to dissolve and quickly Gregory removed the small wax sealed package within.

### THREE

## DELIVERENCE

Where was Stiletto?

As it was home to England's other famous university, it seemed only logical after time spent in Oxford, that Gregory Cobblestone should find himself in Cambridge, ostensibly to attend a performance of Othello at the Shakespeare Festival. However, the real reason was to deliver the package without detection by The Rabbit.

Haydrift Eaglebeard was a strange fellow, but that in itself was his best recommendation. Strange carried connotations of weird, and weird was where the two friends were going.

*What is it with the museum thing?* Gregory pondered. Collection had been at the Ashmolean, whilst delivery was at the Fitzwilliam, a wonderful museum with a fine collection of Impressionist paintings and statues. Gregory was quite surprised to see so many fine works outside of Paris or Amsterdam.



He was particularly taken with the beautiful bronze statue, *A Woman Combing Her Hair*, which apparently was on loan from the Tate. It was a pity they weren't international art thieves instead of universal conspirators, because Gregory had fallen in love with it and could imagine this beautiful statue having pride of place in his apartment on Sunshine, Lord Stiletto's space station, near the Horse Head Nebula.

There was no sign of Stiletto, but was that Lady Bane descending the magnificent stairway? Stiletto was convinced she was on the side of the angels, but Gregory thought of that magnificent silver ring, and wasn't so sure.

Eaglebeard, who to the casual eye, had been examining some beautiful marquetry on a splendid old cabinet, was deep in conversation with the Girl with the Red Hair. Was he simply flirting, or delving for information, or maybe, the thought came, he didn't actually know who she was. If the Girl with the Red Hair was here, then surely, they must be in the presence of The Rabbit!

Quickly Gregory put his hand to his waistcoat pocket, but it was still there, the wax sealed package.

The timing had to be very precise. The portal would only be open for seconds.

Gregory sighed with calm satisfaction, then buckled in unbelievable agony as the jagged blade was placed, rather than stabbed, into the left of his two kidneys.

Something was wrong! Glancing over the space of the hall, Haydrift Eaglebeard saw his friend slowly collapse, a pool of crimson blood spreading around him on the polished mahogany floor of the splendid antiquarian museum.

Before he could act, the Girl with the Red Hair looped a fine wire, so thin and strong it couldn't have been made on this planet, over Eaglebeard's right hand, and with a deft tug, removed it at the wrist.

Thank goodness for Stiletto. Biding his time in the shadows, he stepped from behind a curtain and shot the Girl with the Red Hair. Unfortunately, the gun was set to stun, so she would live. Reaching down, he calmly picked up the hand from the floor, and slipping it into his pocket, guided his friend towards the ever-spreading pool of blood around the prostrate form of Gregory. Lifting Gregory onto his shoulder, he heard the strangled whisper, "the package," but it was too late. A red trail of rabbit prints led away across the polished floor and a quick check of the waistcoat pocket showed that the package was truly gone.

## FOUR FRIENDS

The advantage of having friends in the future became clear to Haydrift Eaglebeard as he flexed the fingers of his right hand.

He was sat in the library of Lord Stiletto, book collector and cosmic adventurer, and enjoying a very fine bottle of port. The rumour was that Stiletto had been given several cases of port by a grateful Napoleon Bonaparte after his help at the battle of Smolensk.

Sat across the exquisitely crafted table were his two good friends, Lord Stiletto and Gregory Cobblestone, now recovered after the installation of an artificial kidney, to replace the one destroyed in Cambridge.

Stiletto was laughing as he good-naturedly recalled the surprised look on Eaglebeard's face as his hand came off and dropped to the polished wooden floor. The cut had been so fine and rapid that initially there had been no pain. That had come later.

"It's the same hand," Stiletto continued through

mouthfuls of olives, “but we have modified it slightly. I think you will find it’s a good trade.”

Eaglebeard went back to flexing his restored fingers, which felt, and seemed to his amazed eyes, to be completely unchanged.

The rustle of silken skirts alerted the friends to the entrance of Lady Bane. Gregory nodded his thanks over the rim of his cut glass. It was her quick action and skill that had kept him alive whilst in twenty-first century Cambridge. The medical science of the future may be incredible, but they hadn’t yet mastered the fabled art of reversing Death itself.

“Ah,” thought the Boy from another dimension.

“What was that?” said Stiletto, always sensitive to the ambiguous.

“Just an old friend,” smiled Gregory, and passing a glass of port to Sarah, lifted his glass for the toast, “Friends.”

## FIVE

### THE CAPTIVES

Unknown at the time, two other survivors of the destruction of the planet Earth, had been Duke Magnus and the Lady Susanna. Wise to the machinations of the Rabbit and the Girl with the Red Hair, they had hitched a ride with The Rabbit. A chance remark had betrayed their sympathies to the Friend's cause. Now, naked and freezing, they hung upside down in one of the cells deep within a forgotten asteroid.

It was only chance that had alerted the Friends to the fate of Magnus and Susanna. In an infinite universe, entanglement creates powerful connections.

Haydrift Eaglebeard passed his palm over the electronic lock of the door. Silently it opened. It was one of many amazing abilities of his new hand he was discovering.

He took a clockwork mouse out of his pocket, and whispering his instructions, sent it off to explore the cell complex.

Lord Stiletto ran his fingers along the cold steel of the blade, from which he took his name, and slipped it back into the sheath on his wrist. As a diversionary tactic, Stiletto was going in through the front door.

Sarah, Lady Bane, was unrecognisable. Gone were the silk skirts and bustles. Gone was her whole appearance. Stiletto's technicians had completely changed the structure and appearance of her face and now she resembled a cross between a demon and a reptile. The fluorescent yellow slime oozing from the corners of her eyes was a touch Stiletto was particularly pleased with.

Spleenspew, the guard, was mean. He had been serving The Rabbit all his life, for his was an hereditary post. A complete bastard by all accounts, he had served in the Grakkam campaign, clearing out the uranium mines infested with the indigenous rebels, and had "cleared" many more with his hands and spiked knuckles than with his blaster. Spleenspew liked to get up close and personal.

Which was Sarah's situation at this moment. The local dialect was pretty much like Slavic mutant spat through gravel, and Sarah delivered her lines perfectly, demon eyes boring into Spleenspew's. She thought she had him, but brutal and mean as he was, he was also efficient. Feeling his welling thought communication, with lightning speed she drove the point of her blade through the mutant's throat, before the alarm could be given.

Unaware of the drama taking place hundreds of

levels below, Lord Stiletto wandered through the main entrance of The Rabbit's lair.

A frock coat and top hat is not every day wear on an asteroid, and the girl on reception, used to seeing battle-weary troops, and the scum of the universe, sensed trouble, a concern which was confirmed by the sensors that showed Stiletto was carrying more personal armaments than a Zidian space trooper.

Years of training had given Haydrift Eaglebeard lightning reflexes. Unarmed as he was, except for his bone blade which was able to escape detection by the sensors, he felt the incoming threat and as he spun, palmed the attacking energy with his new right hand. The wall to his side exploded with molten metal, and all elements of surprise were lost.

Sarah, Lady Bane, held the mutant eye up to the scanner and the door silently dematerialized to reveal the holding cell. Shivering with the intense cold, she glided across the freezing cell and released the captives from their bonds. Magnus and Susanna fell with sickening thuds to the frozen floor and Sarah realised she needed help.

Lord Stiletto had only gone about ten steps before alarms sounded and blast doors slammed down all around him. With no break in his stride or composure, he pulled a metallic capsule from his pocket and lobbed it into the busy atrium, full of soldiers, guards and mercenaries. The nerve toxin, to which he had been made immune, rendered a fatal paralysis on all within touch of its rapidly expanding vapour.

Eaglebeard knelt beside Sarah, and passed his right hand briefly across the foreheads of the two captives, who immediately began to show an improvement in their colour.

Extending his hand like a blade, he opened a fold in the very fabric of the universe, and within the blink of an eye, they were gone.



## SIX

### THE SMILE

Gregory played the last bars of My Funny Valentine, and with a satisfied smile, placed the vintage tenor saxophone on its stand by the library window.

Sunshine, Lord Stiletto's base, on the edge of The Horse Head Nebulae, was like a second home to him. He had his own private apartment, furnished with his unusual eclectic taste for Art Deco, but his favourite place on Sunshine was right here by the huge Library windows, looking out on one of the wonders of the universe. He never tired of the beautiful spectacle of the head rising from a red sea of gas and dust, although to Gregory's eye it was more like a dragon than a seahorse.

He picked up his glass and settling down into one of Stiletto's comfortable armchairs, sipped his port, and opened his book to the page where he had left off.

SEVEN  
THE SAVOY

“The square root of nothing is fuck all!”

Gregory spun around. He had heard that raucous tone before. Henrik.

The young man stood behind Gregory, a big smile beaming broadly on his friendly face, but Gregory knew Henrik was an agent of The Rabbit.

Pretending bonhomie, he engaged the charming young Swede in conversation, wondering as always, where the devil had Stiletto got to?

Lord Stiletto was sat with his pipe in a comfortable arm chair in the lounge at the Savoy, watching with wry amusement their conversation going on at the bar. He had no concern for his friend, but he was still troubled by the unanswered question, “Who was it that had knifed Gregory at the Fitzwilliam, and removed the package from his waistcoat pocket?” Surely not Henrik!

“And what brings you to London?” Gregory was politely enquiring.

“Oh, just here to catch a show,” the young man said, beaming. “*Wicked* is still playing, and I’m hoping to catch the Matisse exhibition at Tate Modern before it finishes.”

Gregory had finally caught sight of his friend across the lounge, and steered young Henrik into a rather smart looking armchair next to him.

“How’s the girl?” asked Stiletto evenly of Henrik.

“Well she had a hell of a headache and was out of action for a few days, but she’s around,” replied the debonair dandy.

Stiletto was always surprised, even here at the Savoy, at the curious and sometimes mocking glances their Victorian dress instigated. Still, he leant across to brush some fluff from his own trouser crease, then forward a fraction more to do likewise to young Henrik. The needle on his finger was so fine Henrik didn’t even feel it, but within seconds the Swede was unconscious. With a broadsheet to cover his recumbent form, he looked like an old gent who had dozed off whilst reading the paper. The two friends made their exit.

Waiting outside at the wheel of a vintage Bentley was Haydrift Eaglebeard. No sooner had Gregory and Stiletto settled in the rear seats than Eaglebeard shot the car out into the Strand, horn blaring, as he wove between the early afternoon traffic. Lady Bane as usual was riding shotgun, restored to her normal silk and

bustled self, but with a rather strange metallic contraption cradled in her arms that most peoples, wherever they might be in the universe, would recognise as a gun of some sort.

“What’s that?” enquired Gregory.

“It’s a gun of some sort,” Sarah replied with a smile.

EIGHT  
THE BANK JOB

Lord Stiletto strode through the lobby of the Union City Bank in his shirt sleeves, bowler hat and goggles, and one of his most garish purple check waistcoats. Unusually, the pipe clenched between his teeth was emitting a rather yellow plume of smoke.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” an anxious young lady bank employee said to him. “You can’t smoke he...” but before she could finish the sentence she was dropping where she stood. Stiletto caught her, breaking her fall, and laid her carefully on the marble floor.

Others were not so lucky, and clerks and security guards alike were hitting the floor left, right, and centre.

Once the coast was clear, into the lobby sauntered Haydrift Eaglebeard, although one could only identify him from his flowing beard and ponytail, as his face was covered, by what looked to Stiletto, a world war one gas mask.

The electronic security of the bank with its cameras, both overt and hidden, and the latest twenty-first century technology, was no match for Stiletto's future technicians, and had been disabled seconds before he came through the lobby door.

Still the safe complex had some good old-fashioned iron doors with top grade tumbler locks, although these would be no defence against his accomplice with his dimension breaching hand.

Sitting outside a bank in a vintage Bentley with the engine running might be a bit of a giveaway, so Gregory and Sarah were parked in the underground garage. With Stiletto's nerve agent, this time a mild version, and his neutralisation of the security system, they weren't expecting any problems with their escape. But somebody hadn't taken into account the tenacity of The Rabbit.

The Rabbit was sitting in the shadows, whiskers twitching, watching the occupants of the old turbocharged Bentley. With a twitch of his ears he gave the signal for the counter-offensive.

Lord Stiletto and Haydrift Eaglebeard knew exactly which vault contained the package, but when they slipped through reality into the vault, the window in the space time continuum closed behind them with a pop. The vault wasn't empty though. It contained a grizzly bear.

Had The Rabbit borrowed the grizzly bear from London Zoo, it might have been a little easier to manage, but this one had been taken from the Alaskan

wastes, and it was seriously hungry and pissed off. Its roar in the confined space was deafening. Its mistake, however, was standing up on its hind legs to offer its challenge.

With lightning speed, though an almost casual air, Eaglebeard reached through its chest and crushed its pounding heart. Unfortunately, fourteen hundred pounds of dead bear toppled forward, crushing and trapping him against the vault floor.

Sarah's gun of some sort had been built in the future by Lord Stiletto's technicians. Having access to the books in his library inspired a vast array of potential effects. One of their favourites was the Medusa ray, which like her fabled glare, turned the living to stone. At the moment though, it was creating explosions, which was useful because it had an approximation factor built in, and even if you missed the target all together, it could still be taken out by the environment, in this case shrapnel from the architecture, and motor vehicles in the underground car park.

Haydrift Eaglebeard came from an ancient and warrior-like race, and he was made of strong stuff. Still he was pinned to the floor, and had concussion, and the benefit of several broken ribs, one of which was causing some internal bleeding. Left to his own devices he would not have been able to extricate himself from under the dead weight of the bear, even with his new and special hand which was trapped beneath him. Fortunately, his accomplice was Lord Stiletto.

Strong as Stiletto was, he couldn't shift a four-

teen hundred pound carcass, but he had one of those iridium blades, said to be able to cut the fabric of the universe, although not in the way of Eaglebeard's hand, and he was able to joint the bear into manageable lumps. Fifteen minutes later a very broken and bloody Haydrift Eaglebeard sat on the floor, wondering with his friend, how the bloody hell they were going to get out of this one.

Being a serendipitous lot, where the thought of a friend often found that friend walking around the corner, or at the least, calling on the phone, at that moment the door of the vault momentarily hummed, then vanished, and silhouetted on its other side was Sarah, aka Lady Bane, holding a gun of some sort.

Back at the Savoy, clean and spruced up, with Eaglebeard's ribs healing below the bandages, the four friends, Gregory, Stiletto, Eaglebeard and Sarah, were joined for dinner in Gregory's private dining room, by Duke Magnus and Lady Susanna. Over dessert Magnus was amusingly recounting how the porters had discovered Henrik unconscious under his newspaper, and unable to awaken him, sent him off to Great Ormond Street Hospital in an ambulance, siren blaring, blue light flashing.



## NINE

### THE MISTAKE

Duke Magnus and Lady Susanna's passion lay at the university at Stockholm, where the duke, like Stiletto, had a special library. Unfortunately, their particular library, and home, had been destroyed in the parallel universe of the Earth that had been blown up by The Rabbit. In *this* universe, there would be another Magnus and Susanna in Stockholm.

Being a scholar of ancient Earth languages and sharing Duke Magnus's passion for books and libraries, Stiletto was going to take Magnus and Susanna, along with Lady Bane, to visit the library in Alexandria. However, top hats and silk dresses would definitely cause a bit of a stir, so Stiletto, also an expert in ancient cultures, had made a pre-visit to Rome to purchase togas for the gentlemen, and stolas for the ladies. After all, he had a mentor who liked to buy his suits in Rome.

In future days everyone is fitted with inbuilt neural

translators, so the myriad lifeforms of the universe can communicate with each other, so it had been a simple affair for Stiletto to fashion his friends with the ability to speak Latin and Egyptian, although with a Roman accent, as they would be posing as tourists, which of course, they were.

It was true that the Girl with the Red Hair had also had her planet blown up, but she had shifted effortlessly back into the Sweden of this universe by seemingly eliminating her parallel self. In fact, being essentially a good person, although she had chosen to serve The Rabbit, she had arranged for her parallel self to have a new life on an Earth colony in the future.

Duke Magnus was sat on a marble bench in the great library in Alexandria reading a scroll of Plato's Republic, in what was possibly Plato's own hand. A great scholar of Greek philosophy, he knew the text inside out and this version contained several arguments and explanations of the theory of forms that had never made it to posterity. Sat on the bench beside him, his wife, Lady Susanna, kept on breaking into howls of laughter as she absorbed one of the funnier plays of Aristophanes.

The Rabbit couldn't give a fig for the achievements of Greek thought, or any other kind of human achievement for that matter. All The Rabbit wanted, was results.

The Girl with the Red Hair, now fully recovered from being shot by Stiletto at the Fitzwilliam, was struggling to keep up with the events of the last few

months. Recruited by The Rabbit, she had witnessed the destruction of the Earth, only to return to a carbon copy of her previous existence. The Rabbit was an enigma, but serving him was fun, and it transpired she had a talent for mayhem on a cosmic scale.

Lady Bane, a woman of spontaneity and action, had got bored in the Library, and she and Stiletto were exploring the adjacent streets. They passed easily as Romans, for Egypt was part of the Empire and Alexandria was full of merchants and military, but for all his wisdom, Stiletto had forgotten about slaves. No noble Roman lady would be out and about without personal attendants easing the way.

Stiletto and Sarah had been marked, but marked as what? The beggar with the scarred face knew they were wrong but didn't know why. Clearly, they were noble Romans, but unlike any he had ever seen.

Stiletto wasn't worried. He had seen the beggar in the shadows, and the ragamuffin messenger who raced off, and had correctly assessed the situation. Trading his top hat for a toga had been fun, and its folds hid a treasury of concealed weaponry.

Turning to warn Sarah of the threat, he was astonished to see she was gone. Astonishment changed to incredulity as the arrow hit him from behind, and pierced his right shoulder. He staggered a few steps, and then fell to the cobbled street.

The Girl with the Red Hair watched from the shadows. She had seen Lady Bane taken, and Stiletto shot, and watched as men in rags fought with the badly

wounded adventurer. Deciding to act, she looped her wire over the head of the first attacker, removing his head with a tug, and drove the point of her blade through the back of the neck of a second. It was all the relief Stiletto required, and he quickly dispatched the other two, blood seeping through his white toga where the arrow shaft stood proud. The adventurer had miscalculated, and where was Sarah?

TEN  
THE STAKE

"It's not Vegas or Monaco." Lady Bane looked comfortable wearing a new gown, with her hair fashionably coiffed, and an ivory and gold dice cup held in her manicured hand.

"It's basically the forerunner of backgammon, and Hazid here is a fanatic." She gestured to their bejeweled host, who was wearing the finest silks, with a thick black beard, and an evil glint in his eye.

"And what did you use for the stake?" enquired Stiletto.

"Well, there were no vampires."

"Betting stake."

"Just teasing. I gave him information. I showed him my tablet and told him I was a Seer, and this was my magic window. Those books set in Rome by Colleen McCullough are like gold. Hazid now knows the next hundred years of Roman occupation of Carthage and Egypt, including Gaius Marius, Lucius Cornelius Sulla,

Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius. The wily old fox.  
He and his ancestors will make a fortune."

A servant girl entered and offered Stiletto a golden  
goblet of wine.

"It's quite safe, and absolutely delicious. Try the  
Larks' tongues!"

## ELEVEN

### THE CABIN

Lord Stiletto and his blood brother, Alex Lagenschripp Esquire, known to his friends as 'Schripp, were on their way to the rendezvous. To avoid attention, they had picked up a car in San Francisco, and currently were driving through the back roads and ways of Yosemite National Park. There was no satellite navigation out here, just well-honed experience, and an old-fashioned paper map.

Although it was August, by the time they reached the vicinity of the cabin, it was dark and very cold. Pulling his greatcoat tight for warmth, Stiletto had swapped his top hat for a bear skin cap with flaps that covered his ears and laced warmly under his chin. His trusty goggles remained perched on the top of his head. Funny how things worked out! He patted his hat like an old friend, which in a way, it was.

Silently the two friends approached the cabin through the freezing night. 'Schripp had a selection of

sharp and blunt weapons concealed about his person and for silence carried an ultra-modern crossbow he had picked up at a hunting shop in San Francisco. Stiletto's fingerless gloved hands cradled a gun of some sorts, and just for the hell of it, he had set it to Medusa.

'Schripp could feel the sweat trickle down his cheek and freeze in place as they stood waiting on either side of the cabin door. With a nod of understanding Stiletto put his hand silently on the latch which opened easily and with a determined rush the two friends were inside.

'Schripp was the first to get his bearings. Years of travelling with Stiletto had honed his sense of spontaneity. He handed his crossbow to the Maître d', took off his coat, and accepted a glass of brandy. Although the dining room was lit by a dozen chandeliers from the high ceiling, there was only a single table laid for dinner by the fire. Dressed in an immaculate nineteenth century dinner jacket and seated in an armchair by the fire was the Enabler, last seen by Stiletto and 'Schripp, two days earlier, outside a bar in downtown San Francisco.



## TWELVE

### THE HRYM

Like Inspector Poirot, The Enabler was a small dark Belgian, but unlike the inspector, he didn't have a ridiculous moustache.

Lord Stiletto put his cutlery together on his plate, tines down, and drained the last of the Château Lafite. Their host had truly presented them with a meal of a lifetime. A sudden explosion outside shook the building and a dozen glass chandeliers made the music of war. Cannon fire had punctuated the meal, occasionally drowning out the marvellous strains of the string quartet, but their host assured them that in fact they were quite safe.

"I believe you have been here before?" commented The Enabler, offering the two friends cigars. Lord Stiletto politely declined, took his empty pipe out of his pocket, and gripped it firmly between his teeth.

"I understand you are looking for a package?" continued the debonair Belgian.

'Schripp had passed on the cigar but took a generous sip of their host's splendid port.

"Yes, and yes," replied Lord Stiletto. "I was able to render a certain assistance at Smolensk and we have mislaid a certain wax sealed package."

"And what does this package contain?" The Enabler asked with a mischievous look.

The two friends looked aghast but maintained a subtle silence.

"I understand The Rabbit has taken delivery of the package," the Belgian continued dryly, "and it seems to me he has just been playing games with you."

'Schripp could feel his temper rising but with a breath in and out returned to his usual equanimity.

"We have had some difficulty retrieving the package," Stiletto admitted, as the Maître d' poured more port into his glass, "but we have every confidence in your services. You come very highly recommended."

The Belgian's next words filled the two adventurers with dread, and the normally unflappable Stiletto almost spilt his port.

"The package is in the hands of The Hrym."

## THIRTEEN

### THE SPIDER

The four friends, Stiletto, Gregory, Eaglebeard, and 'Schripp, stood in the library window looking at the view of the nearby nebula, understanding a shared love of the universe.

Tomorrow they must leave and do battle with The Hrym.

The Hrym was a nice man, at least in appearance. Unless you looked deep into his eyes. There dwelt a coldness and vacancy so empty, that it would freeze the blood of Death himself. For The Hrym was thoroughly and completely evil.

What is good in the universe is love. A love of life, of existence itself. The love of a dewdrop on an Acacia leaf, the soar and tilt of an Eagle's wing, the double sunset on the planet of Hoth Minor. The moments of life that make existence so special. The shared experiences and moments that go to create true friendship.

But all these were meaningless concepts to The

Hrym, who was a vacuum of love, of life, of positivity. Many had tried to analyse why The Hrym was as he was. A broken home, a traumatic environment, the proximity of his home planet to a destructive burst of Gamma radiation, but truth be known, The Hrym was as he was because he was a complete and utter bastard. At least that's what Stiletto reasoned as he went through his check list in preparation for the coming assault.

Haydrift Eaglebeard was more prosaic. A life spent following a philosophical and spiritual path, true of all the friends, had taught him to let go of the past and future events and only truly live in the present moment. What is, is, and only now in this second of existence does the experience of life truly take place. Good or evil is a choice.

Life on The Hrym's world was one of drudgery, hatred, and loss of hope, if hope in this grey and negative place had ever existed. To step onto this world was to be assailed by a draining waste of nothingness, and no more was this felt than in the direct presence of The Hrym.

Because of the sophisticated defences of The Hrym, the friends had to drop off forty kilometres outside the city and hike in.

The atmosphere was a mixture of sulphurous and other toxic chemicals, and if one was to take a litmus test, one could confidently hold their strip of paper against the grade scale, and record a pH of 1. Lord

Stiletto had provided special lightweight space suits to protect the friends from the planet's toxic fog.

Coming over the ridge, they saw the city below them. Even though the design was meant to strike discord into the hearts of all thinking beings, the friends burst out laughing. Ahead in the centre of the barren plain of smashed and jagged rock was a perfect replica of a cul-de-sac from an anonymous suburb. Each house was perfectly represented. Yet the scale was massive. Each "house" was thousands of metres high and would have dwarfed the tallest of Earth's sky scrapers.

By reasons of proportion, the base of each house measured several kilometres square and who knew what concealed, treacherous warrens were awaiting them there.

What is consciousness and what is its range? The Hrym's consciousness, through the machinations of The Rabbit, had gone through some violent evolutionary steps, and now took in all of the planet. In a way, one could say The Hrym was the planet. Every stone, every rock was a part of his being and so he was aware of the friends as soon as they materialised on his surface. Like a spider sitting at the centre of his web he waited for the flies to come to him.

## FOURTEEN

### THE BAR

The busy bar was based on The Hrym's readings of modern Japanese literature. It was his own take on Monkey Brain Sushi. He abducted devotees of his favourite soap opera, locked their heads into a vice like structure that sat on the edge of his pine wood bars, and gave them a quick jolt with an electronic device that liquefied the contents. Then his customers drove a narrow titanium tube through the weakened cranium and sucked out the gelatinous brains, like a glorified milk shake. This way, The Hrym joked to his dinner guests, they really did have brains like mush, instead of simply seeming like it.

The four friends sat at the bar wondering how they were going to get out of this one. The choice wasn't so much which brand of cola or ginger beer, but which nationality. 'Schripp sat unhappily on his rotating stool playing with his titanium straw.

They had gone through endless walkways of mind-

numbing banality. Expecting a dark underground world of fire and nightmare traps, Constantine meets Raiders of the Lost Ark. It had instead been mile upon mile of vacant and numbing arcades, malls and precincts, all brightly neon lit with bland neutral shades.

'Schripp was a man on the edge and clearly about to snap.

Gregory grabbed the light but strong metallic straw from the counter, powered it down through the temporal lobe of the rigidly held smartly coiffed head, and sucked with a mighty slurp.

It was too much for 'Schripp. As the beautiful but vacuous barmaid leaned forward to see if he required assistance, he pivoted in his seat, his razor sharp blade whistled with the sound of its passing, and stopped one millimetre away from her beautiful although rather anorexic looking neck.

"No thank you."

With that all hell broke loose. Alarms went off, and with concussive retorts, the heads of all the other customers exploded, covering the friends with a fine patina of neural phlegm.

With blank resignation the barmaid's slightly pouty lips blew 'Schripp a kiss and then her head too exploded. Bone fragments embedded in his face and his vision destroyed, the polite but exasperated warrior passed his blade to Stiletto, took a napkin from the bar and wiped the dura mater from his agonised and newly blinded eyes.

FIFTEEN  
THE DARK

The only one untouched by the carnage was Haydrift Eaglebeard. He didn't know if it was lightning reflexes or instinct that had moved his hand, but he found he was in a pink cavity where the exploding neural tissue and fragmented bone had stopped about an arm's length away from him. He would have to work on that, a detached part of his mind thought. With a bit of expansion he could have protected the group, although 'Schripp's proximity to the barmaid meant he couldn't be helped. Still, he passed his hand over the damaged face of his friend and the pain, although not the blindness, was taken away.

'Schripp was focused on the eyes of the girl. His sword, razor sharp, was a hair's breadth from her throat, and then the world exploded. His face was an agony of pierced flesh and his world was replaced with darkness.

With the calmness of a warrior he turned to where



he knew Stiletto would be, and handing him his blade, took a napkin from the bar, and wiped the pureed flesh from his face and useless eye sockets.

He felt the presence of Eaglebeard, and a callused hand was passed gently over his face. The pain disappeared, but the blackness remained.

"Come on Zatoichi," Eaglebeard whispered, taking 'Schripps sword from Stiletto, and then taking his friend's arm they sprinted out of the bar.

The alarms were still shrieking and 'Schripp slid on the slimy floor but managed to keep up. After one hundred metres he felt the pressure to stop and the tsuka of his katana was slid into his hand. 'Schripp pushed his awareness out, and found that with the absence of his vision, his hearing and smell were super acute, and he silently thanked his old Master for the constant drills with and without a blindfold

A concussion rocked them as Stiletto fired a gun of some sort, and the friends raced off down the corridor, Haydrift keeping close, but only maintaining the barest of touches arm to arm. 'Schripp could sense a space coming on the left, and the threat concealed there. Blade held lightly in his right hand, left arm brushing his friend's, he moved across to that side of the passage, sword tip slightly raised as he became open to the void.

He felt the change of pressure in the confined space and with unerring accuracy slid his stance forward to meet the attack, gliding his blade through the neck of the Tark mercenary. There was a thud as

the mercenary's head hit the floor and rolled away. He could hear the sounds of battle around him, and instinctively knew the feel and presence of his three friends. The time for concealment was long over, and taking weapons from their fallen opponents, they sheathed their blades, and unleashed the heavy firepower. In all, fifty-nine seconds had passed since his world exploded, and apart from Eaglebeard's joke, not one word had been uttered.

"Now!" yelled Eaglebeard, and 'Schripp felt a powerful heave as they all slipped through the portal Eaglebeard had opened with his amazing new hand.

SIXTEEN

THE PERSONAL ASSISTANT

The Rabbit wasn't the only one who had been recruiting at the Steampunk Festival at Gavle, Sweden.

Aiasdotter was the best PA The Hrym had ever had. Efficient, organized, brilliant, she kept his cosmic empire ticking like clockwork. Working for such a totally evil being had caused her to make some psychological adjustments, and some nights she woke up screaming from the vacant banality of it all, but Aiasdotter knew she was a crucial element of the friend's campaign against The Rabbit.

All hell had broken loose. The Hrym was not happy. It was impossible to tell from his face, which showed no sign of personality or emotion, but his instant annihilation of all the barmaids in every part of the city, along with their friends and families, was a sure indication that yesterday's events had got under his skin.

Confident from the moment of their landing

outside his city, he had played with the bastard retards like wasps in a jam-jar. He was incandescent when they escaped. Over and over, he replayed the vid of the tall one losing his eyes, but his satisfaction was spoiled by the calm and determined way the tall man then carried on, as if he had his face destroyed on a daily basis. And, how was it possible for him to fight so well?

Aiasdotter placed the cup of tepid water on The Hrym's desk, and returned to her duties. It was hard to maintain her own sense of calm when she saw the events of the battle and escape played over and over again.

And then she saw it. Computers had long ago left the realm of hardware. The software was now tied into the neural processing power of the user's brain, although in big business, or in the employ of cosmic psychopaths, it was heavily encrypted. Still, being such a trusted part of The Hrym's network, she had very high clearance access, and accessing security updates, she had just learnt the whereabouts of the Package. Hard to imagine it was still intact.

She had no chance of getting a message to Gregory, so she would have to act. Leaving her desk, she said something banal to The Hrym, and headed down to the storage facility.

The Hrym was disappointed. Aiasdotter was a fantastic asset, even if she was leaking information to the Retards.

SEVENTEEN  
THE SPECTACLES

The friends had gathered for a dinner at Gregory's private dining room at the Savoy. Gregory mused that they could be forgiven for being mistaken for a private dining club rather than a close-knit band of cosmic adventurers.

Lord Stiletto had particularly enjoyed the quail although he had had some issues with eating them. But what was the difference between them and organic poultry, or estate shot pheasant? Just that quail are cute. Not a thought he would have been too happy sharing with the table. It was good that the seven were all together again. A magical number, although in truth and in secret they were nine. He was just settling down to some goats' cheese when they were disturbed by a knock on the door, and the Maître d', profusely apologising for the interruption, supervised the wheeling in of a large widescreen TV. He placed a remote control, and a small engraved wooden box in

front of Gregory, bowed and left the room, silently closing the large double doors behind him.

"What the devil," growled Eaglebeard.

"I thought there were no interruptions," commented Magnus.

"Is it a surprise?" asked Lady Sarah.

"Sorry," replied a disturbed Gregory, "I'm as much in the dark as you are."

"Then you had better press Play," said 'Schripp, his empty sockets holding them all where his useless eyes had been removed, and skin transplanted from his buttocks had been grafted over to cover them.

Gregory picked up the remote control and meeting the eyes of his friends, carefully pressed Play.

Sat in a simple grey plastic chair, terror etched into the lines around her eyes, was the limp and haggard form of Aiasdotter.

Held loosely in her bruised, bleeding hands was a small wax sealed package.

"I think you had better open the box," said Stiletto calmly.

"It might be a trap," purred the Lady Susanna.

"I don't think so," replied Gregory, and releasing the catch of the beautifully crafted box, he took out a pair of round, golden ladies' spectacles.

"What's the engraving on the box," asked Eaglebeard.

"Oh, only a Rabbit."

## EIGHTEEN

### THE PAIN

In the end it was all down to the slime. The slime extracted from the gall bladder of a very angry space cucumber. This special ingredient was used in the creation of a neural thread that allowed the user to explore the secret pathways of the universe.

Gregory had been metaphorically bashing his head against the walls of reason, trying to come up with a plan to rescue Aiasdotter, when all along what was required was the ability to slip under the surface.

Lady Sarah looked like she had gone several rounds with a Megafraken pit fighter, and that was before Stiletto's technicians changed her face. It was she who had volunteered to use the slime to penetrate the dark planet of The Hrym.

Like a corrupted Japanese Daimyo listening to the screams of a boiling Dutch cabin boy, The Hrym was carried away by the music coming from Aiasdotter's cell. He didn't have to actually be present, because

tuned into every nuance of the minutiae of his planet, he was aware of everything.

The Hrym was a connoisseur, and just as the conductor of the Berlin Symphony Orchestra could hear the minutest change in the tone of his lead violinist's E string, so too, The Hrym felt the minutest of fluctuations in the terror and pain experienced by his erstwhile brilliant and efficient private secretary.

Connected to his neural network, The Hrym linked straight to the cell where Aiasdotter was being kept and tortured.

In the Hrym's future world the dimensional reality of neural communication and entertainment had come a long way from the 3D cinema and TV back at the beginning of twenty-first Century Earth. It was as if The Hrym was in the cell, and had brought his presence with him.

Sat there in the chair was Aiasdotter, and yet The Hrym knew it was not her. Like the skin of a deep ocean octopus, his supermarket suit and shiny shoes changed from pale blue to a raging crimson colour, as the sensitivity of the neural net picked up the subtle shift that his physical presence would never reveal.

The colour change was a step too far. Haydrift Eaglebeard who had been stood silently in the corner, momentarily lost control. Using an ancient Tibetan meditation technique, he had been holding himself in a stasis of No Thing whilst the switch between Aiasdotter and Lady Sarah had taken place.

Seven and a half seconds were required, and to



Sarah strapped to the plastic chair, it seemed like an infinite moment of torment.

Suddenly The Hrym was standing before her, face almost catatonic in its banality, yet his whole presence burning red like Lucifer on a bad day.

And then, that kindly face appeared from the corner and with a few waves of his hand, Sarah's pain was gone.

## NINETEEN

### THE TRAM

Eight Earth weeks earlier...

The image was burnt onto Gregory's retinas. The pink manic eyes of The Rabbit in the window of the Belgian tram.

Stiletto had taken a wrong turn, in more than one sense of the word. Now his old Bugatti was screaming in reverse between medieval buildings as the looming city tram pursuing them gained on the startled friends.

The day had begun much better. They had been in Ghent, to attend the Science Fiction Convention. Gregory, Stiletto and Lady Bane had arrived in good time and made their presence in the great hall. Comic artist legend, Ian Gibson, a well-respected Master of the genre, and well represented in Lord Stiletto's fabled library, was unexpectedly at the adjacent table. Stiletto was delighted to meet this unsuspecting mentor, and was fortunate to spend time talking to him and learning from the old Master. Was this why he

miscalculated the shenanigans of The Rabbit? Like an avalanche that starts with a single pebble, the origin of Karma is often lost in the mists of events.

Rubber tyres burned and howled as Stiletto accelerated the car in reverse, horn blaring to clear the Saturday evening crowds. Once over a small bridge he applied his handbrake, and the car squealed in a tight arc almost about its own axis and shot backwards in a straight line down a narrow side street.

Stuck on its tracks, the tram hammered past. "It was the Girl with the Red Hair," commented Lady Bane. A part of Gregory's mind had noticed her, driving the tram at the fleeing car, but most of his horizon had been filled with the piercing pink eyes of The Rabbit.

Gregory was reasonably sure that vampires didn't exist, at least in the daytime, so he was quite surprised to meet a Steampunk one. Back at the convention, he and Sarah were manning the table whilst Stiletto was off wandering the halls. A beautiful lady in full role play, had been talking to Gregory and had his full attention. It was the teeth he found so fascinating, they looked completely genuine. She claimed she had paid thousands for the dental work.

Lady Bane had seen some sights in her life. Stiletto coming through the door in his shirt sleeves and waistcoat, but still wearing his bowler hat and goggles, threw the broken, bloody chair leg into the waste paper basket.

"Goddamn vampires," he spoke calmly as he took

his empty pipe from his pocket and nonchalantly put it between his teeth.

"What, not the one talking to Gregory?" she asked in amusement.

"The very same. The genuine article. He actually invited her in, to his room." He chuckled, taking his pipe out to speak more clearly, "Besotted, quite besotted!"

TWENTY  
SILENT TEARS

Lady Bane shed a silent tear as she threw the blue rose into Stiletto's gaping grave.

An unseasonal mist sent cold fingers around the gravestones in the Oxford cemetery. Glancing over at his companions ringing the graveside, Gregory pulled his overcoat collar up against the drizzling rain and walked away to the waiting cars.

## TWENTY-ONE

### THE ASSASSINATION

Henrik, a nice young man at heart, had been told to up the ante. The order to assassinate Lord Stiletto had come directly from The Rabbit and had put Henrik under a great deal of stress and confusion.

He wasn't a killer, he knew that in his heart, and basically, he had quite liked Gregory and Stiletto when he had met them in the now vapourised Sweden, that vanished reality of his planet Earth. He realised that he owed his life to The Rabbit, but knew deep inside that he wasn't a murderer.

Lord Stiletto had been out driving in the Oxfordshire countryside in his favourite Bugatti. It was an original car from 1939, one he had picked up from the Milan home of Ettore Bugatti himself, just as the Second World War was kicking off. He had driven it down to Sicily where he had shipped it over to Malta, and there stored it in a cave on the small adjacent island of Gozo.

Now he was racing along the road to Lechlade, wind buffeting his bowler, goggles firmly in place.

Henrik had gone for an indirect method of murder. His choice, spiked metal sheets nailed into the tarmac surface of the Lechlade road. Almost immediately behind the caltrops he had parked a traction engine, recently stolen from the neighbouring village's steam fair. He felt a nascent thrill in perverting Stiletto's love of the arcane and ancient.

Stiletto came around the corner in third gear doing eighty-five miles per hour, and saw the traction engine stationary in his path. Taking his foot off the gas that powered the super turbocharged engine, he slammed it on the brake, and the Bugatti skidded sideways down the narrow Cotswold roadway. When he hit the caltrops, the tyres exploded on the sharp metal spikes, and as it left the ground, the beautiful old car began to roll, and accelerated towards the waiting engine.

Henrik had been having second thoughts about his murderous course. Several days before the date with Stiletto, he had taken the opportunity to send a message to Gregory. Stiletto took some persuading to sacrifice his beautiful sports car, but with Haydrift Eaglebeard as a passenger, and some nifty hand jive, at the moment of impact, the two friends were travelling through an alternate dimension. The classic sports car, almost a national treasure, exploded in a ball of fire as it slammed into the huge steel roller in front of the traction engine, which had been artfully placed in the Bugatti's path.

## TWENTY-TWO

### THE FUNERAL

“You Bastards!” Sarah was beside herself with anger. Anger, confusion, relief, and joy all mixed together as she stared in disbelief at Stiletto calmly sat in the armchair by the fire, gripping his empty pipe between grinning teeth.

“We had to make it convincing,” Haydrift said, placing a kindly hand on her shoulder.

Spinning angrily around she brushed away the comforting gesture and turned towards 'Schripp, “And you?”

He had no eyes to give expression to his feelings, yet Lady Bane knew from his bearing that he too had been a party to the deception.

“Always wanted to attend my own funeral,” Stiletto spoke, in his calm, and reasonable voice, and with an unseen communication, the friends left the room for Stiletto and Lady Bane to make their peace.



TWENTY-THREE  
SLIME AND MOTION

Where was Stiletto?

Stockholm, as it happened, so no help from that quarter. Gregory was at the Royal Festival Hall on the south bank of the Thames in London, waiting for Eaglebeard who had been delayed. Why he would want to be stuck in traffic rather than use his hand was baffling.

The Snowdon exhibition hadn't disappointed. Amazing photographs and better yet, no sign of The Rabbit.

Sunday. Breakfast and Campari weren't the usual mix, but Gregory had travelled down to Brixton to have breakfast at the new café bar, Parissi. Everybody said Brixton was the new happening place in London, safer now with gentrification, and definitely no trouble.

The girl, sat on the stool with her back to the bar, facing Gregory, didn't look quite right. Her face was odd, and Gregory couldn't quite put his finger on it. It

was rude to stare. She was pretty with a nice frock, but pretty strange at the same time. Then a lump about the size of a marble appeared in her cheek, and slowly drifted down, under her mouth, and up the other side, disappearing near her left ear. Gregory was both fascinated and seriously alarmed, and forgot that it was rude to stare.

Suddenly her skin peeled back as the girl's face exploded into a miasma of tentacular activity, like a worms-nest on acid. No features to speak of, just slime and motion.

So, no trouble then.

Like the eye of a hurricane, the rest of the girl was normal, except for the large and weird looking gun that she slowly removed from her tiny handbag.

Spyros, the proprietor, who had been making a customer's latte behind the counter, calmly leant over and threw the freshly made coffee into the heaving mass of motion. The nightmare creature emitted a blood curdling scream of agony, as the tentacles thrashed blindly, only to be cut short by the razor edge of Gregory's sword, drawn like fluid poetry from the folds of his stylish Abercrombie overcoat, parting the writhing mass from the attractive body below.

Handing Gregory a napkin to wipe the slime from his antique blade, Spyros placed the cup in the sink, and with a smile, dryly commented, "Goddamn aliens!"

TWENTY-FOUR  
THE STUDENT

It was part of her therapy.

Aiasdotter had suffered both psychological and physical torture at the hands of The Hyrm, and although she had been “healed” by Stiletto’s medical technicians, there was still the *pain*.

Aiasdotter had been given into the care of ‘Schripp, and his first act had been both training aid, and bonding technique. He had taken away her vision.

It was only temporary, a blockage of the functioning of the occipital cortex, and she knew that when she earned it, she would get her sight back.

The crack of the shinai against the men, the grill mask of her Kendo armour, made her head rattle, although in truth it was only a light tap with the bamboo sword.

“Feel,” ‘Schripp encouraged for the hundredth time.

Again, she waited. It wasn’t like being in the dark;

there was no light, no vision. All her other senses had become incredibly acute. She could smell 'Schripp's sweat in the confines of the room and hear the slow beating of his heart, but the physical senses were not fast enough for what she was trying to do. She had to feel the attack.

Time and again 'Schripp had told her, "You must feel the intent. Do not think."

They had spent months disciplining her mind, that she might learn to lose her thoughts.

There was no noise, no movement, just her own action. The shinai in her hands moved with lightning speed, to be held vertical by her left ear to block the cut, and the crack of the clashing bamboo was deafening.

Her feeling of triumph was short lived as a fraction of a second later the right side of her men was lightly struck, and that patient voice spoke right beside her.

"And again."

## TWENTY-FIVE THE GRADUATION

She was allowed to choose three weapons. She chose two blades, one a katana in a specially adapted carbon fibre saya, instead of the traditional bamboo. It was made to sit flush against her back, angled left for the “traditional draw.” Also, a four-inch double edged knife in a wrist sheath, and a Walther PPK. This was a beautiful, slightly old-fashioned gun, favoured by Ian Fleming’s fictional secret agent, and only marginally adapted by Stiletto’s technicians. It was made of a futuristic silicon metallic composite that was incredibly light, and it never ran out of bullets. The original idea was from a combination of a stacking CD system in the boot of a car Stiletto had once driven in 1980’s Earth, and the joke about the bottle of Guinness, that magically refilled every time it was emptied.

“What have we here?”

Aiasdotter glanced around. She did look a little odd. Given a choice of clothing she had picked a mid-length

skirt of tartan check, bright red leggings, and lime green dock martins with small pink stars on them. They were the high legged ones, laced nearly to her knees. The ensemble was completed with a Minnie the Minx T shirt, and a specially adapted grey-green bomber jacket cut to conceal the katana at her back. Hair dyed green to match her boots, the only thing The Hyrm would have recognised were the spectacles she still chose to wear.

If she had been several decades ahead in time, no one would have batted an eye. Here in an early 1970's London pub facing four skinheads though, she stood out like a sore thumb.

"You taking the piss?"

This from a stubble headed young man with a swastika tattooed in the centre of his forehead. These boys would happily beat the crap out of anyone, brutalise children, generally cause mayhem and destruction, and believed that women were only good for sex. The woman in the tartan dress had the fashion appearance of one who had evolved beyond their simplistic and brutal mind set, and they were confused by the look in her eyes.

Aiasdotter stood to leave.

"Excuse me please," she said.

"Fuck off," said the leader, pawing at her breast as she tried to squeeze past.

She didn't even need her armoury. She took the hand in a motion that flowed with its intent, applying force to the wrist, simultaneously rotating the shoul-

der, and smashing his face into the edge of the table as she snapped his wrist.

The other three skinheads were completely stunned. They lived daily with violence, but at their instigation and control, in their man's world.

The second had already dropped, jaw dislocated and broken in two places. He would survive but was screaming on the floor and at that moment Aiasdotter was in heaven. Her vision was clear, she felt in control and she was feeling confident. The scream in her ear as savage nails ripped through her cheeks, and stockinged legs wrapped around her thighs, caught her by surprise. Ironically it had been one of the girlfriends that had reacted first, jumping Aiasdotter from behind like a frenzied animal.

Ignoring the pain in her face, Aiasdotter pivoted her elbow in a tight circle, driving in under the pretty jawline of the girl, who collapsed to the pub floor.

The smash of glass alerted Aiasdotter, and moving instinctively towards the sound, the knife was suddenly in her hand and opening the descending arm from wrist to armpit. The Skinhead screamed, dropping the jagged remnants of the pint glass, and Aiasdotter sidestepped the welling blood and exposed muscle, and slipped out through the door of the Ladies toilet.

Bright sunlight filled the sky, casting a shadow on the alien beast that was already in full leap towards her. Still holding the short bladed knife, she dropped

below the oncoming claws and ravening teeth, and sliced along the underbelly of the monster.

It was like attacking dragon's scales; the thing's chest and belly were seemingly impenetrable to her blade. Remaining calm, she switched the knife to her other hand, drew the Walther from her concealed holster, and even as the creature was turning on her, squeezed off three rapid shots into its left eye.

She couldn't stop the momentum and only her incredibly rapid reflexes prevented her from being crushed below its dead weight. The razor-sharp claws had caught her leg and her lovely red tights were laddered. So was the muscle in her thigh.

Limping slightly, Aiasdotter looked around the sunny forest clearing searching for the exit, and the next confrontation of her challenging graduation.



TWENTY-SIX  
THE WINDOW

“Five lattes, a hot chocolate and a cappuccino.”

They were sat in the small lounge adjacent to Lord Stiletto's magnificent library, on comfortable couches.

Stiletto placed the tray on the table and took a seat by Sarah who was spellbound by the view. No matter how many times one visited, the view through the window that took up the whole side of the room, the Horse Head Nebulae, stars twinkling amongst the dust clouds, was truly breathtaking.

‘Schripp took his mug from the table and raising it to the friends, toasted, “Aiasdotter.”

“You must be so proud,” purred Lady Susanna.

‘Schripp just beamed, the blank skin covering his empty eye sockets seeming to fill with expression.

“She was just fantastic,” Eaglebeard enthusiastically commented, spilling his coffee in his excitement.

“It was the last room that did it for me,” Magnus said with a sigh. “The seven barbarian warriors in the

dungeon. Brilliant move to put the solitary torch into the piss bucket.”

“Ah, well, of course, she had had no sight for fourteen months.”

“All told, how long was her training?” asked Sarah.

“Seven years of life time although in Earth time it was only seven weeks.”

They had all been silent observers to the graduation, as if they were in the simulator with Aiasdotter. Eaglebeard, several times, had stepped forward to help, but been no more present than a ghost in a haunted castle. When the light disappeared, they had all had the benefit of infrared vision for Aiasdotter’s final amazing confrontation, demonstrating her mastery of her ancient Japanese blade.

At that moment, Gregory, who had been deep in conversation with Stiletto in the corner, but keeping a watchful eye on the door, stood up and led the applause as a smiling Aiasdotter came in with her steaming mug and made her way to her seat by the window as she received the hugs and congratulations of her friends.

TWENTY-SEVEN  
THE DISAPPEARANCE

Gregory had vanished. A passionate traveller, he often disappeared for long periods as he explored galaxies, visiting the beautiful and exciting. Sometimes he just spent quality time on Earth at a retreat in Nepal, or playing chess with friends in Paris.

Still, he was always contactable. By the time Stiletto realised his friend was missing, he still hadn't grasped the extent of the problem. Searching Gregory's favourite haunts in Marais, Paris, he felt his friend, clear but distant, cry out in pain.

It took the adventurer several days to locate his friend at a government facility in the Arizona desert, with security and protection that shouldn't exist in the twenty-first century. Stiletto made a call to an old Swedish friend who had served in the French Foreign Legion, a giant in stature and action. He was impulsive, but a good man, and more importantly, Stiletto trusted

him with his life. Stitch. He was the covert ninth member of his team.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

### THE FALL

The thing about riding a bike harkened back to the lone warrior on his horse, the cowboy crossing the desert on his pinto.

Stitch felt the vibration of the big V-twin engine as his bike ate up the desert road. The sensitive Nordic giant could feel the silence despite the roar of the pipes and the beat of the engine, and once again that day, grinned the happy smile of one truly at peace with his journey.

The bike itself was beautiful. He had picked it up from a custom shop in Phoenix and they hadn't asked any questions when he had supplied a few items from Stiletto's technicians for them to install. Mostly weapon holsters and concealed compartments, they came in raw titanium and had been sprayed to match the pearl metallic yellow colour and finish of the bike. Stitch was riding towards his destination with more fire power than a New York City SWAT team.

Gregory was being held deep in the facility. He was immobilised, and wires were attached to his cortex and fed into the machine that tormented his mind, whilst stealing his memories.

Stiletto looked at his watch. The timing was critical. He thought of his friends, and instantly they were all in communication with him. His technicians had done wonders with the information Aiasdotter had revealed of The Hrym's neural network, and had even further improved the system. It had taken weeks of training but now each of the friends was conversant with accessing and using their private network, that had a degree of processing power the early 21st century could only dream about.

One second, Haydrift Eaglebeard was in place, high on a gantry in the underground bunker, and the next he was falling. He tried to maintain calm. The wind was screaming in his ears and his eyes watered as he plummeted hundreds of metres to the steel floor below. Now the years of meditation, to maintain equilibrium within the heart of the storm, would pay off. He would only have one attempt.

Silence had been maintained but the team had all snapped into Eaglebeard's video-feed as he rocketed downwards and then, with a flash, the feed was gone.

## TWENTY-NINE THE FACILITY

Stitch throttled back on the big V-twin as he came up to the barrier. Except for the rusting metal fence that extended out for miles on either side of the gateposts, from where the two marines in pristine uniforms were sauntering over, it was just empty desert.

“This is a restricted area.”

“I’m lost. Can you help me with my map buddy?” and with that he unzipped his leather jacket and reached inside it.

“Whoa Boy,” came from the nearest guard, but it was too late, as he and his partner looked down the barrel of a gun of some sort.

One second, he was falling, the next he was through. The shielding had been so good there was no way to find a portal but now that he was in, Eaglebeard could open a breach for the others.

Aiasdotter, ‘Schripp, and Lady Bane were ready, and armed to the teeth. As they passed through the

inner door of the Facility, they had at least the element of surprise. The first soldier evaporated before he could cry out, and with the three of them carrying guns of some sort it was like shooting fish in a barrel.

Once on target, Eaglebeard opened up a portal. Silently, with a nod of friendship, Lord Stiletto stepped through. As yet no alarms had been triggered. How long, wondered Stiletto, had the government been in league with The Rabbit and The Hrym?

Stitch on the other hand, had set off plenty of alarms. The young Lieutenant operating the security desk had seen the giant on the custom bike ride up to the barrier, have a brief conversation with the two guards, and then draw what looked like a toy gun and shoot them both. No visible sign of injury on the monitor and yet both soldiers were down and unmoving. She watched on the screen as the giant walked into the guard room, lifted the barrier, got back on his bike and headed towards the Facility.

It was all down to timing. 'Schripp was finding the whole experience very strange. He could see the video feed through the neural net, his visual cortex processing the image data. Eyes collect images. Instead of his missing eyes, he had a cam on the side of his head, which relayed *vision* to his brain, but he had switched it off. It was just too confusing for rapid combat, and 'Schripp knew in a fierce fire fight he wasn't going to be much of an asset.

Almost at the main control room of the Facility, Aiasdotter and Sarah were under heavy machine gun



fire. The air stank of cordite and the noise was deafening.

Stiletto and Eaglebeard slipped silently down the empty corridor. There were cameras every few metres, but Stiletto carried a futuristic jammer that overrode them and erased their presence from the feed. They were getting close, he knew. He could feel Gregory's essence, although it felt wrong, distraught.

Stitch could see the welcoming committee. Three armoured personal carriers were blocking the route and his proximity sensors could detect about fifty personnel.

Aiasdotter spoke to Magnus on the neural net. "The buggers have got us pinned down, any suggestions?"

"Not much room for manoeuvre, I'll send the layouts."

Immediately the plans were there in her thoughts. Once they had broken through the secure barrier, the net was taking downloads from the Facility's core drive.

"Halt right there!"

The megaphone amplified the command and Stitch grinned as he opened up the throttle and accelerated towards the blockade. Seventy, eighty, ninety, the bike screamed towards the metallic wall and bullets and trace fire exploded from the waiting troops. Its easy to be cocky, Stitch had to admit, when your bike has its own built in force field. *Bang tidy*, he thought. *This is living*.

The fire fight was intense. They didn't want to use

explosives because of the potential damage to the Facility's control systems.

"Hell, these guys are tough." Aiasdotter selected the gravity control on the neural menu.

'Schripp and Sarah were instantly aware and thought their confirmation.

Holding her gun steady in her right hand Aiasdotter charged forward with

impossible speed and ran along the wall and along the ceiling of the corridor, firing precise and lethal bursts from her beloved Walther.

They were too late. Stiletto stared down at the lifeless corpse of his friend. "Bastards," he swore through gritted teeth. There was no way to soften the blow. He flashed the image of the broken body to the friends and said quietly, "Gregory's gone."

## THIRTY STARDUST

The moment was enhanced with a little showmanship by Stiletto. Gregory's ashes were treated with a radioactive phosphorescence, and placed in a silver casket shaped like a beautiful fish.

The friends stood silently in the dark window in Stiletto's library, and watched the rotating casket head off towards the Horse Head Nebula, the ashes creating a beautiful spiral of twinkling stars.

THIRTY-ONE  
THE DECISION

Lord Stiletto polished the lens of his monocle and ran his fingers around the rim of his top hat, feeling comfort in the concealed blades hidden there. He looked up as Henrik entered the room. It was bizarre, but this young Swede had come to pay his respects, and had asked for an appointment through the Concierge of The Savoy.

Stiletto's mind slipped back to the dinner yesterday in what had been Gregory's private dining room. An empty place had been set for their friend. Still, they had had an excellent meal and enjoyed the fine ambience of the Savoy and each other's companionship. Stiletto had read out a few cards of condolence, including one from Caroline.

"Who is Caroline?" asked Lady Susanna.

"The Girl with the Red Hair."

Stiletto thought back to the moment in Ptolemaic

Alexandria when she had saved his life, during Sarah's kidnapping.

And now this young man. Stiletto coolly appraised Henrik, standing before him, confident and polite. He and Gregory had both taken a shine to him in Gavle, with his boisterous manner, yet charming ways. Henrik too, had saved Stiletto, from the assassination plot and now had confirmation that Stiletto had survived and that his funeral had been a ruse.

So, what to do with young Henrik now that he knew the truth. The Rabbit, Stiletto reasoned, always seemed to be one step ahead of the friends, and it seemed unlikely that it had been fooled for one moment by their mummer's farce.

Stiletto smiled at the polite young man, and again, stroking the rim of his hat, came to a decision.

## THIRTY-TWO

### THE TEA SHOP

One moment he was enjoying looking at the beautiful colleges from his seat in the punt, and the next, Haydrift Eaglebeard was swallowing water.

He hadn't even heard or felt his assailant as he came up out of the river, grabbed him powerfully by the arm, and heaved him over into the murky, freezing waters of the Cam in February.

Though he was trained not to panic, it was hard not to as the brackish water found its way into his lungs, and the fingers that seemed to have a super-human strength closed about his throat. At least that will keep the water out, the academic part of his mind reasoned, seeming to operate separately in its analytical way. Relaxing with an effort, he eased his struggle, and taking one of the blades concealed about his person, drove it into the wrist of one of the hands grasping his throat, severing its tendons.

Magnus, Susanna and Aiasdotter were in the Tea

Shop enjoying afternoon tea, when a soaked and red faced Haydrift Eaglebeard sat down beside them.

“What the hell happened to you?”

“Got wet,” said Eaglebeard, smiling.

“Looks like you’ve had a bit of a work out,” commented Lady Susanna, looking at the mottled red imprints of finger marks on his muscular neck and the red clusters in the whites of his eyes where the capillaries had burst under pressure.

“Probably just a diversion from Stiletto, to keep me on my toes,” joked the quiet one, but they all knew they were in danger. Although they maintained their pose of elegant calm, there was a coiled tension in their secluded alcove, and weapons were held at the ready.

## THIRTY-THREE

### THE ANALYSER

Whilst Haydrift Eaglebeard was having his aqua-aerobics class, Lord Stiletto, Alex Lagenschripp, and Sarah Lady Bane were checking out the Fitzwilliam Museum. After listening to a particle physicist on the BBC Radio Today Programme talking about neuroscience and how in the future they should be able to record and reproduce memories and emotions from the human brain, Stiletto had got his technicians working on some new technology. His team had been at it non-stop and had come up with a passable working model.

Everything had gone “tits up” at the Fitzwilliam when Gregory had both lost a kidney, and more importantly, a wax sealed package to the agents of The Rabbit. Could they use the technology to go back to the museum and find the answers to the mystery?

It was one of the guards Stiletto and his team were targeting. Those unobtrusive men and women who are stationed in each room of a museum, keeping a



watchful eye on the exhibits and the visitors enjoying them.

The friends had gone in posing as a Human Resources team from London and managed to easily commandeer an office. To maintain the illusion, they had interviewed several of the other staff first, asking them a range of nonsensical but seemingly appropriate questions.

When the guard they were interested in arrived, he was sprayed with a chemical formula, not unlike the ones they used in hospitals, for treatments when the patient needs to be compliant, but have no memory of an unpleasant medical procedure.

Stiletto sat the guard in the chair at the desk and, having placed the neural scanner in contact with the forehead, accessed the frontal lobe.

The scanner was connected to Stiletto's own neural net and, happy with the settings, he sent out the thought to proceed.

A stench of burning like badly barbecued pork permeated the room, and the guard went rigid as smoke leaked from his nostrils and ears. Then there was a loud crash as the body toppled forward and the head hit the desk with the sharp report of a cricket bat striking a ball.

## THIRTY-FOUR

### THE CONVENTION

‘Schripp had hidden himself at an academic convention. It was as good a place to hide as anywhere, although rather boring.

Sat on an unusual leather armchair by the lifts and sipping passable coffee, he felt a sudden hand on his shoulder.

The grip felt wrong, and instinctively ‘Schripp knew that it was personal, not just another attendee of the convention.

Standing up, leaving his coffee, he muttered an apology and attempted to go towards the nearest lift, the door of which had just opened.

The grip on his arm was vice like. A woman screamed as ‘Schripp slammed the stranger’s face into the metallic edge of the entrance to the lift on the left, and then with a quick glance behind, stepped through the middle doors.

Aiasdotter was on the roof. She knew something

was wrong with 'Schripp, so earlier, she had slipped a tracker in his pocket and monitored him from a safe distance. The lift was going down and she could see the heat traces of potentials approaching the lifts on all floors. She had no idea at which floor 'Schripp was going to exit.

'Schripp had pressed the button for the ground floor but when the lift stopped at One, he immediately stepped through the open doors. Standing there were three of them, almost like clones, tall, solid, non-human. Metaphorically closing the eyes he no longer had, he set off a small flash that would disable the retinas of his assailants. He couldn't have known about their extra protective inner eyelids.

Shifting left he punched the first one in the throat, crushing its thorax, and before it had collapsed, he had broken the second one's leg, and struck its temple. The third was going to be more difficult. Sensing the gun, 'Schripp manipulated the second's body to take the hit, then pushed it forward to create space and confusion. Sliding through the gap he drove his middle knuckle line under the edge of the third's jaw, hoping there was a cranial nerve in there enervating a heart, and so for good measure, dislocated its thorax.

Aiasdotter, racing down the stairwell, saw the still signatures on her three-dimensional plan of the building, and sighed with relief. Then her mind stopped thinking as she simultaneously registered the threat on the schematic, and the door in front of her opening.

Like magic, the Walther PPK appeared in her capable and steady right hand.

The first head that moved centimetres into sight, beyond the edge of the door, exploded with a spray of blood, fragmented bone and brains decorating the walls of the stairwell. *Quite avant-garde*, came the stray thought of the confident Swedish lady existing in the moment, and then forgotten as another target appeared, and the pistol came to life again.

THIRTY-FIVE  
THE REED

“Coffee?” suggested ‘Schripp.

‘Schripp and Aiasdotter walked along the river bank, across the footbridge, and into the busy traffic of John Daunton Street. The bristling hub of Manchester life breathed around them. They were Master and Student, content in a series of beautiful moments, for isn’t that as all moments should be?

Entering the café, they went through the curtain into a dark alcove, and joined Lord Stiletto at his table.

“Having fun?” the old book collector enquired.

“Oh yes,” replied ‘Schripp, “although sooner or later this prescience of The Rabbit is going to be fatal!”

Lord Stiletto, calm as always, yet somewhat drawn in the face, reached into his fob pocket and placed a worn saxophone reed he had found clearing out Gregory’s apartment, on the café table, and dryly commented, “It already has.”

THIRTY-SIX  
THE PIE

"It was our last chance to confirm Gregory's attacker. Their identity would have been locked in the guard's memory, if only we could have accessed it," Stiletto said, and sighed with suppressed irritation. How could The Rabbit have known about their examination of the guard, and more, infiltrated their network to fry his brain the moment Stiletto was extracting his data? "It is so frustrating."

"Relax my friend," said Eaglebeard from the adjacent arm chair. "Sip this glorious Armañac, look at the view from your window, and let go these frustrations."

"But, are we ever going to be free from the machinations of The Rabbit?"

"Yes, my friend, and it starts here, right now. We must come up with a cast iron plan and we trust no one. Just you, me, and 'Schripp, nothing on the net."

"How do you know we aren't under observation even here?"

"We don't. We'll go to some god forsaken asteroid or the middle of the North Yorkshire moors, and we will decide, and we will overcome, and we will kill that goddamn rabbit, and cook it in a pie." Eaglebeard took his own advice and drank some more Armañac, watching his friend intently. "There you go. Feel better?"

"A little," replied Stiletto.

"Little steps my friend."

THIRTY-SEVEN  
THE MEETING

The Meeting took place on a flat rock in the middle of the Australian outback. About as remote a place on Earth as could be. Just Stiletto, 'Schripp and Haydrift Eaglebeard, three old friends and the emptiness of the desert twilight. They had bought jeans and T shirts from a wayside stall, and left everything from their normal life in the vehicle.

They had parked the Land Rover and walked the ten miles to this remote location. No phones, watches, weapons of manufacture, although Eaglebeard had picked up some wood on the way that had the right feel for a bokken.

All through the night the three friends sat beneath the Southern Cross and the Milky Way, and polished and perfected their plan to finally retrieve the sealed wax package.

Each had been assigned their part. Each taken



aside privately by Stiletto and given their detailed brief. This time there was to be no neural net.

## THIRTY-EIGHT

### THE DEBT

Since saving his life on the streets of Alexandria, Lord Stiletto had owed the Girl with the Red Hair a life debt. Covertly, they had remained in contact and a friendship had blossomed based on mutual respect and a love of the warrior way.

Caroline had not so much been turned from the service of The Rabbit, as realigned to the shared harmony of the friends. Still, she remained in the Rabbit's camp, and for all intents and purposes was their mortal enemy.

Lord Stiletto had gone with his instincts and young Henrik, the debonair dandy they had liked so much, was now dissolved into his constituent elements and floating freely in the deep vacuum of space. His deep echoing voice now echoed only in the memory of Stiletto's mind, for now he truly was "the square root of fuck all."

## THIRTY-NINE

### THE LUNCH

It was the most beautiful railway station he had ever seen. Stitch's huge frame squeezed through the train door and stepped out onto the platform. The journey through the mountains had been spectacular and they had arrived at this wonderful location.

Lunch was set out in the small plaza outside the church with its beautiful rose window. Although it was the first day of March, the sky was blue, and it was warm enough to sit outside and enjoy the lovely spring weather.

"Absent friends!"

The crisp Spanish wine delighting his palette, Stitch stood with the others and raised his glass.

"He always loved to dine with friends at a circular table and this was one of his favourite places."

"How do we know The Rabbit, or his minions, aren't going to turn up again?"

"This tapas is divine."

“What are your plans after we have defeated The Rabbit?”

“Oh, do you think we will?”

“How did you survive at the base in the desert?”

“Have you been down to the bay on the tram? It’s from San Francisco.”

“We originally met when I was in a book shop in Oxford, looking for a book for my library.”

“Oh really,” commented Lady Susanna, “I thought the four of you had a closer connection than that.”

Alfredo, the owner of the small restaurant, brought out one large flan to the cheers of the friends and placed it on the centre of the table, followed by coffees, and glasses of the local brandy.

It was late in the afternoon when the friends, having shaken hands with Alfredo, and hugged his wife Martina, walked across the plaza to the stop and waited, laughing and talking, for the old wooden San Franciscan tram to take them down to the harbour.

FORTY  
THE DENOUEMENT

The backdrop was absolutely beautiful. The strange proximity of the three planets had created interlinking rings like the rings of Saturn, only more intricate, and the fine particles glowed with the irradiated star light creating a light show that was literally out of this world.

Stitch could feel the sweat on his brow and the knife in his spleen. The pain was excruciating but he had learnt control during his time with the friends. He breathed in and breathed out. The pain was still there but detached, and his mind remained sharp. Better to leave the blade in place than suffer the increased trauma of removal. With luck he would survive long enough for Stiletto's technicians to repair him. If not, he had better make the most of his time left. It seemed his luck had run out.

A creature the size of a rhino but with the agility of a cat, leaped at him from the shadows. Stitch angled

smoothly in and low, and his blade whistled silently in an upwards arc, spraying him with fluorescent green blood that burned like acid where it contacted his exposed skin. Still, a single cut. His ego allowed himself a quick satisfied smile, then without a backward glance, he moved on.

Eaglebeard stepped from nowhere into somewhere, and gently pushed the two blades he was holding into the backs of the two necks, through the spinal cords, and out through the throats. He pulled his weapons clear and the two guards silently dropped to the tunnel floor.

Lady Bane held her breath. She could hold it for six minutes, which was useful because that was just a fraction longer than it took for the nerve toxin to dissipate. It was a Stiletto special and could only be absorbed via the lungs. There were so many bodies on the floor that she had lost count. Her mistake was in presuming they were all dead.

The grip on her ankle was like iron and she toppled over. She managed to twist in the air and as she accelerated down, she angled her elbow towards the creature's throat, which spread outwards in a huge bubble of purple skin, like the aggressive territorial display of a sea iguana.

The pressure of her wrist sprung the short blade into her hand, and with two deft cuts she deflated the throat bag and drove the point through the creature's ear and deep into its brain.

Lord Stiletto stood with his back to the door, and

made a quick mental checklist of the events he thought might occur, the potential actions if they didn't, and the armoury that meant he could feel slightly ambivalent about it, one way or another.

Haydrift Eaglebeard and Alex Lagenschripp stood waiting on each side of the entrance and smiled in anticipation.

All subtlety was wasted on Stitch though. The Nordic giant, still controlling the agony from the knife in his abdomen, took off his sunglasses, removed his blaster from its shoulder holster, and vapourised the door. An energy blast shot from inside took the top off Stitch's head, and the colossal Swede sank to his knees and toppled forward, the remains of his head striking the steel floor with a loud metallic clang. Then all became still.

Aiasdotter stepped through the opening in the fabric of space time that Eaglebeard had created with his new hand. The very air was fizzing with the energy building. A fraction of a second later her blade was out and deflecting the bludgeon accelerating towards her beautiful head. Pivoting lightly, she guided her blade into the flesh, and as the body collapsed, the sinking weight of the head accelerated the cut, and with a heavy thud, it hit the floor.

No time for elation, the fetid breath of the approaching creature made Aiasdotter feel faint with nausea. It stood on two legs like a bear, and was about the same size. There the similarity ended. Its face was misshapen and ugly. The head and jaws were over-

sized, with worn teeth that looked like they could grind bones to powder. But it was the great scything claws that were the immediate danger. Like magic, the Walther appeared in her hand, and the strange creature's head exploded with the force of her bullets.

Soaked in gore, Aiasdotter stepped towards the passageway and caught the empty eyes of her teacher. Her smile was felt by him rather than seen, then 'Schripp's spirit howled as the head of a spear exploded out through Aiasdotter's chest. 'Schripp's blind eyes failed to register the light passing out of hers.

'Schripp felt moisture on the skin of his empty eye sockets. The universe had provided. He held the bloody body of his brilliant student and wept from the depth of his being. Almost without thought he took Aiasdotter's beloved Walther from her shoulder holster and squeezed off a volley of retribution into the head of her nemesis.

Stiletto and Eaglebeard were approaching the centre. A ripple of something impossible to define passed through them, and a shared glance showed they both felt the loss and pain that accompanied it.

Putting his hand on to the door handle, Stiletto turned it and stepped through onto a beautiful terrace.

The Hrym sat unperturbed, immaculate in his impersonal bland suit and shiny shoes. Completely ordinary and anonymous, he wouldn't stand out in a crowd, except to the two friends. The very vacancy of any spark of originality screamed at their senses.



Whiskers twitching, The Rabbit sat watching on the balcony, absently accepting the attentions of the Girl with the Red Hair.

Eaglebeard stepped forward and with a speed and concealment that defied the moment, sent a blast of pure energy at the head of The Hrym. Taken from the heart of an adjacent star, it was the most powerful weapon released by humanity since the destruction of the city of Nagasaki.

The Hrym maintained his expression of banality and Eaglebeard evaporated as the energy was deflected back to its source. A faint smell of ozone was all that was left. Reacting with lightning speed the Girl with the Red Hair had pushed Stiletto away from his friend. With her proximity to the energy, she slowly dissolved into a cloud of fine ash, which with a sudden gust of wind, dissipated into the void.

Staring in horror, Stiletto had no time to mourn his friend or Caroline, as he felt himself held motionless by an unknown force.

Magnus, Susanna and Lady Bane were monitoring everything from the stasis field that had been set up by Stiletto. Essentially a temporary wormhole in space-time, it contained all the technology of Lord Stiletto's future existence.

Magnus and Susanna functioned as a whole. Neurally and spiritually connected, not to a machine, but to existence itself. They were the very stuff of existence, the flow of being that is the universe.

Simultaneously they were the spear that burst out

of Aiasdotter's chest, and Aiasdotter herself. The energy that Eaglebeard had pulled from the heart of the star had been returned with Eaglebeard's energy added to it. The cloud of chalk like black dust, that was the Girl with the Red Hair, swirling in the mountain breeze, all was together and apart. All had existence, both in the moment and in the infinite.

Sarah, Lady Bane, materialised directly in front of The Hrym and with the passion born of thousands of years of evolution, planted a huge and passionate kiss on the bland fish like mouth. The Hrym blushed bright pink, and beads of moisture broke out on his skin and the surface of his suit.

Sarah broke away screaming as the corrosive droplets ate into her lips and face, until her dissolving mouth and tongue could no longer emit a sound other than a damp gasp, and suddenly The Hrym exploded in a wet cloud that took him and Lady Bane into a state of nothingness.

The combined energy that was Magnus and Susanna, and all things including Sarah and The Hrym, held onto the part that was the whole, the finite, that was Stiletto, and held him apart.

Held immobile in a suspension of the moment, Stiletto watched his love evaporate before his eyes, yet held his mind detached. A part of him quickly registered The Rabbit, whiskers twitching, pink eyes watching calmly, seemingly unaffected by the events on the terrace.

Magnus and Susanna lacked Stiletto's detachment.

For them the pain of the moment was too much, and with a flash of unbecoming they ceased to be.

Released by the moment, Lord Stiletto was reintroduced to gravity and crashed to the terrace floor. Spent but not broken, he looked to the balcony, but The Rabbit was gone.

FORTY-ONE  
THE PENULTIMATE

Lord Stiletto and his good friend Alex Lagenschripp sat on the veranda at the Stora Hotel in Linköping and sipped their beers. The meal had been delicious.

The world had turned full circle and the future was full of potential.

Back in Sweden, just one year since the beginning, they had feasted like kings, caught in the magic of the moment, and the memory of moments gone by, and the friends who had shared them.

At the end of the meal the two friends toasted each other, and absent friends.

"What ever happened to The Rabbit?" asked 'Schripp.

"Disappeared off the face of existence," his old friend replied.

"I expect it will turn up, eventually."

"What like a bad penny?" Stiletto asked with a smile.

"Yes, like a bad penny."

FORTY-TWO  
THE END

Lord Stiletto stood quietly in the shadows of the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, patiently waiting for a brief hiatus in the whirls and eddies of the museum.

Seizing the moment, he calmly walked to the display cabinet, passed his hand over the beautiful statuette of the Woman Combing Her Hair, which partially dissolved, revealing a small chamber.

With only a moment of regret he dropped the sealed wax package into the void and without a backward glance silently walked away.







# THE ADVENTURES OF MISS ANN THROPE

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FRIENDSHIP SERIES BOOK TWO



## PROLOGUE

The sound of the explosion was deafening. A head that reminded her of red jelly appeared for a brief second, then vanished into scarlet mist. Miss Ann Thrope gently squeezed her trigger and another Mercenary evaporated. She never really understood the technical function of the futuristic weapons her friend from the future provided, just that they worked.

Whipping around with a lightning speed that belied her appearance, she casually erased three more. That's how she saw this space pistol, or ray gun as she told it to her grandchildren at their bedtime stories, like an erasure, rubbing out a smudge on her beautiful pencil drawings.

Racing ahead at breakneck speed she dived low under the incoming fire, and into a roll as her Eraser led before her, sending a volley of precision shots into the concealed hard-bitten Mercenaries trying to pin her down with their targeted bursts.

Silently Miss Thrope edged her way down the dimly lit metallic corridor. In this future age, in a distant galaxy, security was controlled by the Station, which was almost sentient. In this distant future every surface, space, temperature gradient, any physical parameter was controlled and monitored by the Station.

The only possible way to be covert was with the use of very special counter technology; physical hacking. She walked down the corridor with complete confidence of, in essence, being an invisible, undetectable, physical virus.

That was her first mistake.

The creature that sank its huge claws into her shoulder pulled her backwards. Also sentient, it paused just a little too long before sinking its scything jaws into its victim.

Having dropped her blaster, Miss Thrope was surviving purely on instinct. The long-bladed stiletto from her wrist sheath appeared in her hand, and she thrust it behind her, through the soft flesh below the monster's jaw, aiming for its tongue. With a roar of pain, the great leviathan reared back, opening up her shoulder wound, and nearly tearing her other arm out of its socket.

The smell of rotting flesh from the creature's open maw nearly overpowered her. Its teeth were as long as her arm, and its slitted yellow eyes radiated venom. Ignoring the terrible pain in both shoulders she took an incendiary grenade from her harness, then acti-

vated it with her neural net. Her friend's grenades were very sophisticated. She picked 'bang,' on a scale from one to ten, of two. With the beast's next roar, she casually threw it down its throat.

Should have picked one, she thought as she limped down the metal passageway, completely deafened, and covered in ribbons of stinking flesh.



ONE  
PARALLEL UNIVERSE - PRESENT

Miss Ann Thrope had found an edge of the universe. A parallel universe. It wasn't readily apparent because it looked the same. The street in front of her, the seedy bar like any seedy bar on 21<sup>st</sup> century Earth, seemed continuous. That's why it looked the same. Anything fast couldn't cross the gap, like bullets or a speeding car, but if one was to casually saunter, one might not even be aware that the gap had been crossed.

Casually she entered the bar. Looking about, she was aware that there was more of a difference than in time.

The barman polished a glass and watched the woman sitting alone at a table in the corner sipping her drink. She stood out like a sore thumb, not because of her garish outfit, black and purple silk string dress, orange combat boots, small silver skulls on a chain around her neck. After all this bar did cater to an unusual clientele, but her skin colour, it was pink. All

the rest of his customers had flesh that was shades of green.

She sat at the table enjoying her drink and pretending to read the newspaper. Sensing a change, a ripple of tension in the room, she knew the Mark had arrived. There seemed to be a quiet oasis of calm around her, although the bar itself was heaving. The noise level was off the scale, raucous music, shouting, laughter, conversation, video screens. Near her a group of old men were playing a game that looked like nine spot dominoes. The Mark had joined the table and was being dealt into the game. Behind him towered two guards; hard men with subtle bulges in the right places in their jackets.

Getting up from her table, she placed the newspaper down, and wandered towards the exit, taking a path that would pass by the game.

The Mark, Harold Brickman, warlord, watched the strange lady with the skull necklace cross the room.

As she made her way through the heaving bar, she walked in clear sight. She knew the Mark was aware of her. His eyes were looking straight at her, and she gave him her most winning smile. The Mark returned her smile. Technology was all very well but simplicity was best. She noticed the two guards behind him hadn't focused on her in the same way, knowing that would be to her advantage. They were a type she recognized. Smart haircuts, clean shaven, designer suits, dead eyes. As she drew level with the table, she caused the dealer to drop the tile he was passing to the Mark. Just a



manipulation of the space-time continuum trick she had learnt from her friend, Lord Stiletto, when they had visited the famous casinos in the Julian Constellation.

As the Mark reached forward to pick up the tile, she reached a hand into her corset, and removed the thin blade concealed amongst its ribs. Then casually leaning over, she slid it un-noticed into the neck of the Mark. Carrying on past, she was a step beyond before his head smashed into the table top, scattering tiles in all directions.

Cat-like, the two guards whirled to face her, drawing their guns. The quicker of the two, although bulkier than his partner, already had his barrel pointing at the strange woman when his pupils dilated in surprise at the gun of some sorts in her steady hand. A narrow beam of light went through his pupil, and before he could sense that the eye was blind, the energy expanded within his brain and he no longer sensed anything.

His friend was lucky. Despite years of training and combat experience, the sudden explosion of his buddy's head right next to him distracted him for a brief second, and when he turned back to the assassin, she had gone.

## TWO SPACE

“When we played our charade...”

The words of the song hung in the air. “When we played our charade.” It was all tumbling down around his shoulders. Tied to the beautiful glass table, Charlie Smith, conman and chancer, ruminated on the vagaries of life. The caper had been a good one. Complicated, it was true, but that had been the beauty of it. Picking The Man, as their victim, that had been their first mistake.

Many years ago, he had received good advice. Wisdom, from a cell mate on a prison asteroid. Not that he realised it at the time. “Don’t mess with a force of nature. Not unless you are determined and able to deal with everything that comes, with the utmost conviction.”

Well, The Man, and his empire, that hung around him like smoke clouds around a volcano, was a force of nature.

How quickly it had all gone wrong. Now he had been left to contemplate. In a way, that was the start of the torture. The imagination, the little drop of fear and terror running around in his brain.

Utter darkness, and then, there was light, and then it began....

The Man rinsed his hands in the ebony sink, washing away the blood and the lingering distaste. Goddamn punks. Trying to scam Him. Would they never learn? Still he had to make an example, or they would all be trying it.

A message awoke in his ear, "Boss, trouble at table three."

He nodded to the maid. She was very efficient. He knew on his return the corpse would be gone, and his dining table left spotless.

A mature lady, impeccably dressed, seemed to be a little flustered as she conversed with the croupier.

"Well young man," she spoke in her strange off world accent. "I placed my chip on the red, my ball came in, where are my winnings?"

The croupier tried to explain the rules of the house. The lady was obviously getting upset and there was a crowd drawing around and murmuring. No one wanted to see an elegant lady of a certain age treated badly.

The Man, himself a masterclass in elegance and couture, gave a little bow and asked the lady if there was anything he could do to help.

"It's all been too much." She sighed and, taking a

beautiful delicate handkerchief from her sleeve and wiping away a tear, “never in all my travels...”

The unfinished sentence hung in the air as The Man considerately picked up her dropped handkerchief.

That was his first mistake.

THREE  
EARTH - BRISTOL - PRESENT DAY

Two new contracts successfully completed. Miss Ann Thrope was feeling more than a little pleased with herself, sipping her glass of Sauvignon Blanc with a sigh of satisfaction. It was a beautiful autumn afternoon, and she was enjoying the English sunshine. She loved this time of year, and there were some darling boutiques in Clifton Village she might stroll to later. She was sitting on the terrace of a hotel on the rim of the wonderful Avon Gorge. The river sparkled far below, and Brunel's great iron bridge spanned the expanse.

Her diary enabled her to keep track of her engagements in her own time on Earth. Being a Master of the space-time continuum, she was able to go anywhere in time and space, but it required a high degree of organisation. Checking it now, she saw that she was free for a while and contemplated a tour of the rings of Saturn. It was so marvellous to be able to nip off to the future

and experience the wonders of the universe. She deserved a rest; after all, life wasn't all work and no play.

As careful as she was, she was unaware that she was under surveillance.

It was easy for Ferret to hack into the primitive Earth spy satellites to use them to monitor her. For the last week they had been following her all over the planet. Weasel glanced at Ferret as he uploaded the report. He looked at Miss Thrope on the sun filled terrace, thinking, Yes, enjoy your wine, whilst you can.

FOUR  
SPACE - ALPHA CENTAURI

Stoat was the muscle.

He made up the team of three. Two hundred kilos and well honed. He was shabby in an elegant way. His suit was quality but ill cared for and so he stood out. He could have been good. He was kind to kittens and his old gran, but all things considered, Stoat was not very nice.

The three of them were drinking slammers in a dingy bar on one of the slave moons near Alpha Centauri. Huddled in an alcove away from the noise and the product. This was the kind of bar where credits could satisfy the most perverted of tastes.

“Get anything useful?”

“Plenty about shoes. I’m thinking of going into the fashion business.”

“Taking the piss?”

“Yes. She pops up, on the radar, so to speak.

Lunches, shops, goes to galleries. Cities and towns all over the planet. Always cute places.”

“What ya mean, cute?” cut in Ferret.

Weasle hesitated, picked up the bottle, then poured another round of drinks. “You know. Old buildings, postcard landscapes, you know, cute.”



FIVE  
EARTH - PORTUGAL - PRESENT

Miss Thrope gazed across the bay as the little boats glinted on the water. She loved the Amalfi coast in the fall. She had just enjoyed a delicious luncheon of small fresh fish delicately cooked with local vegetables, accompanied by a wonderful glass of Soave, the dry white Italian wine exciting her refined palate. Life was definitely full of magic. She felt the Mediterranean sun on her skin and luxuriated in its warmth.

It wasn't just the shadow that took away her warmth, it was the unusual smell. Not otherworldly, but not of this world. Springing upwards like an exploding vortex, she casually took a fine china plate, smashed it on the table edge, then holding it firmly in her elegant hand, glided it through the crease of the throat just above where you'd expect to find an Adam's apple. Blood erupted in a spray that quite ruined her beautiful new dove grey dress, covering her face in a fine patina of red mist.

All around her diners screamed as tables, chairs and fine china crashed in the ensuing panic. Making sure she had her bag, Miss Thrope ran to the edge of the quay and dived into the tranquil water.

A small child, forgotten by his panicked mother, watched the surface where the funny lady had dived in, waiting for her to pop back up like a seagull, but the water stayed mirror calm, and hearing the frantic sobs above him, he went to put a comforting hand on his mother's knee.

SIX  
EARTH - LONDON - PRESENT DAY

Miss Ann Thrope stood back to admire the picture. One of the most amazing musical artists of the last half century had died recently and the family had put his private art collection up for sale at Sotheby's, one of the Earth's great auction houses.

A particular painting had caught her fire. A beautiful oil positioned on its own in the corner. A bold modern canvas with strong primary colours that spoke to her deeper self. This show was just the preview for the auction. A short showing of a selection of the musician's paintings, sculptures and furniture. He had a very eclectic choice she thought. The full show was in three months, followed by the auction. She would return and bid for the picture, after all, what was one to do with all those fees, if not to enjoy and taste a little beauty?

Then lunch at a lovely little bistro on the edge of Mayfair and Soho, a quick spin around Liberty, just for

fun, then a very enjoyable evening at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in Soho. A wonderful quartet. Their playing seemed to capture the very rhythms of the universe.

"Can I assist you Madam?"

She was standing alone by the curb of the Soho street. There was no traffic at this late hour. Turning her head slowly, she looked up into the cold eyes of the clumsily dressed giant beside her, met his gaze, and in her silken voice, told him, "I'm afraid you are making a serious mistake." The man, a brutal but subtle character, looked into the beautiful eyes, delicately wrinkled at the corners, and felt a cold ball of sweat trickle down his spine.

Still, a cool fellow, he maintained his composure, only a slight whitening of his cheeks, and a shortness of breath betraying his fear, as he apologised and quickly retraced his steps down Frith Street.

Miss Thrope smiled as she felt his presence fade into the night, and with a spring in her step was on her way.

SEVEN  
SPACE - THE CRYSTAL CITY

The Crystal City was one of the wonders of the universe. No one really understood how old it was or who had made it. Even now in the records of the 'Verse, it was tens of thousands of years old. About the size of the moon that orbited the Earth, it was a feat of three-dimensional architecture that amazed all who beheld it. Not quite spherical, it was like a translucent honey comb of silken threads that transmitted light to every single part within its matrix. No matter where one was within its substance, there was a feeling of space and light and a oneness with the incredible beauty of the universe surrounding it.

Approaching the Crystal City physically from Space, the ancient way, was simply breath taking. In the same way that the great Earth cities of Hong Kong, New York, Cork Town, were best approached by sea. Like the original immigrants passing the Statue of

Liberty through the fogs of the Hudson, the approach to the Crystal City was truly staggering.

Miss Ann Thrope sat on the viewing deck, sipping her Hendricks and tonic and soaking in the incredible view. A small part of her marveled at all the thousands of beings below locked into their alternate reality consoles whilst the real thing was here and now. The Crystal City glittered like a great chandelier suspended in the giant ballroom of space. No wonder it had become a major tourist site, although only for the extremely wealthy.

Fifty-four thousand Earth years on from the great days of ocean cruising, the Earth no longer existed, never mind Hendricks gin. However, she always carried her own supply, and she had an arrangement with the Maître d' who brought it at just the right temperature in one of her own Waterford crystal glasses.

The room in the hotel was truly unique. When she came to the Crystal City she always stayed at Jammie's. The original Jammie family, legend had it, was from the first rogue ship that found the deserted city and colonised it. Now it was the premier luxury hotel in the civilized, 'Verse and the views from her suite, of the adjacent star systems, were awe inspiring.

Still it was simply furnished in quiet good taste with silken fabrics and, unheard of in this sector of the 'Verse, exquisitely made wooden furniture. Just one of the wooden chairs in this room would repay the planetary debt of a minor backwater world. Miss Thrope

was a reasonably frequent guest at Jammie's, and this suite was reserved for her exclusive use.

Tonight, she was dining with old friends. There would be eight altogether, which she found just right. She had a lovely round dining table that had been a present from Claude when she stayed with him at Giverny. Everyone facing each other, so much better for conversation. The food was local and as such indescribable. If you were on Earth how could you describe the taste of oysters or sashimi to a Bedouin prince living in a tent in the middle of the Sahara Desert? Needless to say, the hotel provided the finest cooks, and her luggage did contain three bottles of very fine French wine she had bought recently at her favourite little caviste at Annecy, where she had a lovely home overlooking the turquoise waters of the French town's beautiful lake.

"And what happened to our rodent friends?" asked Lord Stiletto over a sip of Monbazillac.

"Oh, in the end it was just too much," replied Miss Thrope. "It all unravelled in Rome, in that lovely little boutique near the Trevi Fountain?"

Stiletto smiled politely, as if he had any kind of clue, which particular little boutique his friend was referring to. Obviously encouraged, Miss Thrope continued with her tale. "Just materialised right next to me whilst I was trying on a lovely cerise creation."

"How rude," observed her friend, dryly.

"Yes, so I relieved him of his rude sensibilities, right there on the spot. Clean you understand, wouldn't

want to splash on Chiara's drapes. Then I followed his energy line back to the other two, and invited them to savour the *après vie*."

"And did you ever find who they were working for?"

"No."

There was a short delay as Miss Thrope unwrapped a mint and nibbled at it thoughtfully. "In that respect they were very good."

Stiletto poured port for them all from his fabled supply and a collective sigh went around the table.

"Friends."



## EIGHT

### SPACE - THE STATION

It was one of her most elegant solutions.

Boris, king of the Zaaaartiktik, was here for an interstellar conference with the other war and drug lords. His was an interesting existence, coming from a fluid world of great gravities and pressures. A special tank of dense mercurial fluid had been constructed, and here Boris held court in the depths of the Station.

Getting onto the Station had been straightforward, although the welcoming committee had been unexpected. Still, she had to get into the heart of the station, to get to the heart of Boris.

Miss Thrope's solution was simplicity itself, but very dangerous to her own existence. Now concealed in the control centre, she had connected her own neural net into the mind net of the Station, again using a little code worm created by the technicians of her good friend, Lord Stiletto. Then it was just a matter of drag and drop, as she grabbed the physical co-ordi-

nates occupied by Boris in his tank, dragged them into the vacuum of open space, then just let go. In fact, as the Station was orbiting a rather large and wild planet, all the drop had to do was just hold the mass still for eleven seconds, for the Station was truly immense, and then just let it go. Tough as poor Boris was, the emptiness of the void was an unforgiving place.

For a thousandth of a second infinite pain flashed through every nerve ending in her body. The System had detected her and sent a counter attack. Fortunately, the human mind's awareness of its own nervous system couldn't respond so quickly, and thanks to the speed and sophistication of Stiletto's neural net, it cut the connection and all Miss Thrope felt was a rather disorienting dizziness, which at the moment, couldn't begin to compete with the agony in both her shoulders.

## NINE

### THE STATION

The flower was an anomaly. In an environment that was essentially sterile, metallic and controlled, the room that held the flower was particularly unique.

The room on the Station was completely sealed and regulated. Temperature, light, humidity, all perfectly synchronised. A fine mist containing a precisely blended concentration of nutrients kept the flower in perfect health.

Although the security of this special garden room was exceptionally tight, Miss Thrope leant over, and delicately inhaled its subtle aroma. Rather disappointed, she took a pair of nail scissors from one of her many pockets, and with a quick snip placed the bloom in her button hole, then continued on her way.

“No, the flower wasn’t the hit,” Miss Thrope spluttered, struggling not to spill her wine as she tried to choke back laughter.

Stiletto maintained his calm, leaning forward to top up her glass and with a raised eyebrow, invited her to continue her story.

TEN  
HORSE HEAD NEBULA - SUNSHINE

The old man with the long white beard had a distinctive and unusual dress style. He was portly, with a twinkle in his eye, and wore a striking red suit with white buttons. When it was made, in Saville Row, London, it had fitted him like a glove. The material was an intelligent elasticated fibre supplied by a good friend of his, and auto adjusted with time to remain a good fit. Time had been kind to the old man, although like the fibres of his suit, his figure had become somewhat elastic.

This was a busy time for him. There was a myth on certain worlds that at this time of great celebration and festivity, he somehow managed to visit every home, all within one rotation of the planet. The notion of a man in a red suit and white beard whizzing round the world on apparently, a small open craft, yet big enough to contain billions of parcels, and pulled by quadruped animals with large antlers growing out of their heads,

was quite fantastic by any standards of infinite possibility.

“So, what do you do,” asked his friend, as they sat together in comfortable chairs by the huge windows of his library, with the magnificent view of the Horse Head nebula, “bend the space time continuum?”

“Basically, yes,” replied the old man in the red suit, sipping his port.

“Why do you bother?”

The old man was silent for a while, enjoying his drink. His eyes seemed to sparkle, not just with a deep joy, but literally with tiny lights around the irises.

“To maintain and bring a little love into the universe,” he finally replied.

ELEVEN  
LONDON

The Hrym sat on his planet in his vast fortress of waste and negativity. His bland and forgettable suit, like his facial features, was a pale and sickly green. His world, or the many worlds he held sway over, stood for all that was insipid and mediocre in the universe. The Hrym's very essence sucked the joy out of existence. If there was one thing in all of creation that he hated, it was the old man in the red suit.

That is why he had paid the exorbitant fee for the contract.

Little Billy Brambling had been a good boy. Mummy was sick. The illness inside her had been eating her away, and despite the latest medical technology she suffered greatly. Each night little Billy lay in bed aware of the whimpers and agonies of his dearest mother.

In a world of instant gratification, of trainers and handheld computer games, in a world of constant

communication through chat rooms of the inane, young Billy was alone. A child with no friends but with a deep love and devotion to his dying mother.

Billy lived in a country vast in wealth. Like most of the universe, ninety nine percent of the resources was held by one percent of the population. On the frontier worlds that Billy read about in his comic books, run by robber barons and warlords, the injustices of 'intelligent civilisation' were obvious. On his own world they were hidden in plain view by the news, entertainment and social media that informed and distracted its lucky citizens.

Billy wasn't feeling lucky. He was hungry and cold but most of all he was sad. He wanted to help the suffering of his mum. Every day before school, he got up with the sun and made breakfast for the agonised shell of humanity that was his mother. He did his utmost to keep the small garret flat warm, a camping stove from the charity shop, newspapers for blankets. He comforted her the best he could, reading her stories from his few precious comics. There is only so much you can do when you are nine.

Today was the start of a special holiday. There had been no school for several days and Billy had been able to look after his mother all day. Now she was drifting in and out of a troubled sleep, quietly moaning. He was sat in the main room of the small flat. The screen of the video display was dark and silent. Even the poorest members of society had a television. It was considered an essential right of every home. There



were hundreds of channels feeding a constant diet of banality and mediocrity, interspersed with the ads, the content messages to consume more and more of those things that Billy instinctively knew they could never afford.

Occasionally there were a few programmes Billy would watch. Factual programmes about the wonderful world he was supposed to live on with beautiful wildlife and waterfalls, rainbows and snow-capped mountain ranges. He enjoyed some movies and series about adventurers and space and cowboys, loving their possibilities, unaware that they were true, yet as remote to his experience as the soaring eagles and painted elephants of his own world.

The assassin had a sense of humour. Time, fate, and destiny aren't fixed. With time travel, multiple parallel universes, the bending, alteration, and riding of space time, there was a degree of potentiality to events. In some advanced parts of the universe, prediction of events was a little more sophisticated than reading tiny leaves in the bottom of a tea cup, or the lines on the palm of a hand. The man in the red suit was set with a 99.34% chance of visiting little Billy on 24th December, and the assassin was in place and ready.

Billy, unlike his mother, had had a good day. For the past week he had been practicing his songs. He had made his mother's room as pretty as he could, decorating it with lights and ornaments that he had been getting over time from the pound shop. After a special

fish and chip supper, he had stood at the foot of his mother's bed, proudly and unselfconsciously singing carols in his clear melodious voice. The tears of love in her eyes, replacing the tears of pain, were all the gift he required.

As the old man in the red suit approached the roof of the block of flats where Billy and his mother lived, he could sense the violence to come. He was philosophical. He had lived an extraordinary life and seen many wonders in a universe of infinite possibilities. Still, Billy had been a good boy, and love, with its all-embracing marionette, seemed to be pulling the strings of the universe.

The assassin was silent. Legendary throughout galaxies for ingenuity and attention to detail. Standing perfectly still as the old man in the red suit placed the parcel at the bottom of Billy's bed. The contract was just for the old man, not the boy. Too much of a professional to be emotionally involved, the assassin still anticipated the satisfaction of a job well done, and the consequences for the world.

The room was full of smiles. The man in the red suit smiled as he looked at the sleeping boy, and gently put his gift by his bed. Little Billy smiled in his sleep, dreaming happy thoughts, riding the wave of the moment. The assassin smiled as his finger closed the pressure on the trigger, and Miss Ann Thrope smiled as the cold steel of her silken blade entered into the soft depression at the base of the assassin's neck, then

angled powerfully upwards into his unsuspecting brain.

The sun crept over the horizon and filled the small room with beautiful winter light. Billy opened his eyes, his strange dream fading from memory. Thinking straight away of his mother, he climbed out of bed, his breath clouding in the cold air, and saw the package brightly wrapped at the end of the bed. A simply handwritten card, "To Billy with love, Happy Christmas."

TWELVE  
EARTH - PARIS - PRESENT DAY

“Voilà,” said Lord Stiletto as if he had pulled the *Sacré Cœur* out of his hat, which in a way, he had.

It had all started in the morning when Miss Ann Thrope went down in the antique lift that descended through the centre of the beautiful building where she had her Paris apartment. It was the charred doorway in the lobby that had raised the hairs on the back of her elegant neck. The varnish was blistered and peeling, the wood cracked and splintered.

She forgot about the door as she spent the morning delighting in the wonderful little shops and boutiques that nestled near her Marais apartment. Whichever century that she visited Paris, Marais was always her favourite district, like her own beautiful village within a beautiful city. Soon she was walking up to Montmartre where she was meeting Stiletto for coffee.

She might pop over to Luigi's, a charming little trat-

toria in a hidden part of Venice, for lunch. She had a hankering for his little pasta parcels, but she had to be back this evening as she was having dinner with Pierre and Maxine at the Jules Verne restaurant near the top of the Eiffel Tower.

She entered Café Le Progrès on Rue Tardieu in Montmartre, noticing Stiletto straight away. He was hard to miss with his bright silk waistcoat under his elegant jacket. The whole ensemble crowned with a magnificent purple top hat. Paris was an exciting place, full of bohemians and eccentrics, and although he drew some odd glances from tourists, about to make the climb to Sacré Cœur, he blended in very well. Rising to hug his friend, kissing both cheeks in the French way, he pulled back a chair for her, and they both sat down. As if by magic a waiter appeared with a tray of delicate pastries and coffees.

“Why are you here?” she asked between sips of coffee.

“Last night I had dinner with Bonaparte at his apartment, so just nipped forward a few hundred years. Actually, it’s just around the corner.”

“I wonder who lives there now?”

“Oh, some magistrate and his family, I think. I wonder if they even know.”

“And how is Nappy?”

“Oh, you know, generous, funny, slightly megalomaniacal. Good conversation. I don’t think he likes you calling him Nappy though.”

“But he’s such a charmer. Perhaps you should invite him to Sunshine.” Sunshine was Lord Stiletto’s home. A space station on the edge of the Horse Head nebula.

“Somehow I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

Having finished their coffees, the two friends got up to leave. The waiter brought them their overcoats to guard against the late December air. It was a short though steep walk up to the beautiful church, and the views over Paris, were breathtaking.

It would be unexpected if it became general knowledge, that Miss Ann Thrope didn’t care for heights. This was unfortunate as she was currently suspended from an upper gantry of the Eiffel Tower. The taloned grip holding on to her left wrist was strong, and the eyes that held her attention were somewhat disturbing, being red, smoking, and with slit like pupils that seemed to sear in to her soul.

The New Year fireworks added to the sense of occasion, but any tourist looking up from the Avenue Pierre Loti far below, would have needed binoculars to witness this wonder of Parisian theatre. Miss Thrope met the malevolent stare of an entity, from who knows where. Unblinking she held its gaze whilst the wrist knife appeared like magic in her other hand. Striking simultaneously upwards and sideways, she buried the knife to the hilt in the thick sinewy wrist of the monster. Screaming in rage and agony it opened its claws, releasing the captured hand, which within an

instant, had driven a second knife into the alien's forearm. The creature pulled up and back reeling with the pain, lifting an unruffled Miss Thrope, who gratefully returned to the stability of the ironwork balcony.

## THIRTEEN

### SUNSHINE

Nobody else noticed. Miss Ann Thrope had excused herself for a few minutes, at a dinner party on Sunshine, to visit the bathroom and came back to the table with a decided limp.

Stiletto glanced with concern from his seat at the head of the table, noting the lines of pain etched into her face. Calmly Miss Thrope made her way to her seat, taking a quick sip of wine, before resuming up the conversation as if nothing had happened.

Although Miss Thrope had only been missing from dinner for a few minutes, in relative time she had been away for several hours. The ability to make use of bends in the space-time continuum was useful for creating the illusion of an alibi. Not that Miss Thrope would ever have need of one, or would have subjected her friends to the scrutiny.

She hadn't had to change. Known for her unusual style, Miss Thrope was always dressed impeccably.



Shopping was a favourite pastime, and although she had her preferred little boutiques and fashion houses in Milan, Paris and Rome, she also had access to designers and fabrics in many places and times, not usually accessible to the well-dressed dinner guest.

The other dinner she attended was in honour of the Silekian Ambassador, and was held on the bridge of the Silekian Admiral's flagship. It was always a mystery to Miss Thrope that wherever she went in the universe, military tradition with its elite corps of officers and their dinner rituals, created a pattern that was repeated again and again. It was something she had pondered over her years of activity as an assassin, but she never really got to the bottom of it.

The client was very specific about her requirements. Anyone who could afford Miss Thrope's massive fee was usually of a kind that knew exactly what they wanted, and was used to having the power, influence, or funds, to achieve it.

Commissions, as Miss Thrope liked to think of them, for were they not truly works of art, fell into two main camps. Those secret, covert assassinations where the victim simply died, apparently of natural causes, or some fluke accident, where no one was any the wiser, or a full in-the-face assassination where the target was publicly eviscerated, or blown up, to the general spectacle of, or making a political statement to, a news-entertainment hungry world.

These second category entanglements were often more difficult in that they required a degree of social

theatre whilst at the same time maintaining Miss Thrope's anonymity. After all, even in the immensity of the 'Verse, there was only a very small group of individuals who would have knowledge of Miss Thrope's specialist services, and even fewer, on how to access them.

Miss Thrope always liked to apply the personal touch. If one was simply to leave a small bomb to blow a target up, how would that be distinguished from the act of a gangster. One job she fondly remembered. She had had a pair of false teeth, made to fit perfectly, to replace the target's own, and switched them in the glass of water in the victim's bathroom. Miss Thrope had been in the audience at the press conference the following day, when at the appropriate time of his speech, the prime minister's head had unfortunately exploded on camera.

Miss Thrope awoke from her reverie, glancing down the table at the ambassador. She knew that in a few minutes time, the females would be required to leave the room, whilst the dominant males, would proceed with their rituals of drinking and talking.

The admiral's bridge, like the officer's mess, was held to be sacrosanct, although the security was more imagined than actual. Still, there were armed marines positioned around the perimeter. It was an alert marine, who with lightning reflexes, shot Miss Thrope in the leg, seconds after she had taken her long shot down the length of the table.

The pistol had been concealed within the pudding

on the table, in front of her. It's not the sort of thing one can conceal within the folds of a fine silken gown. Breathing calmly, she had leant forward, and pushed her hand firmly into the large mousse before her. Her nearby dining companions gasped with her spontaneous, and insane action, then their pupils dilated, and faces blanched as the beautiful manicured hand withdrew, holding a dangerous looking pudding-smeared pistol. Miss Thrope, in one smooth action, pulled the pistol and shot the ambassador through his left eye. It was a marksman shot with its accuracy and distance; Miss Thrope hadn't been hired for her dress making skills.

She hadn't allowed for the speed and alertness of the marine, and collapsed to the floor, and rolled under the table. The response was rapid, but when the dinner table was pulled back, the dessert slimed pistol was alone, and the elegant lady was gone.

FOURTEEN  
THE CRYSTAL CITY

Miss Ann Thrope woke up feeling the discord in the air. She reached under her pillow, withdrawing a gun of some sorts, gently rolled over as if in her sleep, and shot the intruder through the quilt.

She had been sleeping in her suite at Jammie's, and no one entered her inner sanctum until her security system was disabled. She made a call to Beetle Jammie, the current owner and General Manager of Jammie's, informing him of her breakfast requirements, and arranging for some of his people to take out the trash.

By the time breakfast arrived in her charming dining room overlooking the magical Crystal City and its nebula backdrop, the smoking corpse had been removed, the beautiful carpet looked as if it had just been shipped from Persia, and fresh cotton bedding was in place on the bed. Closing the door of the bedroom she glided over to her wonderful antique

table, set for one, and poured coffee into a bone china cup.

Her meeting was scheduled for later. Time and place for her was a somewhat fluid concept, being in the enviable position to travel backwards and forwards in time, and even within and without, parallel universes. Whilst maintaining particular advantages in her specialised line of work, still there were many hidden pitfalls. For the sake of her own temporal stability, and also her sanity, she had to keep a firm grasp on her own sense of time, hence the incredible importance of breakfast. With the many worlds and star systems that she visited with their many differing time structures, her internal clock kept to the standard earth twenty-four-hour time, and to be really precise, Greenwich Mean time. She smiled to herself. As she had archly recounted once at one of Stiletto's dinners, actually, she didn't think it was mean at all.

Her appointment was on a small moon in the Dikdak system in the iridium mine where the finest ore, used for the most sought-after iridium blades, was found.

She arrived early using Stiletto's spatial virus to avoid detection whilst she made a physical check of the location. It was her amazing attention to detail, and thorough state of preparation, even in the smallest eventuality, that enabled her to pull off the most difficult of engagements. But even with all her preparation, something inevitably, and spontaneously, went wrong.

That was the thought repeating through her head.

The nerves in her arms screamed in pain where the cable ties had bitten into the delicate flesh of her wrists, where they held her to the chair. That in itself was worrying. Where in hell, or who in hell, was using simple nylon cable ties?

Cold water soaked her hair and dripped in frozen rivulets down her strained face. Whoever had her, had disabled her neural net with a wet towel, which had been secured to her head with duct tape, wrapped round and round. Her heart beat rapidly as she surveyed her situation. She half expected to see an old car battery, jump leads, pliers, and a Stanley knife, but she didn't want to lose her grip on reality.

FIFTEEN  
SPACE

"Can I call you Ann?"

"No, you may not."

The interrogator sighed. It was going to be another one of those days.

She was thinking of that film she liked. The Irish actor in Paris, rescuing his daughter. There is a point where he's chained to a pipe over his head, surrounded by bad guys, at which point Miss Thrope thought, he was screwed.

It felt a bit like that. She breathed in and breathed out. There would be a way.

SIXTEEN  
SUNSHINE

"So, what happened?"

Miss Thrope was sat in the library sipping a gin and tonic.

"Well, it was the meeting. It turned out the interrogator was the client."

"How ever did he get the drop on you?" asked Stiletto.

"The whole zone was booby trapped with a harmless but fast acting nerve toxin. Undetectable."

"A bit embarrassing though," chided her old friend, "what are you going to do?"

"Well, dear, I've accepted his contract. Then, when I've been paid, I'm giving him an unexpected bonus."

"Ah," guessed Stiletto. "You are going to do the client for free."

"Exactly," smiled Miss Thrope, and arched a brow to draw Stiletto's attention to her empty glass.



SEVENTEEN  
EARTH - SURREY - PRESENT DAY

Miss Thrope silently lifted the latch on the cottage door. She was assaulted with a musty smell and waited while her eyes adjusted to the gloom. Slipping inside, she was surprised to see the silent man sitting on the old sofa with the moonlight from the window reflecting on his spectacle lenses.

"Hello Tim," she said quietly, no sign of her surprise displayed, as if every day at three am, she covertly entered old people's homes, to find them fully dressed and waiting for her. She reached the window with a single step, drawing the curtains, and turned back to switch the light on.

Tim had seen better days. He was in his nineties and still had a good head of white hair. His spectacles were very strong, and his intense magnified eyes watched her calmly as she searched for a clean spot to sit down. There wasn't one. The sofa, once a beautiful red chesterfield, was grey and filthy. Miss Thrope leant

over, placed a kiss on his recently shaved cheek, and sat down on the rancid cushion beside him.

Tim was smartly dressed, with a nicely knotted tie which Miss Thrope admired, but his shirt was stained and the tie ancient. A military uniform with medals hung on a hanger from the open door behind, and photographs of a dead princess lined the walls.

"So, Tim," enquired Miss Thrope, "what on earth is going on?"

"You're on a job aren't you," he replied.

"Yes," she admitted, slightly embarrassed. "Why didn't you call?"

"Look at me," he said.

She held the hand of the old warrior looking all the while into his steady eyes. "I'll return the fee," she said, a single tear appearing on her cheek.

"I'd rather you didn't" he said, marginally increasing the strength of his weak grip in her hand as she slid the blade into place. His eyes closed and his old hand went cold in hers.

EIGHTEEN  
LONDON - THE SAVOY

"Did you ever break a contract?"

"Only once. It was one of your friends. He was the target."

Lord Stiletto blanched, despite their friendship. Still he maintained his customary sangfroid. "Gregory?" he asked in a whisper.

"It was a last-minute job, just helping an old friend, Caroline."

"I knew her," he interrupted, "she saved my life on more than one occasion. In the end she was my friend too."

"It was a long time ago in a museum in Cambridge. We had supper together the night before. She had got mixed up with some very bad company, and they were going to relieve someone of a certain package. Caroline asked me to remove one of the players. I was concealed until the last moment. Imagine my surprise when I saw

you were involved. I'm afraid it probably cost your friend a kidney."

"Thank you, that was kind of you. You know he almost died?"

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic. I'm sure you had the situation under control. What happened to your friend?"

"I'm afraid they got him in the end. Bad business," said Stiletto putting his empty pipe between his teeth.

Miss Thrope calmly held his gaze as she raised her glass, "Absent friends."

NINETEEN  
EARTH - AMSTERDAM - 2059

The problem with the future was computed predicted outcomes or CPO's. Everything was predicted, including social and group behaviour.

Social background, schooling, even junk food and musical tastes were monitored by The Corp, as the ruling elite had come to be known. It had all begun at the beginning of the 21st century when the whole world started giving itself to social information gathering programmes.

Initially, outcomes were used by the profilers of the secrets and the ads, but with time they were developed to predict how individuals and groups would evolve. That's how The Corp knew about the Fivxj group. They monitored their social traffic and their algorithm recognised trouble. Incendiary trouble.

It all started at a concert at the Amsterdam Jazz and Blues festival back in 2017. That's when the touch

paper was lit, the actors came to the stage, the chemistry began.

There was the old chestnut about the German dictator. If you knew in advance how he would turn out, would you remove him from history and potentially save millions?

Now in the age of The Corp, most ambiguity had been removed. But rather than a problem, the Fivxj group was seen as a resource, a saviour.

Fortunately, the art of CPO's wasn't restricted to The Corp. There were rebel groups, sophisticated operators, who developed their own cutting-edge technology and weren't afraid to use it.

Miss Thrope's brief was clear. Go back to that March evening in 2017 and eliminate the threat to future generations.

"Like removing a few rogue cells before the tumour develops," explained the client.

The Axel club was packed. There were a surprising mix of age groups, mostly young, but plenty of more mature concert goers, so Miss Thrope blended in perfectly. There were several hundred people crammed into the small space. A stage at the end of the room and a long bar down the side. She remembered last time she had been here, in Amsterdam to see one of her favourite Jazz musicians, she had called in to the club after the gig. That was before the smoking bans. She remembered the heavy choking air filling the dense club with its misty haze. So much better now, but the clarity wouldn't assist her task. She paid no

attention to the band on the stage. The Fivxj group didn't exist yet, she was here for anonymous unconnected individuals. There were nineteen in all, mostly in their early twenties. It was quite a challenge.

Next day the tabloids had a field day. Banner headlines,

Club Tragedy.

Dangerous Recreational Drugs.

Rogue Batch.

There were even questions in Parliament, and a city mourned. Somewhere in the upper echelons of The Corp a response was formulated, and an order given.

TWENTY  
SPACE

The CEO of the Corp didn't even have a name. Long ago it became a given truth that power was everything, and true power lay hidden like the slime clinging on the underbelly of an ancient rock.

The assassin had taken away their future. The CEO made a call.



## TWENTY-ONE

### SPACE

The failure of the Weasel and his team, whilst disappointing, had created quite a degree of intelligence about Miss Thrope and her habits. They had followed her around the planet, hacking into the primitive 21<sup>st</sup> century satellite systems to aid their surveillance. She popped up in favourite restaurants and boutiques, always in what would be considered to be beautiful places.

The CEO had seen her type before. Living as he did in a world of control and profit, he misunderstood ambience for decadence, and quality for extravagance. Unfortunately for Miss Thrope, his own blinkered and prejudiced viewpoint was tempered by the wisdom to retain trusted advisors, who understood Miss Thrope a whole lot better. Still, he ruminated, the Rodents had never managed to locate any kind of home base, before they became careless and were eliminated.

## TWENTY-TWO

### SPACE

The breakthrough came as always, not with patience, attention to detail and hard work, but by pure chance. Sooner or later there is always a mistake, however small.

Miss Thrope's first mistake was in many ways one of her strongest characteristics. The ability to completely relax and embrace the moment. Not in the meditational sense of empty mind, where the mind is free to be everywhere, but free, in a spontaneous instant to seize the moment, and act powerfully without reservation. When Miss Thrope was in the Zone this was her constant state of being. Miss Thrope's first mistake was that in certain special circumstances, she left the Zone.

Her grandchildren were a joy. She loved her time with them, and this is where she let go. It was a casual by her, but not unnoticed remark about a salon where she had tried on a lovely little dress in Siena the day

before. This information was repeated later that day when Arthur, the five-year old, was visiting a friend. Arthur, a rough and tumble boy who survived two volatile elder brothers, had a quiet and deep intelligence and was very observant. Whilst proudly recounting to his best friend the story of Grandma's new dress from Siena, he wasn't to know that the boy's father, delegated to watch the children play, was at that moment reading an agent's report concerning Miss Thrope's Italian shopping trip.

The CEO only cared about results. He had strip mined and deforested entire planets. The assassin must be eliminated. He was not going to worry about the fate of a few children.

TWENTY-THREE  
EARTH - SCOTLAND - PRESENT

Miss Ann Thrope sat reading her book in the garden, overlooking the beautiful Scottish landscape. The cottage was high on a spur with views over a long valley to the crags, and snow-capped peaks beyond.

It was late spring of the same year. She had spent the morning pottering, pulling weeds from the cracks in the stone-paved path, and now she was relaxing, enjoying the evening sun, a superb glass of Malbec, and a good story. What a combination. In the distance she could hear the happy yells of the children playing. Idyllic.

Lord Stiletto was frustrated. Communication was so easy with the neural net. It was almost like telepathy. Communication by thought. He needed to contact a good friend, and her neural net was disabled. Even he didn't know the secrets of Miss Ann Thrope. He was in Scotland and was pretty sure the team of mercenaries he was following did know. They must be a

bunch of macho fools though. Hunting Miss Thrope with four-wheel drives, and guns with bullets, was the equivalent of hunting a tiger in the bush with only a bow and arrow and a switch blade. He felt comfort from the gun of some sort nestled in the passenger seat beside him, and keeping out of sight, both physically and with a cloaking device from the future, put the Bugatti into gear and carefully followed the convoy ahead.

TWENTY-FOUR  
SCOTLAND

The glen had become unnaturally silent. Miss Thrope put down her book and looked up. Walking towards her was a giant. Well if seven feet tall was a giant. He was crouching slightly which gave him a rather a hunchbacked gait, and Miss Thrope went cold as she took in the picture. The giant walked towards her holding the hands of her two youngest grandchildren. Little Arthur and Suzanna walked along with faltering steps, unusually quiet, with faces tight, on the edge of tears. The loud clatter of the gun cocking behind her completed the moment. Her grandchildren's suffering forgotten, Miss Thrope entered the Zone.

TWENTY-FIVE  
EARTH - VIETNAM - 1967

She could feel the creatures invading her body. She knew leeches had adhered to her, and were feeding, though they anaesthetised the skin.

The noise of the Vietnam jungle was like musical thunder which meant they were doing okay. Any physical disturbance would create a silence that was deafening. They had been lying still, in waiting for two days. Buried in the undergrowth, concealed, unmoving but ever vigilant.

Next to her, unseen but his presence felt, was her teacher and mentor, Colonel Tim Bleacher.

Their paths had crossed in the sixties when she had briefly done some assignments for the English security forces and Tim had been on temporary assignment from his 'regiment.' He was an expert in jungle warfare, and she had somehow managed to persuade him to both train her, and take her on assignment.

Tim, truth be told, didn't need much persuading. Miss Thrope as she was known even in those distant days, and young as she was, was quite the most efficient and lethal killer he had ever encountered, and over a long career he had trained many. Yet despite her ruthless talent she was thoroughly charming, fresh and cultured, a breath of fresh air.

Miss Thrope breathed in and breathed out. Perfectly still and perfectly ready she watched the approaching Vietcong troop. Like ghosts, these guerilla fighters moved through the misty evening. Like Apache she thought, totally at one with their environment, and leaving no trace of their passing.

That was her first mission in a three-year stretch. Being in charge of covert ops, Colonel Bleacher didn't find it too difficult to conceal that a member of his team was a woman. With all his years of combat he never felt so safe in the field as when Miss Ann Thrope was covering his back, or so he had once confessed after several bottles of Chivas Regal, in a backstreet bar in Saigon. It was her proudest moment.



TWENTY-SIX  
SCOTLAND

"May I call you Ann?"

The voice was melodious and high, which was odd coming from such an enormous frame. The giant was heavily bearded. A high domed forehead rose over deep set piercing eyes. His nose was just a gash above a mouth of even black teeth. He wore a skimpy costume of shiny metallic fabric, with a bright red chest plate and matching red boots. His arms and legs were covered in pale green fur.

Why does everyone want to be so familiar? Miss Thrope was thinking, but out loud in her confident voice, she said, "You dye that fur, I presume?"

Even though he was holding onto her grandchildren, and she was seemingly unarmed, she could sense the giant's nervousness.

She still didn't know what or who was behind her. With a thought, she activated the neural net. No boot up time with Stiletto's systems, instantly she was on

line. The concealed security system showed her images from all about the estate, and far above, the NASA satellite gave an aerial view. It was surprising what an organisation like NASA would do for you with a secret investment in their technical programs and a certain nudge in some developmental areas.

She took in the team of mercenaries and smiled, noting the cleverly concealed Bugatti in the copse by the loch. All this took place within a fraction of a second, and she didn't have time to assess the messages her friend had left her, but thought an instant hello, and sent all the data she had reviewed for his assistance.

TWENTY-SEVEN  
EARTH - KYOTO - 1523

"Call me Ann."

Miss Ann Thrope was sat comfortably for dinner in the famous restaurant overlooking Central Park in Manhattan.

Her date, or as far as he was concerned, her client, was a nondescript man with plastic spectacles and short tidy hair, wearing an immaculately cut pinstriped worsted suit, from one of the finest tailors on West 57th.

The CEO, brilliant though he was in his field, couldn't manage relationships. He had no family to speak of. He didn't have the warmth and empathy to make a connection. Still, he had needs, and in each major city in the 'Verse there were services that could supply a special kind of escort, sophisticated enough to discuss any range of culture and politics, talented enough to play Mozart or jazz, beautiful enough to

please the eye, and artful enough to fulfil his sexual requirements.

Oddly enough, the little anonymous Japanese man who now benefitted from his business connections with the CEO was the ancestor and inheritor of the most famous "Tea House," or pleasure house from Kyoto, Japan.

Miss Thrope's mind has been drifting to similar thoughts. For it was at that very geisha house in Gion that her friend and mentor, Konami, occasionally went to talk and meet with his peers, the great daimyos, feudal lords, and Samurai of seventeenth century Japan.

For Konami was the greatest sword smith of his generation. Tending the souls of the Samurai.

Long ago, as a young woman, Miss Thrope had sought him out. Of course, she could never appear in public, never mind at a geisha house. Women in medieval Japan, if they circled in the life of a great man like Konami, would either be a dutiful Samurai wife, a servant or a geisha. As a white European she would literally be a giant in a land of midgets, almost as incongruous as Gulliver in Lilliput. There were a few European priests and freebooters in Japan at this time but no women.

The first time she had gone to see him, she had just been waiting, kneeling in a deep bow, wearing a simple peasant's kimono, in Konami's workshop. She had prepared thoroughly and had consulted Lord Stiletto, an expert in ancient cultures, starting a lifelong friend-

ship. She had spent several years mastering modern Japanese, and then found a hermit in the mountains who thought her a sorceress, and mastered fluency in the medieval tongue, whilst in the privacy of his remote retreat.

She knew she risked instant death, but gambled on the famous wisdom and deep spiritual love, for which this great Master was reputed. For Konami was a great artisan, philosopher, and Tea Master, and was sought out by the great men of this first Tokugawa Shogunate.

Konami was a master of many things. It was his mastery of the art of Zen that allowed him to exist in a state of no mind. The art Miss Thrope would study and learn from her mentor, leading her to what she thought of as the Zone.

To a true Master there is no on or off, there just is. The old man entered the shuttered room. He could feel the energy. Silent he stood, adjusting to the gloom, taking in the prostrate figure on the tatami. The old man sensed the warrior before him. Unlike that ruffian, Takezo, he felt the calmness, the beautiful spirit, the awareness of death, and yet a tremendous alien nature of this strange giant.

And so, it began. She went to ask for a blade. She found instead, a Father, a mentor, a guide and a friend.

TWENTY-EIGHT  
SCOTLAND

Like a flower opening, the blood welled around the hilt of the blade embedded in the giant's throat. Involuntarily, the creature's great hands released the children, clasping together, as he fell to his knees as if in prayer. Like an explosion spiraling out from the centre of a new born universe, Miss Thrope launched into being.

TWENTY-NINE  
KYOTO - 1529

She had been lucky in life. To have met and been accepted by great mentors. From Konami she had learnt to master her inner self, to live truly in the moment, both in terms of experiencing the magic but also in the art of true spontaneity. She had studied all the great classics that had survived including the famous treatise from the Zen Master to the Sword Master, both living contemporaries of Konami. However, you can't learn this wisdom from a book. It has always been a direct transmission from Master to student.

In the privacy of his home and workshop she had come to master many ways. With wooden bokken he had taught her Kenjutsu, the art of sword fighting, and with his own katanas, Iaijutsu, the art of the living blade. He was a fine swordsman, although not in the same league as some of his friends and pupils.

Cold winter evenings were spent learning the fine nuances and inflections of the Tea Ceremony.

It was a strange relationship. She never understood how Konami could accept her existence without the need to question her. She never discussed her origins or life with him.

The Japanese art of sword making made the finest blades known in human history, thanks to the swordsmith's art, of folding the steel many times to create tremendous strength and a blade of unparalleled sharpness. Only surpassed by the future iridium blades, said to be sharp enough to cut the fabric of the universe. Konami was one of the greatest proponents of this art.

One day Miss Thrope brought him an unusual blade, originating from Italy. An assassin's blade, a stiletto. She asked him to make her two pairs. One pair she kept for personal use. The other she presented to her friend, who took his name from the knife, as a birthday present. She always had a wry smile, when she thought of the curator of Japanese Art and Antiquities at the British Museum, and what he would say if one ever came into his hands. An impossibility of time and place.



## THIRTY SCOTLAND

The Merk was confident. The whole team of assassins had been briefed. The woman was supposed to be lethal. He had served for thirty years and had fought in many combat zones both here and out there. He saw the old lady sat with her book and couldn't see what all the fuss was about. That was his first mistake.

He had approached silently as the Gojxk came up with the Thrope woman's infant family. As he positioned behind her, he cocked his weapon. Suddenly the whole world went to hell.

Faster than his eye could see, the woman had produced a knife and thrown it straight into the throat of the Gojxk. The Merk felt the surge of adrenaline as his finger began to tighten on the trigger, but before he could apply any more pressure, his world stopped. The last thing he thought was, how beautiful, and yet terrifying, were the two eyes staring into his, and then there was nothing.

THIRTY-ONE  
SCOTLAND

Lord Stiletto felt the sweat sting in his eyes and the midges biting into his skin. That was the problem with Scotland at this time of year. His blue paisley silk waistcoat and bright yellow cravat were hardly camouflage gear, but things had happened all rather rapidly. He had been moving silently through the woodland bordering the east side of the loch. He smiled, remembering the majestic antler spread of the great stag he had silently encountered. He didn't know which of them had been more surprised.

Now, seeing a Merk ahead in the trees, like a Korean henchman in an old spy movie, he removed his bowler hat, and held the rim firmly in his strong fingers. The Merk up ahead had his back to Stiletto, and with casual aim he threw the specially modified hat like a Frisbee. The Merk died without a yell, the razor-sharp rim embedded in the back of his neck. Unfortunately, the man had not been alone and the

tree beside Stiletto erupted into a mass of flying chips and splinters as the silenced bullets ripped into it in angry bursts. The silence of the forest was broken by an explosion of wings in the canopy, and the smell of cordite drifted on the evening breeze.

THIRTY-TWO  
SCOTLAND

A part of her awareness, almost in the background, simultaneously heard the exploding beat of wings from the copse by the loch whilst the neural net showed the infrared images of moving bodies under the trees, and firing weapons, relayed from the circling satellite. She had scooped up the screaming Arthur and Suzanna and was running towards the house. She knew there was trouble waiting for her, the system was even supplying names next to the images she was receiving; an advantage of photo recognition software sold to a gullible public in this time to help sort their photo collections, and used by the computer giants and security services as one of their most valuable tools. Stiletto's future time network was incredibly sophisticated, and hacked into secret systems on a million worlds.

Arriving at the house, she pulled open the hinged

door on the coal cellar, fortunately clear of Merks, and dropped her two grandchildren into its unlit depths like unwanted sacks of coal.

THIRTY-THREE  
KYOTO - 1534

It was inevitable.

In the land of the black robed assassin, the experts in covert operations in medieval Japan, that at some point, Miss Thrope's special abilities would come up in conversation. It was many years as Konami's student before a slight relaxation in their relationship became possible. Despite the impossibly unusual situation of being a woman, a giant, and a gaijin, in no particular order, Miss Thrope was an able and assiduous student. Still, the Master student relationship was almost a sacred bond. With time there was a slight relaxation in etiquette, and with a long time, friendship. Any student of Japanese history would recognise this as impossible, but achieving the impossible was Miss Thrope's stock in trade.

Silently she waited on the outside of the paper shoji, the sliding screen that was all that functioned as inner walls within the safety of the castle. In a land of

earthquakes, wood and paper were standard construction materials that allowed rapid repair, although they were a terrible fire risk.

She had negotiated the nightingale floor, that sung it's warning of intruders, with silent skill. It was one of the most difficult entries she had made, and she gave a silent thank you that the security systems of the future didn't engage such simple physical, yet sophisticated measures.

Holding the tanto calmly in her steady hand she slid open the shoji screen, and stepped into the darkness. The samurai within awoke instantly, his hand naturally feeling for his sword. Flowing like liquid darkness Miss Thrope had the chisel-like tip of her blade pressed into his throat, enough to draw blood but not to pierce the taut skin. Quietly in fluent Japanese, her Kyoto dialect perfect, she asked the question prepared for her. Unafraid of death but terrified of betraying his lord the warrior struck out powerfully. Miss Thrope's beautiful and deadly Konami blade pushed deep through the throat, piercing the spinal column between vertebrae, and out of the back of the neck, into the straw tatami, which soaked up the sudden rush of blood.

Wiping the blade on her victim's silk sleeping kimono she replaced it in the folds of her obi, and returned through the castle corridors as silently as she had entered.

## THIRTY-FOUR

### SCOTLAND

Stepping silently down the corridor of her Scottish home, Miss Thrope could have had her eyes closed. It was like playing a computer game, knowing in advance, where the traps and the monsters were. Don't get complacent she told herself. One mistake and it was all over.

The first one was concealed in the cupboard under the stairs. She shot him through the door, with barely a glance, and noted the change in his thermal signature on the neural net.

Three were upstairs waiting in her large and sunny studio where she painted her oils and water colours. She hoped they hadn't done any damage. The one saving grace was that they were professionals. Here to do a job. No emotion, no malice, just cold and calculated results, just like her, she realised.

There were concealed weapons hidden everywhere. A mad sense of equality had made her leave



her gun of some sort downstairs, it's range of futuristic ballistics set aside. In her hand was a comforting silenced pistol from the old days. She was up against machine pistols and pump action shotguns, with just plain ordinary bullets and shot.

She came through the open door low, fast and ready. Landing in a roll she came out with the gun poised, and double tapped the one in her armchair who was nursing a shotgun. Head and heart. Still in one fluid motion, she shot the one raising his Magnum through each eye. A detached part of her mind scolded herself for showing off, but enjoying herself immensely, a seventeenth century blade appeared in her other hand. She threw it almost casually, but with enough force, to embed itself to the hilt in the third assailant's heart. Or it would have been if he hadn't been wearing a Kevlar vest. Too late Miss Thrope realised her last mistake. Too late to bring her pistol to bear, she stared into the barrel of the automatic weapon.

The sound was wrong. Three rapid phuts. Not the expected explosive sound of automatic fire. The hand holding the carbine let go as its owner's head exploded with the force of the three shots. For once at a loss from the expectation of certain death, Miss Thrope turned to the door where silhouetted, bloody-brimmed bowler firmly on head, was her friend with the loud waistcoats, eyes fierce, lips stretched in a grim smile of greeting over the familiar and completely reliable gun of some sort.

THIRTY-FIVE  
EARTH - NEW YORK - PRESENT

Miss Thrope had suffered as much of this man's inane conversation as she knew was required. Politely she excused herself to visit the restaurant's powder room.

The CEO was pleased. The Jap had really come up trumps. The best restaurant in Manhattan, booked just for his sole use. His date was fantastic, and he eagerly anticipated the night to come. He waited patiently for her to return. What would he have thought if he had known that she had once performed a contract for his Jap's venerable ancestor nearly five hundred years before.

He looked up, noticing his beautiful and charming escort, in a perfectly cut evening dress, gliding through the restaurant back to their table. There was something different though. Her demeanour had subtly changed and her eyes that had sparkled all night seemed to burn.

It was when he saw what she was holding in her

left hand that his eyes truly widened in surprise, but accepting his fate he remained calm, and even managed a polite nod of his head.

Standing serene and still before him she spoke in her soft melodious voice.

"You threatened my family," she said, and with a fluid single motion drew the ancient blade, and dispassionately removed his perfectly groomed head from his immaculately suited shoulders.

Wiping the blood from her blade on the spotless white table cloth, she thought she might pop over to Capri, after all, didn't she deserve a holiday?

THE END



# BEANO GRIGIO

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FRIENDSHIP SERIES BOOK THREE



ONE  
HORSE HEAD NEBULA - SUNSHINE

Beano Grigio was a confidence trickster. He didn't really know what he was doing here, because Beano Grigio moved on the edges of the underworld.

He knew enough about his host to know that he was one of the good guys. When he had received the invitation to dinner, he had thought it was a joke. There wasn't a great deal known about Lord Stiletto in the general 'Verse, but there were all kinds of myths and legends about his home, the fabled tech star, Sunshine, on the edge of the Horse Head Nebula, his incredible team of genius scientists and engineers, and of course his dinner parties. In truth there was virtually nothing known about Lord Stiletto, but in the dark fringes of the 'Verse where Beano comfortably moved, there were plenty of rumours.

Beano was dying to use the bathroom. That was another one of those rumours. It was said that it was never the same one twice. It was said that when one

entered, the room was selected from thousands. It could be an exact replica of a Roman bathroom, replete with senators communally sharing the other pots, a spotless iridium creation from some Nebulan designer, or the famous ceramic urinals from the lavatory of a public house in the centre of Liverpool.

Beano Grigio might have been an intriguing and questionable character, but that didn't mean he wasn't cultured. Still he was bursting. The reason for his reticence was that rumour said that the bathrooms weren't facsimiles but the real thing, and worse, anyone rude enough to disturb the harmony of Stiletto's table, or unwise enough to try to turn the occasion to their advantage, would find themselves exiting their bathroom, and finding themselves in a cafe or a diner somewhere in the middle of nowhere, on the far side of some forgotten planetary system.

Lord Stiletto was aware of his guest's discomfort. Beano needn't have worried. The only guests at his table were very close friends, or in Beano's case, those that were going to be. For Lord Stiletto was a Master of the space time continuum, and Beano Grigio had a very interesting future.



## TWO

### SUNSHINE

Beano had risen early. His room had been simple and comfortable. Not luxurious in a conventional sense. Had he but known, it was modelled on a simple cabin Stiletto had once stayed in at Yosemite National Park on Earth, and the fact that Stiletto himself had lovingly made the walls and bed from actual wood made it a room priceless beyond the wealth of princes.

After breakfast a guide had taken him to a large room where he was reintroduced to his fellow guests from the night before, although he noted two were missing. Of course, night and day are relative terms in space, artificially created for comfort and ambience.

Not yet aware of the neural net, Beano was given a headset that communicated with his own neural functions. It was familiar enough technology from a childhood of playing games where you were in the game.

The room dissolved so that Beano and the others disappeared, and transformed into a huge wooden

room, whose only occupants were the two missing guests from dinner last night. The room was beautiful beyond anything he had seen. The walls were made of special paper on sliding screens, with beautiful black ink calligraphy. The end wall was open to a wooden veranda and beyond was a riot of rich green mountain scenery. The thunder of a mighty waterfall filled the air and he could feel the damp breeze on his face and arms.

Oblivious of the watchers, the two people, wearing strange robes of a kind he had not seen before, knelt opposite each other. In front of each was a carved wooden stick. Beano was familiar enough with combat to understand the game.

"Not a game."

The thought came unbidden into his mind and he recognised the 'voice' of his host.

Beano kept silent and carefully observed the two opponents. One, a tall man, Beano guessed in his early forties, had been sat opposite him at dinner the night before. He wondered if it had been a test. He had needed all of his internal discipline not to keep staring at him, and Beano had seen some strange sights. It wasn't that he was blind, he had no eyes at all, just smooth skin covering his empty sockets.

The other, kneeling comfortably on the tatami, was a mature lady of great beauty. He hadn't been able to glean a lot about her the night before. Her conversation was a mixture of cultural interest and light-

hearted quips about dresses, and 'a thoroughly charming little bistro near the Alhambra.'

Now though, she exhibited a stillness and quiet strength that made him hurriedly run through his conversation the night before, checking that he hadn't said anything inappropriate.

Beano was unaware of any communication in the room but felt that the event had begun. Silently the two friends bowed deeply over their wooden swords. Each, slowly in their own time, picked up the blade before them, as if it was a precious heirloom and object of deep love, and holding it lightly, but with great awareness, seemed to float from kneeling to standing, so fluidly was it done.

Standing now in absolute stillness, the silence of the two warriors seemed to override the thunder of the waterfall. Suddenly the tall blind man moved forward, his blade coming down with such power it would surely have smashed the woman's head had it connected. Beano wanted a rewind. The woman was now in a stance at an angle to the man, the blunt edge of her wooden blade touching the neck of her opponent. Beano was sharp, but his eye was too slow, and suddenly he realised what he wanted to learn more than anything in all the 'Verse.

### THREE

## SUNSHINE

The Book Fairy was about eight inches tall. Unlike the fairies of stories, she didn't always have wings, or rather being magic, she could conceal them at will. Actually, this was more a form of instant metamorphosis, for The Book Fairy had complete control of her appearance. Unfortunately, she didn't have complete control of her size.

She was well travelled, and liked to, so she had got about a good deal. Many years ago, she had become stuck on the Earth, accidentally left there in the Egyptian period, when a lot of interesting communication had gone on. She ended up living there for two and a half thousand years. She had spent what was known as the Dark ages in the East, the birthplace of much of Earth's culture, and only returned to Europe after a young Venetian's visit to Peking. She was so delighted by what she found in Renaissance Italy that she stayed, making many friends amongst the commu-

nity of artists, poets and musicians. One particular fine mind had been very interested in her stories of flying machines, and even came up with a few designs of his own.

The following few hundred years, with the general upsurge of the Age of Reason, meant that the only humans who could even see her were children, which was somewhat limiting. One day she was lounging in the Savoy, when a man in a garish waistcoat, sucking an unlit pipe, sat down beside her. Life was never the same again.

FOUR  
EARTH - SCOTLAND - PRESENT

There was a knock at the door. It was a lovely summer evening. Miss Ann Thrope had been pottering in the garden, then settled down in front of her log burner with a good book. She was all cosied up and in her jim-jams.

Opening her front door, she discovered a heavily-paunched man with eyes that sparked with tiny flames. He wore a well cut red suit and had a large flowing beard and hair that was so white it twinkled in the fire-light. Beside the old man was a quiet boy, sad but stoic, holding onto the old man's hand.

Without introduction, the old man said, "Hello Miss Thrope, I'm sorry to disturb you like this."

Miss Thrope smiled to show her assent.

"You may remember, this is little Billy Brambling. His mummy just died, and I was wondering if you would take Billy on as your apprentice. He needs a home and a trade, but not a new mother."

Miss Thrope looked at the boy. "Is this what you want Billy?"

"Papa Rouge says you will look after me."

Miss Thrope smiled. "Is that what he told you to call him?"

For the first time the boy smiled too. "No, it's my little joke."

"Do you know what it is I do?"

"Papa Rouge says you are like the heroes in my comics."

"Papa Rouge is a nice old man," she replied warmly. "In Spiderman what does the newspaper owner think of him?"

"He thinks he's a villain."

"That's right, and a lot of people think I'm a villain too."

"Is that because you kill people?"

The boy's question surprised her, but this was a moment for truth.

"Yes, I do. In fact that's my trade, which Papa Rouge wants you to learn."

"I know," said the boy. "We discussed it."

"How old are you Billy?"

"Nine."

"Will you do everything I say, whether you understand the reason or not? Will you trust me?"

"Trust has to be earned," replied the boy.

"Yes, it does, but in this case, this is it, this is your moment. You must choose."

"You saved Papa Rouge. I thought it was a dream,

but I remember. What better life could I live than to be like you?"

"You can become a doctor or a teacher and change people's lives. A life with me will be hard and full of danger. You may be cold and hungry."

"You're testing me, right?"

"Yes Billy, I will always test you."

"Then you will take me?"

"Yes Billy, I will take you," and for the first time she saw Billy's face break into a huge smile.



FIVE

EARTH - THE RETREAT -PRESENT DAY

Beano Grigio was exhausted but happy. He had showered and collapsed into his bunk bed. It was not dissimilar to the guest room he had stayed in that first night as a guest of Lord Stiletto. However, this log cabin was high in the mountains somewhere on Earth. He didn't know where, he knew nothing about Earth. Only this wooden complex in the mountains where the scenery was beautiful, and the nights were cold.

In the next cabin little Billy Brambling was exhausted too. His day started at five a.m. sweeping the training room, gathering firewood, and helping cook the breakfasts. Billy was wise. He had read books, he understood how the simple tasks he was told to perform were as an important a part of his training as the constant repetitive drills with the wooden sword he had been given by 'Schripp on the first day. He had thought it would be Master 'Schripp or some honou-

rific title, but the blind man had just said, 'call me 'Schrippp.'

The first month, he had stayed at his new guardian's cottage in Scotland. It was very different from the rough estate he had grown up on in the poorer districts of London. He loved the beautiful colours, the majestic Highland scenery, and such a feeling of space. Long walks on the fells, and evenings reading by the fire, brought Billy a peace and contentment he had never experienced. Miss Thrope's grandchildren had their own room with well stocked bookshelves, and she encouraged Billy to borrow from these, and her own shelves.

The first time she had taken him through the space time continuum he had been simultaneously nauseated and excited. One moment they were in the scullery with its cold ceramic flag stones, the next in a little villa in the hills overlooking Florence. Miss Thrope insisted he speak Italian, not English, which resulted in a lot of silence at first, but his young mind was quick to learn.

Most days were spent in galleries and museums, always learning. He had quickly established at the cottage in Scotland that little was wasted. Everything was a lesson, even if not always grasped at the time.

By the time they had left Italy he had a reasonably good grasp of the language, mannerisms, and culture of the Italian people, and a love of simple fresh pasta cooked with just garlic, or a pesto infusion, that would never leave him.

He had wondered when the hard, hungry part was coming, when one autumn morning, as they sat on the terrace sharing a simple breakfast, and enjoying the Tuscan landscape, Miss Thrope advised him to dress warmly. After breakfast they had arrived at 'Schripp's mountain retreat.

Miss Thrope had stayed for dinner, where Billy had been introduced to Beano, a man from space, she had said, watching with enjoyment his look of wonder, and then the next day she had left, assuring him that he was safe in 'Schripp's capable hands.

## SIX

### THE RETREAT

Six months. Six exciting months of training from dawn to dusk. Beano Grigio was already a character. Decidedly dodgy. He had been in plenty of scrapes and desperate situations, and occasionally had had to blast his way out, but Beano's greatest skill was the mastery of illusion. He did his best work when most people hardly noticed him.

After six months of training by 'Schripp, Beano and Billy had changed. Evolved. It wasn't just the hardness of body, the endurance; their whole sense of being had changed. Their sense of time and awareness was different.

How did Beano describe it? "It's like being a fly," Beano said. "Its sense of time is completely different. By the time your hand approaches, it has had lunch, written a play, watched a movie, and still has time to re-catalogue its vinyl collection before flying away."

"Wow, really," said Billy over his bowl of rice, "what kind of flies do you have on your world?"

"Pretty, goddamn smart ones," replied Beano, warming to his jape. Then he saw the boy's eyes crinkle in a smile and knew he'd switched the con.

"Good, kid, that's really good."

Just at that moment the door opened, and the two warriors looked up to see Miss Thrope enter the room. Both smiled, pleased to see her.

Taking a bowl and chopsticks from the table, she helped herself to some rice, and the three of them quietly continued their meal.

It was later, sat on the veranda, after Billy had finished his meditation, that Miss Thrope put her book down, and told him in her clear voice, "Tomorrow we will be going to space."

Billy was at once both excited and anxious. "Will there be monsters?"

"Eventually, maybe," answered Miss Thrope, "but this trip is to stay with 'Schripp and an old friend of mine. He has a different kind of training hall. Has Beano been winding you up?"

"Oh no," he replied, not quite meeting her eye.

"I admire your loyalty young man," she countered, but if you are going to lie to me, you must learn not to betray it in your mannerisms."

"Is that something that you are going to teach me?"

"Later," came the reply, "much later." With that she picked up her book and carried on reading.

## SEVEN

### SUNSHINE

Billy loved Lord Stiletto's training hall on Sunshine. Beano told him it was where he had first witnessed the match between Miss Thrope and 'Schripp.

Growing up, Billy had never played computer games. They had never been an option. Now, to be inside a virtual room where all his senses told him it was 'real,' was truly amazing. To help him adapt, his first experience of the 'room' was an exact replica of their mountain retreat on Earth. They carried on their normal existence for several Earth weeks, and after the first few days he mostly forgot that he was in space.

"Exist in every moment." That was one of the things 'Schripp had said to him on his first day in the mountains.

He wondered about the book he had been reading, that discussed fantasy and reality. Reality was being on a future space station called Sunshine, but his experienced reality, being in a mountain cabin back on

Earth, whilst artificially created, appeared completely 'real.' Billy reckoned that dealing with this temporal and spatial displacement was just as an important part of his training as the sword fighting and mental discipline.

Billy knelt on the floor awaiting the commencement of this morning's lesson. It was his favourite part of the day. Chores finished, exercises complete, practice over. Beano and Billy had graduated to individual lessons with 'Schripp and recently that had meant a lot of bokken sparring. Today as Billy waited, he sensed a coming change.

He felt the presence of his teacher as he entered the hall but was also aware of someone else. Walking across the tatami was a beautiful young woman in simple black robes carrying a white oak blade. Introduced simply as his new combat teacher, she indicated with a nod that he should prepare himself. Her attack was like lightning. Still the boy had trained long and assiduously. Maintaining his focus on her eyes, he was able to 'see' all of her. Though still at an elemental stage of development, Billy had come far. He glided away from the force of the attack, casually deflecting her blade, and then almost as fast, cut at a potential weakness in her sphere. The wooden blades were a blur of motion, a volley of loud cracks as they clashed together. Billy was in the Zone. No conscious thought or decision. Each attack or defence was spontaneously created in the moment. All the while, he held the eyes of his opponent lightly in his awareness.

Suddenly, the woman thrust the tip of her wooden blade at his chest. Feeling the flow of energy, Billy was already adjusting his being, so that his torso would no longer be occupying the same space as the sword tip, when her eyes changed. Now the eyes he held before him had the vertical slit pupils of a cat. Completely shaken, his harmony smashed, he felt the bokken tip strike him powerfully on the rib cage, sending him flying.

For the first time the woman, now with a cat's head, spoke to Billy. "You did well, but why were you surprised? Those ribs will be cracked. See the medics. Then for the rest of the day, study the book I left in your room. We will talk at dinner." Then with a nod she was gone.



## EIGHT

### SUNSHINE

Now that he had adapted to the training room, he had been allowed relatively free access. Billy was totally amazed by Sunshine. He had taken the book he found and sat in a comfortable chair by the window of Lord Stiletto's library. The view of the Nebula was incredible. Billy always thought it looked like a sea serpent gliding through the mists of an ethereal loch. Faced with a view like that it wasn't surprising he didn't get much study time in. In the last hour he had been joined by Beano who also never tired of the view.

When it was time for dinner Beano guided Billy to the dining room. Sat on the edge of the table opposite Billy's place was his new teacher. Perfect in every way, except that she was only about eight inches tall.

Space was full of surprises, and Billy was bursting to tell Mat about this one. The Book Fairy, his new combat instructor, was apparently immortal, and until quite recently had been stuck on Earth for two and a

half thousand years, which meant her friends had included many great men and women from history. Because she had travelled so widely all over the planet, she had been the source of the myths of fairies in most cultures. Billy wanted to ask if that was why dragon stories existed all over his world too, but didn't want to appear stupid, so held his tongue.

"Why do you call her Mat?" The Book Fairy had asked.

Billy pondered for a moment, wondering if he could share this secret. Deciding he could, as it transpired that The Book Fairy was one of Mat's friends, he explained that was what her grandchildren called her. No one really knew why, it had just evolved with the eldest, and had stuck.

NINE  
EARTH - LONDON - PRESENT DAY

"What about the green zone?" Goden asked.

Miss Thrope knew what he was referring to. The parallel universe where she had done that hit. The warlord she had killed at his dominoes game in a busy bar, to the surprise of his two very alert, and deadly bodyguards. A universe almost identical to the one she lived in, with only subtle differences. The main one in this case being the skin colour of its Caucasians. Decidedly green.

"It would do," he persisted.

Miss Thrope was having dinner with an old friend at The Savoy in London. He was a bit, well a lot, of a maverick. Like the Samurai of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Goden was a warrior without war. Trained in the arts of the Bushi, he had explored all of their esoteric ways, and had taught many adherents. Now an old man, he still loved everything about warriors, and especially those of the past.

His particular speciality these days was The War of the Roses, and he was prominent in the Tewkesbury Re-enactment Society. Each year they held a huge festival in England, and staged great battles over a summer weekend, with four thousand enthusiastic volunteers.

Goden had his own little band of enthusiastic volunteers. Hardcore. They trained hard and seriously. Incredibly skilled, they fought fiercely, comfortable in their mutual trust for each other's ability.

Goden had gotten wind of his old friend Miss Thrope's ability to bend the space time continuum, and he wanted her to take his team of enthusiasts back to the actual battle, so they could try their mettle, and get seriously engaged.

Miss Thrope had cautioned him about the butterfly effect. "A tiny change in the past could have catastrophic changes in the future, maybe changing your own destiny."

"If we go to that parallel universe it won't matter if we change their future."

"It might to me," she replied, but then warming to the idea, "maybe I could find a universe that would be suitable, and even with normal skin tones."

## TEN SUNSHINE

Billy and Beano spent months honing their skills with 'Schripp and The Book Fairy, learning not only to fight tenaciously and brilliantly, but to develop control of their minds and their ability to stay in the Zone. "Of course," said 'Schripp to the pair one day, " it will take a lifetime to truly master the Way."

Despite their differences in age and background, the shared experience of their journey had brought Beano and Billy together more like brothers than good friends, and they had become very close. The day came when they would, for the time being, go their separate ways. Beano was to spend time with Stiletto developing their strategy against the Corp, and Billy was to resume his training with Miss Thrope.

Billy had stripped and reassembled the pistol over and over again. His hands, strong and callused from months of sword work, operated smoothly, and now

for the umpteenth time moved almost without conscious thought. He had been told he must have this level of familiarity with all weapons, and that eventually anything would become a weapon, even a paper cup!

He seemed to have a natural aptitude for his chosen trade. It seemed that Papa Rouge had also chosen well.

Each day Billy spent hours on the range. Initially he was presented with static targets, but it wasn't long before the room was creating an ever-varied number of situations and opponents for him to deal with. He also studied past students. One of 'Schripp's best students, Aiasdotter, was an inspiration to Billy. In her spectacles, green Doc Martins, tartan skirt, and Minnie the Minx T Shirt, she was enough of a rebel for young Billy to identify with.

He loved to go to the training room in his own time, watching the old recording of her graduation battle over and over, admiring her mixture of psychological conversation, and fearsome combat technique. Billy didn't know that Aiasdotter had gone undercover, been held and tortured by the Hrym, and died in the final confrontation.

Death was no stranger to Billy. He had cared for his mum as the cancer ate her away, then watched helplessly as she slipped to her final release.

He put aside that fleeting thought as he stripped the weapon down again, reassembled it, and springing

the knife from his wrist sheath, threw it confidently and accurately into the throat of the monster dog that leapt at him from the shadows. Whenever he was in the Training Room, Mat liked to keep him on his toes.

ELEVEN  
LONDON

Billy had taken to wearing sunglasses. He and Mat made a slightly odd couple. On the face of it they seemed to be a grandmother and grandchild. Billy was ten now. He still remembered his tenth birthday party, held in a special suite at Jammies Hotel. Jammies was the premier hotel in the 'Verse, located in the Crystal City, an ancient city deep in space that had been discovered by early explorers and colonised. It was now the most sophisticated hotel in the most sophisticated city in the 'Verse.

The guests at his birthday party had included a fairy, Papa Rouge, his friend Beano who turned out to be a bit of a dodgy character, his guardian and mentor, Mat, who was a secret assassin, and an assorted group of cosmic adventurers and warriors who were fighting evil and mediocrity in the universe.

Billy had never been ordinary, but for a ten year old boy, his life experience and abilities were decidedly



extra-ordinary. The sunglasses were The Book Fairy's idea. Billy's eyes were no longer the eyes of a simple ten year old. The sadness of a year ago had been replaced by a deep love and joy of life, accompanied by a disconcerting look of confidence and ability. Young Billy was evolving into a serious player.

"Still," Miss Thrope had counselled him earlier, "you have so much to learn. I know you can look after yourself, but stay out of trouble, stick with me. Play your role of a well-behaved child, brought up by your grandmother. Speak when spoken to, blend. Always learn and observe. Never display your abilities, ever. We won't have trouble but if we do, let me deal with it. Learn, observe, absorb."

They were currently on Oxford Street, Billy holding Miss Thrope's hand to maintain the illusion, heading down towards Mayfair, Soho, and Miss Thrope's immediate destination, Liberty. This was not a state of freedom, Billy had joked to Beano, but a posh shop where Miss Thrope liked to spend her time.

They had lunch in a little Italian restaurant near Liberty. By now Billy's Italian was almost fluent, and Giovanni, the owner, was surprised by this boy who clearly wasn't Italian, but if you were blind you would think he was. Like Italian children, he was allowed a small glass of watered wine with his meal. Billy politely asked if he could have Soave with his bruschetta and a Montepulciano with his pasta. Surprised, but pleased, Miss Thrope smiled her consent. "A nice choice Billy."

Billy was on his own. Miss Thrope was in one of her favourite little boutiques in Chelsea, and she had suggested that Billy go for a walk down by the river. He had been indulging his lost childhood, scuffing and kicking the dried leaves where they accumulated by the river wall. It was shady with the autumnal trees, and looking up, Billy realised he'd made his first mistake.

There were three of them. Teenagers, wearing hoodies, badly fitting trousers, and expensive trainers. Billy guessed they were from south of the river. He had grown up in a deprived neighbourhood, and recognised the type. Feral, tough, and ruthless. He saw himself through their eyes, young, well dressed, wealthy, vulnerable.

The leader was the spokesman. "Phone." It was a demand, not a request.

"I'm sorry. I haven't got one."

The thugs found Billy's reply disconcerting. His accent was similar to theirs in that it betrayed echoes of the street, but the stresses and inflections were cultured and confident. The leader felt slight alarm bells of misgiving, but the kid was small and young, and he and his mates were hard bastards. He pointed to the sunglasses, indicating his desire for the luxury items. Billy slowly took off his glasses and looked him in the eye. "Please don't hurt me," his voice said, although his eyes were communicating a very different message. A wiser man would have felt the reality of the situation, but the yob couldn't back down to a young

kid in front of his crew. With a sudden lunge forward, he grabbed at the kid with strong tattooed arms.

He was slammed into the wall so hard it took all his breath away, but he didn't notice, because of the screaming pain of broken ribs on both sides of his chest. He saw the last of his two companion's head, held by a fist full of hair, as it was smashed into the trunk of a nearby tree, before he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Billy was sipping a cup of tea on the terrace of Somerset House enjoying the ambience. He was lucky, it was quiet, and he had it to himself. There were ferries plying their trade on the River Thames below, and the London Eye was just across the river. He had tired of watching the starlings on the rail, and he was reading his book, when the elegant lady in the new frock sat down beside him. She noticed the scuffed shoes, rumpled clothes, and bruised knuckles, and arched a brow. "Everything fine, Billy?"

"Everything is just fine," the smiling boy replied.

## TWELVE

### SPACE - GLOS

Beano's home world was as different from 'Schripp's training camp on the Earth mountain top as it was possible to be.

Every available space had been built on, and when the surface was used up there was only one way to go, up. His planet was covered in the worst kind of urban sprawl. The giant buildings were held together by a mad crisscrossing of structural supports and corridors, service ducts and gantries, like a giant spider's web. The narrow gaps between the monoliths formed a three-dimensional network of aerial passageways full of zipping flying taxis and scooters.

Beano lived in an apartment on the four hundredth and thirteenth floor of the Painswick block. The architectural mess that had become of his world of Glos, had just arisen like spreading mould on old bread, but some wag at the planning department had named all the blocks after some ancient

'book' he had found in the data library, 'Villages in Gloucestershire - A pictorial record,' by Alex Kandada.

Beano's apartment looked like all the others from the outside, that is, a parasitic infested dump, but that was just a reflection of his art, for once inside the layers of security and the blast doors, Beano's apartment was comfortable and stylish, recently refurnished with some very functional, yet comfortable furniture he had found in Greenwich Village, New York, during some downtime on ancient Earth.

An insistent beep from the console in the hallway was telling him about his mail. A huge amount of mail. Hell, he thought, it will take forever. He deleted it. Unlike Stiletto's neural net where the 'screen' was just seen within the mind, here on Beano's world, all the walls of the apartment were screens. Activated by thought, even the ceiling was a screen if Beano wanted to lie back in the tub and watch a movie. That in itself was an indication of Beano's status and wealth. Most peeps didn't even have the luxury of a water shower, never mind a whole bath full. Most peeps, if they were concerned with cleanliness and hygiene, had an irradiator. The quick two second sweep of 'safe' waves of radiation killed all bacteria or space bugs as they were known, and removed all dirt from the skin and all its little crevices.

It's a pretty smelly world Beano reflected, as he mentally communicated with the tub, which started filling with water at the temperature he liked. "No,"

after a moment, he told the tub. He gave it a feel of a hotter temperature, and stepped into the shower.

Whilst on Earth he had learnt that the bath was as much spiritual as physical. A place to soak in the rich heat of the water. The bath in the mountains had been large, wooden, and outside. The fragrance of incense in the air mingled with the scents of the mountain, and it was a delight to soak, and watch the setting sun in the far away mists.

The bath wasn't for washing in. That was done first in the shower.

Showered and prepared, Beano lowered himself into the steaming water. On the walls around him appeared the mountain fastness and setting sun from his memory.

His eyes soaked in the beautiful vista as the heat soaked into his body. "Ahhh."

THIRTEEN  
EARTH- TEWKESBURY - PRESENT

"Are you sure about Charlie?"

"Charlie will be fine," said Goden.

Miss Thrope wasn't so sure. Unlike Goden and the rest of his band of brothers, all who had some combat experience, Charlie was just a hard, capable guy, an over enthusiastic re-enactor. He may have earned his place many times over on the meadows of twenty first century Tewkesbury, but now they were going to experience the real thing.

"Accidents happen," she persisted.

"We all know the risks." Goden spoke gruffly, but truth be told he too was a little bit concerned about Charlie.

Miss Thrope had made a recce to find the best place for a seamless transition. She had found a stone barn about three miles from the meadows where the battle would take place. Dressed in Medieval peasant's clothes with grimy hair, dirty face and filthy nails,

already she couldn't wait to get in a nice hot bath, and then visit her manicurist. Stood quietly by her side was Billy, similarly bedecked in peasant garb.

"Remember Billy, you are just here to observe and to learn."

Billy nodded and wondered what Mat would say if she knew about the knife he had concealed within his filthy robe, and that The Book Fairy sat, concealed, in a specially modified shoulder holster.

Ego, ego and amateurs.

Goden had briefed his team. They had spent several evenings watching Science Fiction movies like *Stargate*. Miss Thrope had taken them to a quiet medieval village to acclimatise them to both the past, and to time travel. They had all been freaked, but especially Charlie.

Their order of entry had been pre-decided, with Goden and his son, Grois, going first, followed by the other four warriors, Jorm, Doog, Charlie and Harry. Miss Thrope and Billy were bringing up the rear. They were supposed to be unarmed, but Miss Thrope also had some surprises concealed about her person.

Goden's troops were all dressed in heavy armour and carried an assortment of axes, long swords and shields. The weight of the armour was horrendous, but they were all used to it through years of training. Just as they were about to go through the portal to the past, Charlie with a big grin said, "Here we go," and stepped ahead of Goden.

Unlike Miss Thrope's earlier *recce*, the barn was no



longer empty. Charlie, Goden and his band stepped through the portal into a smoked filled stew of stink, sweat, and several dozen soldiers. With the sudden appearance of armoured troops in the barn, the nearest medieval soldier had no more idea they had stepped from the space time continuum, than if they had just walked through the door. They were other, they were enemy, and without a second's thought, he buried his axe head into a gap in Charlie's armour. Blood exploded outwards and Charlie toppled, but the only ones to really take this in were Mat and Billy. Everyone else was battling for their lives.

## FOURTEEN

### GLOS

Beano checked out the bar. It was dingy, with dark little corners, and was perfect for his meeting. He now affected a slight limp and walked with the aid of a metal alloy stick.

Dressed with elegant but shabby chic, he needed to blend in, without being particularly noticed. He knew the stick messed things up, as it was the kind of detail peeps remembered, but since his recent experiences he loved to have a blade. This particular stick was one of the latest developments from Lord Stiletto's technicians. The short staff itself was a marvellous weapon but with his own physical contact and the correct thought, it instantly morphed into a sword, albeit without the normal circular guard that protected the hand. It had been a parting gift from his new friend.

Still, an ever-cautious man, Beano had a small composite pistol in a shoulder holster under his jacket,

a miniature gun of some sort strapped by his sock, and an iridium blade in a sheath on the inside of his wrist. Beano Grigio was well connected, well-armed, and well-trained.

FIFTEEN  
TEWKESBURY - 1471

Goden was in his element. But he had only been fighting for about sixty seconds and already he was nearly finished. This was the reality of fighting in heavy armour, in close combat, dealing and receiving blows. Around his feet three men lay dead or dying, but the huge bastard in front of him could be the death of him. Suddenly he sensed the Boy coming through by his side, and the gargantuan opposite him staggered as the Boy's knife slipped between a gap in his armour into his leg. It was the only advantage Goden needed, and he drove his blade deep through his opponent's throat and out the other side.

They were hopelessly outnumbered, surprised, yet holding their own. Goden saw Miss Thrope and the Boy moving like lightning ghosts in between the soldiers, unencumbered by armour, so all the more vulnerable, sending deadly strikes in with their fast-moving blades.

He watched proudly, as over to one side, Grois and Jorm, working as a team, covered each other as they waded through the nightmare. Too late he yelled a warning, although it wouldn't have been heard over the melee. Blinking in disbelief he saw a tiny woman with wings fly up to the helmet of the soldier about to impale Jorm in the back, artfully thrusting a tiny blade into his eye.

The whole fight lasted only minutes. The smoke-filled barn was full of the screams and moans of the dying, who along with the corpses, littered the floor.

In a commanding voice Miss Thrope yelled out, "Grois, grab that foot, Jorm, get a tourniquet on that leg, Goden, get everyone in the corner." She didn't have to say anything to Billy, who seemed to have an innate understanding of where to be and what to do. Unabashed, The Book Fairy was sat on his shoulder brandishing her tiny red stained blade.

Seeing the glazed expression of one of the squad staring at Billy's passenger she called, "And Doog, pull yourself together. It's going to get a lot stranger and we need to go."

Later sipping a glass of wine on a couch admiring the view from Lord Stiletto's library, she looked up as Stiletto and Goden entered the room.

"How's the patient?" she asked.

"Good as new," came the reply.

"You haven't given Harry a magic foot," joked Miss Thrope, who had clearly heard the story of Haydrift

Eaglebeard's replacement hand that could open up folds in the space time continuum.

"No, just put the original back on, free from infection and fully healed and functioning."

"Thank you, my friend."

"Where's Billy?" asked Stiletto.

"I sent him to drill as a punishment."

"But he did really well, he made us all proud."

"Yes, he did," she replied, and lifted her drink to conceal the tear in her eye.

SIXTEEN  
SUNSHINE

Billy, troubled about Charlie, had sought out Mat in the training room. He patiently waited for her to finish, admiring her effortless skill and fluidity of movement.

"Are you okay Billy?" she enquired.

"It's about Charlie."

"You want to go back again in time, and rescue him."

"Oh, yes please," said Billy with a smile.

"I'm sorry Billy, it doesn't work like that."

"Why not," said her ward, "you're a Master of the space time continuum, it would be easy."

"Billy I know this is hard to understand, but I'll try to explain." She gestured for Billy to take a seat on the wooden veranda. Spray from the waterfall filled the air, and dampened their faces.

"I love it here," Billy said in wonder, forgetting for a moment the subject of their conversation.

"Me too," replied his mentor. "It is strange to be

here, when actually we are in deep space thousands of years in the future. This simulation is of a very beautiful place in Japan where I trained when I was young. When you are ready, I will take you there."

"To that time, when you were young?"

"No Billy, we will go to a different time. Remember our lessons about Quantum Physics and Schrödinger's cat."

"Yes, I think so. Part of the theory is that every moment, even at a sub atomic level, alternative events can happen. An electron might spin to the right, but in an alternative universe it spins to the left."

"That's right Billy, and if that theory is true then there must be almost an infinite number of parallel universes."

"But surely, you must know Mat, because you travel in space and time."

"Yes, I do, but let's stick to the basics, because there is something crucial here about our lives. Quantum Physics involves a lot of paradoxes, like the nature of light."

"Yes," said Billy, cutting in, "it's both wave and particle in nature, at the same time."

"But they are so different. They can't be both be true. What determines their nature?"

"We do," said Billy in a rush. "We create the interaction. They are both true until we observe them, say with an experiment."

"Like Schrödinger's cat."



"Yes, exactly," said Billy, we don't know if the cat is alive or dead until we open the box."

"It's like that with Charlie," said Mat. "He made his choice, and he died."

"But you could go back and change that."

"I could but I won't. Charlie is dead. We were there. We were sprayed with his blood."

Billy was the most distressed she had ever seen him. "What did you have for breakfast Billy?"

"Cornflakes."

"Okay ignoring the paradox of Cornflakes in the future, was that the right breakfast for you."

"I love them," said Billy, "that's why I keep a box in my bag."

"And what if you decide you had the wrong breakfast. You could go back in time and change it. But you would still have had cornflakes. You would leave the cornflake universe and go to a new universe, the one where you chose toast with marmalade. But in the Billy universe, your timeline, your one life, you flipped from one to the other, you were in both, you had two breakfasts."

One of the things Mat had always appreciated about Billy, and was obvious to her, when Papa Rouge had brought him to her home when he was a nine, was his brilliant intellect.

"So the Charlie we shared life with, chose to go to a battle, made a bad mistake and died. That is always true in that Charlie universe."

"Yes."

"We could go back in time and save him. The alternative Charlie would live in his parallel existence, but in the Mat and Billy existences, there are two Charlies, one of which died on our watch."

"Yes."

"I'm not sure I can live with that Mat."

"Billy, you must make your choices as others make theirs. We are not responsible for the existence and choices of those we love and share life with. Still, you can choose such a path. These are my choices."

"Thank you Mat," the Boy said, standing to leave.

"Best to get some sleep Billy. Tomorrow we are returning to London. I have some business to attend to."

"An assignment?" asked Billy.

"No Billy, I think we have had enough excitement for a while. I'm meeting up with Goden. He wants to talk to me."

SEVENTEEN  
LONDON

A week later Goden came to see her again at the Savoy. It was a little different than their last meeting. After a few minutes of pleasantries, the conversation came around to Charlie. It had been decided to leave his body in the past time of the other parallel dimension.

"He was single so there's only his mum to miss him. He's been reported as missing," Goden stared wistfully into space, as he thought of Charlie, and all their shared moments on the battlefield. He didn't feel responsible. Charlie had died doing what he loved, and his disappearance would be an unsolvable mystery.

"Did you know Lord Lucan?" he asked Miss Thrope with a smile.

"Funnily enough ..." she joked.

"I have decided to take the opportunity to see more of the universe," he confided. "Stiletto has invited Grois and me to join his struggle, so I suspect we'll be

bumping into each other. My wife jumped at it when I asked her."

"What, just like that? Would you like to go and live near the Horse Head Nebula dear?"

"Yes, pretty much."

"Amazing," said Miss Thrope, not often brought to hyperbole. "And what about the other three?"

"They were given the same options, or to return to Earth, with or without a memory wipe."

"What, the battle, and the trip to Sunshine?"

"Yes, and they all went for the wipe."

"Now that really is amazing."

EIGHTEEN  
SUNSHINE

Billy and The Book Fairy were enjoying a hot chocolate in comfortable chairs by the windows of the library on Sunshine.

"So how did they do it?"

"Do what?"

"Build the pyramids?"

"Well not with earth ramps that's for sure."

"Yeah I know," said Billy. "I worked that out when I was a kid."

"Billy," she said not unkindly, "you are only ten years old."

"And ... " The rest was left unsaid as Billy, unusual for him, acted his age and went off in a sulk to look for diversions.

## NINETEEN

### GLOS

"Have you seen Billy?"

"No, not for hours."

"I think we've got a problem."

Billy was on Glos. It had been easy to get here. Not having his guardian's ability to manipulate the space time continuum, he had had to use the bus. That was the humorous name Stiletto had given to the transport system by which his band of adventurers and highly motivated and skilled technicians travelled the 'Verse. After a year being trained by 'Schripp and Mat, Billy's abilities of stealth and concealment had become formidable.

He was on the four hundredth and thirteenth floor of a gigantic building and he was keeping out of sight. He had seen Beano leave his apartment and seconds later, an almost invisible shimmer that broke away from a darkened alcove, and covertly follow his friend.

Keeping carefully out of sight of both and moving

silently, Billy followed Beano and his shadow to a bar. He wasn't really dressed for going to bars. After reading David Copperfield, he had been favouring a kind of Dickensian chic of late. Across the street from the bar was a small shop selling female underwear and sex aids, and he traded his top hat for some exotic lingerie.

The bouncer didn't give him a second look. A smear of lipstick borrowed from the sales girl completed the picture of a young tart meeting his client, and Billy slipped surreptitiously into the bar.

Beano glanced at his watch impatiently. He hated lateness. Still he sipped his drink, maintaining a cool relaxed air as he pretended to watch the screen over the bar. He had positioned himself at a table so he could see the door, and had noted the furtive entrance of the young catamite, but, thought nothing of it. The youngster seemed strangely familiar though.

Billy had lost sight of Beano's shadowy tail. The bar was quiet, with lots of booths, and he could see why Beano had chosen it. Billy sat nearby on a stool at the bar, half-heartedly flirting with the bar-creature in the starched white apron, although he was completely at one in the Zone.

TWENTY  
EARTH - CAIRO - PRESENT DAY

Billy, Beano and The Book Fairy were having a picnic. It had been Billy's idea. He had heard the story of how Bof had been stranded in Egypt thousands of years ago, and had to live through human history before meeting up with Lord Stiletto, and finding a way off the planet.

Billy had set up a folding table and chairs on top of the Great Pyramid, at Giza in Egypt. The missing cap, long gone, had left a small flat space. In the twenty first century it was no longer permitted for anyone to climb the pyramids, although strictly speaking they hadn't climbed, they had just arrived. Still, young Billy had given enough attention to detail, that in a country famed for its corruption, he had managed to put the right amount of funds in the right pockets. In the unlikely event they were noticed, their celebration wouldn't be interrupted.

As the sun went down over the desert in a blaze of



shimmering glory, he topped up the champagne flutes and raised his glass in a toast. "To Bof, may your wings dazzle forever."

"Forever is a long time Billy." Bof raised her tiny glass and sipped the wine contentedly.

"That's the price of immortality."

"Who said I was immortal?"

"Maybe you're just lucky," interjected Beano.

"Bof, tell us what it was like."

"What?" asked Bof with a wry smile.

"You know, all of this," indicated Billy waving his hand at the Giza site, the three pyramids, and the sphinx hovering on the margin between the desert and the great city.

"Well, it was a lot different when I first arrived."

"And when would that have been?"

"Oh, about twelve thousand years ago."

"Ah, but," Billy said with a grin, "according to the historians, Egypt was begun about 4000 BC, so you must be confused about your dates."

"According to the historians," replied The Book Fairy, "the pyramids were built using earth ramps."

"That was where we got to on Sunshine," said Billy.

"So, what's your spin?" asked Beano.

"Biggest space port this side of Andromeda."

"I'll drink to that," said Billy raising his glass, "to the biggest space port this side of Andromeda."

"Get serious," growled Beano.

"This coming from an alien from the future," Billy retorted. "Where's your sense of proportion?"

"Sense of what?"

"Proportion. How is that proposition any madder than us, whizzing backwards and forwards in space-time?"

"Do you want to hear my story or what?" cut in Bof, raising her voice to make herself heard.

"Of course, we do," came the almost simultaneous reply. And so they did.

TWENTY-ONE  
GLOS

Beano saw them coming. Three of them. They were already inside and must have been concealed in one of the booths. He cursed his carelessness.

They all wore sharp suits, but Beano's practiced eye appreciated the exceptional tailoring and beautiful cloth of The Heavy. The other two, stylish, with hard brutal eyes, were the muscle.

"I hear you've been asking for an introduction." It was a statement, no inflection of a question.

Beano did his best to appear worried and only nodded. He was just about to start his pitch, when the kid on the bar stool sauntered over, pouted provocatively and purred, "Two creds for a jig."

Beano hid his surprise remarkably well. He had recognised Billy as soon as he got off the stool. After a year of training together he was aware of Billy's heightened state of readiness for combat, however much the

kid disguised it. He could sense the boy's utter calm, and knew he was ready to explode into violence.

"Piss off kid, can't you see I'm busy?" He managed to say this without looking at Billy, who nevertheless understood that Beano had everything under control, and with a muttered, "Sorry Mister," went back to his seat at the bar.

TWENTY-TWO  
CAIRO

"Tell us about Merlin?" asked Billy.

"What, Merlin, and Yoritomo, and Leonardo?"

"Yes, but not all together."

"You knew all of them?"

"Yes."

"You're kidding."

"Have you ever known me to kid?"

"Good point," Billy and Beano both replied. This simultaneous communication was getting spooky.

"So, let's start with Merlin."

"Well, he was a wizard."

"Is that before or after you met him?"

"Before. He was incredibly talented. Though I may have been able to nudge him in certain directions."

"And Arthur?"

"He was sweet."

"Sweet, now I know you're kidding."

"Okay, what do you want me to say? He was a true

and noble King, who pulled Excalibur from a rock, and had a penchant for circular furniture."

"Did he?"

"I thought you were asking about Merlin?"

"But they're like bacon and eggs, beans and toast."

"Arthur and Merlin."

"Precisely."

"I met him when he came with his Father to Rome to advise the Emperor Claudius."

"Claudius, hold on, Claudius? No way," said Billy.

"Yes, Claudius," replied Bof sipping her champagne. "They met when Claudius conquered Britain."

"But that would put the whole Arthur legend out by hundreds of years."

"Historians again. Yet it is an established theory that Arthur was a Roman Briton."

"It's also an established theory that fairies don't exist."

"Precisely," came back Bof, triumphantly, bursting into flight in her enthusiasm. "My point exactly."

## TWENTY-THREE

### GLOS

Billy loved Beano's apartment with its futuristic décor. Whereas Sunshine was what Billy expected of a space station, Beano's pad was a home. He noticed the stylish American furniture, admiring the way Beano had incorporated it into his lounge.

"Whatever were you thinking?" Beano Grigio asked the boy quietly.

"I'm sorry," Billy replied, blushing. "I saw you were followed from the apartment and thought you were being set up."

Beano looked at Billy in his hastily assumed disguise and bold lipstick and burst out laughing. "I gotta admit kid, you get bonus points for style and quick thinking." Then serious again, "But what the hell are you doing here?"

Billy didn't want to admit he was AWOL, and that in fact he had been behaving like a kid. He put his

hands in his pockets, looked down at the floor, and stayed quiet.

"Oh, come on Billy, this is me. What is going on?"

"Was it a con?" Billy asked, still avoiding eye contact.

"Yes, and the less you know about it the better. It was fine, no harm done. You managed the situation brilliantly, you just shouldn't have been there. These guys are really heavy and really good."

"We could have taken them."

"Stop. You're ten years old."

"That's just what The Book Fairy said."

"Ah," said Beano, starting to divine the bigger picture. "So, you cut loose, eh, decided to make an impromptu visit to your old pal Beano?"

"Yes," admitted Billy.

"Come on kid, you did good," said Beano cheerily, and squeezed him on the shoulder. "Let's clean you up and get you home."

This time neither of them noticed the shimmer that followed them when they left the apartment.



TWENTY-FOUR  
CAIRO

"Look, it's like Superman."

"Superman?"

"Yes, Superman. Stop repeating everything I say."

"How is it like Superman?"

"Superman comes from a planet in space."

"Right, a planet that gets destroyed."

"Right, and the physics on his home world are different to ours."

"Okay."

"So, when he comes to Earth, he has super powers."

"Yes."

"So, Merlin is like Superman?"

"Yes."

"But he can't fly."

"No."

"I'm glad we got that cleared up."

The predawn desert air was cold. Billy, always one step ahead, had brought blankets and flasks of coffee.

They sat huddled together, three friends sipping their beakers, swapping tales, and enjoying the moment.

Beano raised his cup to the others, and made their favourite toast.

"Friends."

TWENTY-FIVE  
EARTH - GRANADA - PRESENT

"Are we going on holiday?" Billy asked.

Miss Ann Thrope had brought Billy to Earth for some timely respite.

"As one of my great friends and mentors used to say, Billy, 'We don't have holidays, this is the way we live.'"

Billy and Mat were currently living in a wonderful little apartment near the Alhambra. Primarily they were there for Billy to learn Spanish, but Miss Thrope liked to have time to recharge her batteries. Billy also needed some normality after his escapade on Glos. If living in foreign countries and being forced to speak only in a language you didn't know was normal. Still, Billy seemed to have a gift for languages. To keep him on his toes Miss Thrope would occasionally take him to Padua or Venice for lunch, where he had to switch to Italian. This often happened without warning. They would walk through a restaurant doorway in Granada,

and enter a dining room in Ischia. It became a fun game for Mat, an amusing diversion, to find places that were quiet, with no language clues. There were always subtle differences of smell and noise and decor. Billy had to show no surprise, then communicate in the correct language. Without realising it, he was learning how to conduct himself in any situation. They were frequent guests at the Savoy in London, and although Miss Thrope had been dining there for decades, she had arranged with the Maître d' to always look to Billy for instructions.

Billy got very good at this game, so one lunch time they stepped through into the dining room of one of her favourite little tavernas on Antiparos. Billy was unsure, but knowing confidence and front was all, asked the Greek waiter in fluent Italian, "Could we please have a table on the terrace?"

Every day he had to spend several hours training in the art of the assassin, constantly maintaining and improving his skills. When Billy was fluent in both Spanish and Catalan, Mat took him to a concert in Barcelona. It was the first time Billy had heard an orchestra in a concert hall, and he was transported. Afterwards, he and Miss Thrope were guests at a party for the musicians. Surprised at the confident child who spoke their language so well, the musicians soon found themselves in earnest conversation with the boy. Billy was surprised to discover that professional musicians practice seven or eight hours a day.

"That's why you took me there isn't it?"

They were back home in Granada, sat on the star lit roof terrace sipping hot chocolate.

"Why Billy?"

"To emphasise how much professionals need to practice, to maintain their art."

"Yes," she quietly replied. "You have done very well. Tomorrow we will be moving on."

"Where?"

"Ah," she said in that annoying way of adults, "wait and see."

TWENTY-SIX  
GLOS - 30 YEARS BEFORE

Growing up on Glos had been tough. Glos was effectively the tough tenement sector of a whole planetary system. Like a planetary Bronx. It took population problems to new levels. Over millennia nearly the whole planet had been covered by urban sprawl that became urban choke. There was only one way to go and that was upwards. Glos high rises stretched towards the stars. Each apartment block, a megalithic structure, was home to millions. Glos had become a three-dimensional web of communities, villages, towns, linked by bridges, catwalks, flying ferries and taxis. It had its Manhattans and Harlems. Like any world it was a melting pot of flavours and spices. To Beano Grigio it was home.

As kids, one of their favourite games was on Star-side. This was near the 'crust,' as it was known. If they had been conventional buildings, they would have been the city roofs. This was the de-facto surface of the

world, a dangerous place, a wild labyrinth full of crazies and exiles from a tough overpopulated world. And like a pizza left too long in the oven, it was burnt by the radiations of a toxic sun.

Beano first came to Starside when he was six. He was small as a child, yet hardy. He loved his big brother, idolised him. Doric Grigio was five years older than Beano, and he belonged to a gang. These kids were tough. If Darwin had been right about evolution, thousands of years of evolution on Glos had created a world of survivors. Built in the heyday of interplanetary expansion and wealth, the planet societies had divided into two segments, luxury enclaves, and ghettos. Nothing changes much in the 'Verse, in that the latter always far outweigh the former. On a tough world, Doric and Beano lived in the toughest district of Barton, a real hellhole.

Being a frontier world, forged by opportunists and adventurers, weapons were readily available. Like old Earth, which had a history of colonisation, subjugation and rape of resources, space had been no different. Like locusts humanity had spread out through the 'Verse conquering and claiming, followed by the pioneers fortifying and building, and finally the mass, like sheep in their wagons, searching for a better life, a better world. Nothing changes. It was a Zit's goddamn right to bear arms, to protect themselves, and to protect their families. It was enshrined in the constitution.

Beano never forgot that day. He was so proud Doric

had taken him to Starside. Like all kids his age Beano was a good shot. Even in the cot, babies were given plastic toys with triggers rather than rattles or dolls. Guns weren't just a tool or an entertainment, they were a *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time.

They had travelled as high as they could on the Stim, part metro, part lift, that spread through the hulking world like cancerous fibres. The last half mile was on foot. Working tight together like a combat unit, the gang wormed its way towards the surface. Timing was crucial. Only at night time could you venture 'outside.' The sun's rays caused terrible damage to anyone exposed to them. Each child wore a respirator to protect them from the poisonous atmosphere.

Doric was a veteran of these sallies to the crust. His mother's words as they left the apartment, rang in his memory. "Make sure you look after little Beano."

The Gang had been waiting in ambush. Beano was scared. Really scared. There was faint star light to see by. Luckily a clear night, but still it was dark. Despite his face mask, a rancid smell filled his nostrils. As if sensing his fear Doric gave his shoulder a squeeze and Beano was comforted by the love of his big brother.

That was when he heard the rasping. Damaged by the radiation and caustic air, the vocal chords of the crazies produced only harsh guttural grunts, unintelligible to normal ears. There was a hand signal from Buster, the lookout. Three. There were three.

Beano could feel his heart hammering. He held his



pistol like a comfort blanket. The touch of the trigger against his finger felt as if they belonged together.

"Now," came Doric's command. As one they stepped from cover. Beano's heart nearly stopped at the sight before him. Close, almost so close you could touch them. Leprous folds of burnt flesh on faces of horror. Wet rasp of fetid air from broken-toothed mouths. But it was the eyes. Pain, suffering and yet, echoes of humanity.

All of these things, six-year old Beano took in during a fraction of what seemed a very long second, then his finger and trigger embraced, and his weapon's energy joined the others as the crazies exploded into nothingness.

There had been a certain joyous relaxing as the gang celebrated their triumph. Beano was still on edge, but he would never forget the look of pride in his brother's eyes, the whispered, "Well done."

They had stepped through a shield door into the unlit corridor beyond. The wreckage of ages was strewn about on its floors, the dark space lit by the beams of head torches built into the respirators.

Beano felt a trickle of fear, apprehension, and looked up to Doric for affirmation that all was okay. As their eyes met through the lenses of the mask, there was a brief moment of connection, then Beano watched in fascinated horror as Doric's respirator was torn off by blackened, clawed hands, and a head buried itself deep in Doric's neck, like a lover's kiss, as it ripped his throat away.

Beano's final memory of his brother was the sightless eyes and rictus of agony as he disappeared along with the crazy, in the blaze of energy pouring from Beano's gun.

TWENTY-SEVEN  
EARTH - CHELTENHAM - PRESENT

Miss Ann Thrope sipped the wonderful Valpolicella in her plastic glass and was in heaven. She was sat in the wine tent at the Cheltenham Jazz Festival, enjoying the moment. Last night, in a little theatre with superb acoustics, she had experienced an amazing avant-garde trio. The drummer-percussionist was a favourite of one of her friends, and it was the trio's first performance together. The music they created was almost symphonic. The double bassist played with his bow, and created the most haunting melodies, sometimes using the wooden back of the bow, or playing the taut strings below the bridge, whilst the bass flautist produced truly beautiful sounds that seemed to float through the soul. The percussionist stroked his drums and cymbals with his hands, brushes, and sticks, blending in and out perfectly with the other two musicians. Miss Thrope was transported. There was one moment of crescendo when the drummer's padded

sticks were moving so fast, creating a triumph of harmonic alchemy, that their journey glowed in the dark as if he was holding a firework. Magic.

She was explaining all this to Beano, who had come with her and Billy to the festival to experience jazz, as he hadn't been at the performance the night before.

Billy had added knowledgeably that at Cheltenham they mostly played modern jazz, but Beano retorted, "As I came from thousands of years in the future, how modern can it be?"

Miss Thrope liked to observe. She had been watching a small child, a little girl in a wheelchair wearing a turquoise top, with blonde curly hair in ringlets on both sides. She was sat at the end of a table, which was fully occupied with what Miss Thrope presumed were friends and family. She turned to Beano, and seeing Billy's empty chair, asked, "Where's Billy?" When she looked back at the wheelchair, she saw it too was empty.

Billy was stood by the free stage watching the band, listening to the jazz. The little girl was bouncing happily on his shoulders in time to the music. Miss Thrope appeared next to him, like magic. Even now he found it disconcerting how she could move so subtly in a crowd. She could hardly just step out of the space time continuum. Well she could, but it might create a bit of a stir.

"Who's your friend?" she asked.

"This is Lucy."

Lucy, very switched on for a toddler, smiled in greeting. She was obviously comfortable with the boy.

Billy could see where this was going, so decided to circumvent the issue. "I was talking to her mum. Seeing her in the wheelchair reminded me of my mum, and I offered to bring her over. I must have a trusting face. Her dad is over there watching to see she is okay."

Miss Thrope took it all in, and relaxed.

"You can trust me, you know."

"I know Billy. Just remember, be invisible in plain sight."

"I will Mat, I will."

## TWENTY-EIGHT

### SPACE

There was a loud *vuush*, and a large hole appeared in the wall by Miss Thrope's head. The skin of her neck and cheek glowed with an instant tan from the heat, and there was a sharp bitter smell in the air as her hair singed.

Sensing the source of the energy blast, she aligned her weapon and squeezed the trigger. Her aim was always true, but she didn't have the time to feel any satisfaction, or even pleasure in her momentary survival. It was the heat of combat, and they were heavily outnumbered.

Nearby, Goden was having the time of his life. His life was being measured in fractions of a second, and each one was wonderful. The old man was still in tremendous condition, but the battle was gruelling. If just one of those energy weapons made contact that would be it. At least he wasn't dragging around that bloody armour.

Goden favoured one of Stiletto's composite replicas of twentieth century handguns. Made of a lightweight futuristic alloy, they had an endless supply of bullets that seemed to feed from nowhere! He preferred a Koch whereas Grois was happy with a gun of some sort.

It had taken quite some time to get used to the neural net. Goden was of a generation which used computers as a handy tool, but he didn't have the familiarity with them that his son had. The neural net, as the name implied, was linked by thought. Instead of a screen he just saw the information with his occipital cortex. Truly it was an extension of his mind, and truth be told, he didn't have a goddamn clue how it worked. Still, it was fantastic. Grois had taken to it like a fish to water, but Goden's learning curve had been a lot tougher. Still, here he was, living on the edge, and loving every second of it. The hairs on his neck prickled and without conscious thought he spun around, lined up his Koch, and his finger embraced the trigger.

Lord Stiletto, bowler hat held fast, empty pipe gripped between teeth, was calmly waiting. He was stood by the huge computer bank. In an age where nano technology and biological drives had reduced storage physical size immensely, this huge bank of hardware was unique, and the size of data unimaginable. Still, Stiletto should be able to transfer the lot in forty-three seconds. That was forty-three seconds he needed to stay right here without breaking the connec-

tion. Advanced as this age was, it was abacus stuff compared with Stiletto's.

The tall blind man could feel the weight of his blade comfortably waiting in its sheath at his back. In his hands he held a different breed of blade, one of pure energy. It could cut through the hardest of metals , and in the hands of a warrior like 'Schripp, could deflect the blasts of energy that were raining down on them. He signalled to Beano, and the two of them sprinted across the open space, weaving through the barrage of energy bolts, deflecting with their blades the ones that came too close. Beano dodged under a blast, feeling the heat, and almost casually cut through the body armour of a soldier who fell in two as the blade passed effortlessly through him.

Then it was done. The transfer complete. As one, the team passed through the space time continuum into the armoury of another time and place.

"Damn, that was tough," said Beano. Until his acquaintance with Lord Stiletto, his life of a confidence trickster was more likely to be spent in a bar, than on a battlefield.

'Schripp and Miss Thrope just smiled. Goden was whooping loudly and hugging Grois. Stiletto's calm, yet powerful voice, cut through, asking politely, "Everyone for tea?"



TWENTY-NINE  
SPACE - STAR LIGHT CENTRAL

Beano Grigio, Lord Stiletto, and Goden, were sat waiting for their appointment in the lobby of Star Light Central on Mikfoj. Wherever one *was* in the 'Verse, or in life, it was important to both blend in and be at one with the ambience. Mikfoj was a very different world, sartorially, to Stiletto's wardrobe of garish waistcoats and bowler hats, but the three men sat in the lobby were very well dressed and coutured by any Mikfoj standard. Goden, however was far from comfortable in his skin tight, bright yellow, one-piece plastic suit. He thanked his lucky stars that being in space, no one he knew was likely to bump into him.

The lobbies of hotels and large organisations were a good place to meet and do business. Neutral and relatively secure. There was no public space in the 'Verse that wasn't monitored so you might as well be comfortable and enjoy the vibe.

## THIRTY SPACE

Beano Grigio, Billy Brambling, and The Book Fairy had gone to the fair. The fair was set in orbit around a fun planet. Fun planets weren't really fun at all, not in the family sense anyway. They consisted mostly of brothels, strip joints, comedy clubs, casinos, and as many forms of live entertainment as you could shake a stick at. The planet surface was a mix of Soho, Macau, and Vegas.

However, the funfair was definitely Blackpool and Epcot. Antigravity rides, and multi-dimensional space shifting, created a level of excitement for thrill seekers impossible to create within the constrictions of planetary entertainment.

Beano, Bof and Billy were queuing for the melter-skelter. It was like the old helter-skelter, except the spiral was more like physically going through a worm hole in space, without the benefit of a ship. Okay if you like that sort of thing. It was called the melter-

skelter because apparently it was like melting your brain.

The Book Fairy didn't have to worry about concealment here. She might have been small but at least she was humanoid if she wanted to be. She had foregone her wings for the moment and was openly sitting on Billy's shoulder for ease of transport.

Weapons were forbidden at the fair and even blades made of organic material or inert polymers were picked up by the scanners, so the Three Bees, as they had become known, were just relying on natural ability. Like everywhere in the 'Verse there were spy cameras, but at the fair they were part of the entertainment. It was just as much fun watching the blind terror on people's faces, and projectile vomiting in zero gravity, as it was going on the actual rides. So, hundreds of thousands of punters had witnessed the Book Fairy sort out a group of Jatek thugs, who were making fun of, and improper suggestions to, the diminutive female. Now most peeps gave the trio a wide berth as they negotiated the rides.

The Three Bees were stood on the lip, suited, booted and goggled, pistols in hand. This was why they were here. The Book Fairy wasn't their mate, she was their instructor. This was where Miss Thrope had spent months in training.

The Router Shooter. It was a huge tube several kilometres straight down and about twenty metres in diameter. As you descended you shot at small targets when they briefly appeared. It was like a rifle range,

except if you missed a target, a laser hit you and disabled your suit, so the remainder of the journey was spent in an embarrassed limbo. Not that limbo was slow. The tube had enhanced gravity and once you jumped it was a very fast run. To stand a chance of survival most punters went down in teams of ten, although this meant that half of the time, they shot each other. Real pros like the Three Bees were able to go in teams of three. Legend had it that Miss Ann Thrope had survived the Tube solo.

## THIRTY-ONE

### SUNSHINE

Billy woke suddenly to the sound of very loud buzzing. In the early morning light, he caught a blurred glimpse of yellow, then it landed on his face. It was so big and heavy its feet pressed into his cheek and the loud drone of its wings seemed deafening so close to his ears. Although it was very near to his eye, he could see its sting like a black sabre about an inch long. As if the giant insect could read his mind it dragged the point of its sting along the flesh of his cheek. Billy tried to control his breathing. He felt a bead of sweat break out on his forehead and begin what seemed an endless journey as it rolled down its slope. The wasp's giant proboscis rolled out as it drank from the gift of moisture.

It was the straw that broke the camel's back, and Billy let out a mighty scream, and tried to swat the giant wasp from his face.

Peals of laughter broke out as the wasp metamor-

phosed into an eight-inch young woman, tiny tears pouring down her cheeks as she convulsed in hysterics.

"You should have seen your face," she howled, dodging the lightning hand of the enraged boy.

A knock sounded on the door, and a concerned Beano put his head around.

"Everything okay?" he asked, before breaking into guffaws of uncontrollable laughter. "Should have seen your face," he managed to stutter, and Billy, appreciating the joke, joined in their cacophony of humour.

After the laughter died down, and a few moments of silence, there was a quietly muttered, "Bastards," after which the whole laughter thing started again.

THIRTY-TWO  
SUNSHINE

"A quiet word, please."

The Book Fairy was surprised at the tone in her friend's voice. Almost like a headmaster in an old black and white movie. She guessed what it was about.

"It was only a joke," she got in first.

"It wasn't that Billy was scared witless," he said calmly. "As a training exercise I could certainly see its merit, but it was the *ridicule* that is so dangerous."

He gripped his empty pipe between his teeth and solemnly held his friend's gaze. "That's not what we do. We build character. There is plenty of mickey-taking out there," he gestured with his pipe out of the window of his library at the tall cloud stacks of the nearby nebula.

"Young Billy is a pretty tough dude," commented The Book Fairy.

"Yes, he is," admitted Stiletto. "He has seen serious combat, can hold his own in most conversation, is

fluent in six earth languages and is getting a good grip on several 'Verse dialects, especially Glos, but he is only eleven years old, and this kind of joke, whilst well meant, can belittle a boy."

"Okay. I'm sorry. Message received and understood."

The Book Fairy knew he was right. She of all beings knew what it was like to be different, no matter how tough she was. Smiling, she accepted the tiny glass of port, and assessing the board on the table, considered Stiletto's latest move in their chess game.



## THIRTY-THREE

### THE RETREAT

Billy swept the path clear of leaves. He was back on Earth, back in the mountains. He felt the tug of the leaves through the tines of his broom, made earlier, in the simple way 'Schripp had taught him so long ago. He felt his awareness of the garden expand as his surface consciousness receded.

Right in front of him three Merks materialised. Billy was unarmed apart from his broom, which spun like liquid lightning in his hands as the butt end of the handle drove into the throat of the nearest assailant. Billy could hear a beetle scratching along a dry leaf, yet his mind paid it no more attention than the crunching of the Adam's apple and neck tendons of the dead Merk.

Already he had closed the distance and swept the leg of the adjacent opponent. There was no choice, no decision-making process, just action. The sweep was followed by a strike with the side of his broom handle

to the temple of his opponent, who grunted and lay still.

With incredible speed he turned to face the last one. The awareness of the shotgun barrel and the flash was simultaneous and the boy, hit full in the chest, was lifted off his feet, thrown back from the stony path, and slammed onto the waiting gravel.

By the time 'Schripp and Beano arrived, in the eerie silence of the defiled garden, they were confronted with two dead bodies, and a red silhouette of Billy on the gravel. But of the boy, there was no sign.

## THIRTY-FOUR THE RETREAT

There was no trace. Billy had vanished as subtly as a magician's trick. Not even an energy trace remained. He could be anywhere in an almost infinite number of parallel versions of the 'Verse.

The mood around the kitchen table was pragmatic. Lord Stiletto scrutinised the haggard faces. The Book Fairy and 'Schripp huddled in quiet conversation. Miss Thrope sat calmly sipping a cup of tea. He couldn't begin to guess what was going through her mind.

In fact her mind was still. It was a situation. The situation needed to be dealt with. At this moment there was nothing to be done. Time would create opportunity. Like Schrödinger's cat the boy would be alive or dead only when the box was opened.

Goden, Grois, and Beano were outside sparring with heavy oak bokkens, the sound of their clashes punctuating the mountain air. Each in their own way

dealt with the unknown, and united in their friendship, they waited.

THIRTY-FIVE  
GLOS - 'PRESENT'

It had all started with Beano's meeting with the Heavies on Glos. That was the start of the con.

The Heavy was actually quite slim, well dressed and smooth. His two associates were heavy in the more traditional way. The Heavy's weight came from his ruthlessness and what he chose to accomplish within his sphere.

The Heavy's sphere of action involved all levels of criminal activity. He made money from brutality and suffering, but if you met him you would think him thoroughly charming. Beano had learnt long ago that gangsters will think nothing of torturing, killing, dismembering and disposing of some hapless victim, then go home, have a shower, dress for dinner and happily play games with their children before the entree.

Beano sat at the table with the Heavy and allowed

his eyes to dart nervously around the room. Trying to push the boy at the bar out of his mind, he played his role and laid his pitch.

THIRTY-SIX  
SPACE

Billy was in agony. The close proximity of the blast had confined the damage mostly to his torso. His cheeks and neck would always bear the pock mark scarring of the randomly scattered shot but luckily, unlike his teacher before him, his eyes had escaped unscathed.

Still, he was wanted alive. The healing process was nowhere as sophisticated or as caring as it would have been with Lord Stiletto's technicians. The tissue regeneration pack was battlefield issue, and Billy screamed as his ruined skin and organs were unceremoniously repaired.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

### GLOS

The Heavy knew that Grigio was a con artist. If one thing really got under the skin of the Heavy, it was lack of respect.

He couldn't work out what the role of the kid was. He had had Grigio under surveillance since his first contact, and today the kid had just appeared from nowhere. The Heavy's watchers always worked in teams. The kid had spotted one of the team and followed it, following Grigio, to the bar. The kid's fast thinking and ingenuity was impressive, and the Heavy could see that Grigio was surprised when he recognised the kid, although his recovery was also impressive. The Heavy sat across from the con man, wondering how Grigio and associates unknown, were going to try and play him. It was certainly interesting, very interesting.

Beano Grigio was a very adaptive man. His con was going to be difficult and complicated. Billy's sudden



appearance dressed as a tart was unexpected, but Beano was in the Zone, and this was his sphere of expertise. Everything was going to plan.

The Heavy listened to the con artist lay out his requirements with half his concentration. As a kid himself, growing up in the terrible city of Barton, he had soon realised at a very young age that he was very different to the gutter kids around him. Not particularly physically tough, he had a mind of exceptional intellect and logic. Early on he had found it easy to influence the other child thugs with his schemes, always allying himself with the hard bastards, instinctively knowing their weaknesses and how to manipulate them. At a young age he had come to the attention of the Corp, which was always on the lookout for exceptional talent. Now decades later, the Heavy was not all he seemed. The Heavy was a Player.

THIRTY-EIGHT  
EARTH - STOCKHOLM - PRESENT

Miss Thrope and Billy were enjoying dinner at a little restaurant in the centre of Gamla Stan in Stockholm. It was a beautiful spring evening, the end of a warm day, although the evening was chill. Eating outside, Miss Thrope had a blanket over her legs, and enjoyed the warmth from the overhead heater.

Billy being young and resilient didn't seem to notice the chill. He was enjoying his meatballs.

It was their first day in Sweden, and Billy had struggled a little with the language, so different to the Mediterranean languages he spoke so fluently now. Even Glos seemed easier. He had made himself understood though and ordered the meal with confidence, even asking the waitress which wine she would recommend to accompany Mat's salmon.

Walking back to their apartment had passed without incident, and Billy had loved the narrow streets with their beautiful medieval buildings. It

reminded him of Italy, although there was a coldness and severity to the wonderful architecture, which he presumed must reflect the character of the harsher northern landscape. Being spring, the sun hadn't set until an hour before midnight. Further north still, in the summer, it didn't set at all, whilst during the freezing winter months there was continual night. Billy wondered what it would be like to reside here, because truth be told, Stockholm was a city he felt would be a very comfortable place to live.

## THIRTY-NINE

### GLOS

Beano Grigio was in trouble. The Heavy had him pinned down by the throat, and he only had seconds to go before reaching unconsciousness. Still, not panicking, he released the short double-edged blade from its wrist sheath, and gently pressed the tip into the throat of the Heavy just to the side of the thorax. He wasn't so gentle that about a centimetre of blade didn't enter through skin into the underlying muscle, and a large drop of blood fell onto Beano's face. He hoped the Heavy wasn't suffering from any serious diseases.

Feeling the blade enter his throat, the Heavy released the pressure on Beano's neck. Beano gasped as air surged back into his lungs. "I'm sure there has been a misunderstanding, a simple misunderstanding."

FORTY  
STOCKHOLM

Miss Thrope and Billy were sat enjoying the sunshine on the terrace of the Museum of Modern Art on the island of Skeppholmen. "What was your favourite exhibit Billy?" she asked.

"Easy," he quickly replied. "The rotary glass plaques by Marcel Duchamp."

"They are fun," she agreed, smiling at Billy's enthusiasm. "I noticed, no one else pressed the button. Why do think that is?"

"No sense of fun, I guess. What was that picture you spent so long looking at before? The alien looking one. It was labelled, 'A Human Figure,' by Max Ernst, 1931."

"That's a very good memory you are developing Billy. That was Vitzz, an old friend. 1931 was a very interesting year."

"How come his picture is in the museum?"

"It's one of Max's most famous. There is some

munbo jumbo about representing the subconscious, but in fact, I always thought it was an exact likeness."

"What happened to him?"

"More her, actually, although we would think of their race as hermaphrodites. Still, she was very feminine. She was rather like Bof in that she could metamorphose and mostly chose a woman's form to pass unnoticed. We used to love shopping together. As to what happened to her, like so many of my old friends, she is dead, I'm afraid."

"Was she in our line of work?" asked the Boy quietly.

"Yes Billy, she was. Are you changing your mind?"

Billy just smiled and helped himself to a second piece of cake.

FORTY-ONE

GLOS

Through gritted teeth, still gasping for breath, Beano said "We, that is, the people I represent, want to invest."

"What, in my business?" asked the Heavy. "You can't be serious."

"No, not in your business," replied Beano, "in the Corp."

"You want to invest in the Corp? THE CORP?"

"Yes, we want to invest in the Corp."

The Heavy smiled, his face giving nothing away, but inside he was wondering, 'so where's the con then?'

FORTY-TWO  
SPACE

Billy was in pain. It was mostly the old-fashioned sort. He had been kept tied up, and the cords were biting into his flesh. Every now and then they threw freezing water over him and he was constantly shivering. The water had the effect of tightening his bonds. The flagstones he was curled up on gave no warmth or comfort, and the meagre slop that passed for soup gave no sustenance. He was slapped around a little and often. It was a pretty bad time for anyone, never mind a kid. Still Billy had been around. He reckoned all in all he was being pretty well cared for considering what could be in store for him.



FORTY-THREE

GLOS

"You probably already have," said the Heavy over drinks.

"What?" asked Beano.

"Invested in the Corp. There aren't many companies in the 'Verse that the Corp isn't at the back of in some way."

Now it was Beano's turn to smile inwardly. He had him. They were in.

Later the Heavy was conversing with one of the board. It wasn't important enough for the attention of the new CEO. "When this is all over," the Heavy muttered, "I'm going to burn this bastard Grigio."

"Just be careful," admonished the Executive, "we still don't know what or who we are dealing with."

FORTY-FOUR  
SUNSHINE

What or who they were dealing with was Lord Alphonso Stiletto. Nobody called him Alphonso, and definitely not Alf. Not unless they didn't know about his close friendship with one of the most lethal assassins in the 'Verse. Not that Lord Stiletto wasn't eminently capable of taking care of his own rough work.

Everything was going to plan. Beano was playing his part, and it all seemed to be slipping into place. Unfortunately, there had been one small unexpected event, one small truant, and nobody had thought it important enough to mention.

FORTY-FIVE  
LONDON - 1888

It was the most unusual contract she had taken. The client, a girl in Uppsala, obsessed with a serial killer.

Miss Thrope waited in the London fog. The smell was disgusting. Menthol rub beneath her nostrils, an old trick, didn't seem to help at all. She heard the wheels on the cobblestones long before the carriage arrived. She held back, in the shadows. Not long ago she had left Uppsala, wearing a beautiful Victorian dress, much admired by her twenty first century friends for its authenticity. She hadn't admitted she had just bought it a few hours earlier in nineteenth century Harvey Nichols & Co.

The gentleman in the top hat watched the carriage leave and turned towards his club, to be confronted by a beautiful older lady with sparkling eyes. Usually an admirer of young women, he was taken by her flawless complexion, and yet, dancing lines at the corner of her eyes.

"Enchanting," he said, as he bowed.

His heart suddenly started hammering. It was so loud, he thought, they'd hear it in the club.

The lady's delicate manicured hand was holding the scalpel, that reason told him, was in his jacket pocket.

She stepped towards him, as if in embrace, and speaking in a strange accent, English but not of his experience, she murmured, "I hear they call you Jack," and sighed inwardly as she ruined yet another wonderful dress.

## FORTY-SIX

### GLOS

Beano Grigio was falling. Gravity was taking him, and a small part of his mind was grateful for the free fall combat training he and Billy had done with Bof. Apparently, it was impossible to truly multitask. The unconscious part of his mind that was grateful to Bof, was completely separate to the part that was laying down a rapid series of accurate shots, as he fell from the building. On Glos buildings were kilometres above the planet surface, so if someone was to throw you off one, or out of one, you may be assured they were pretty pissed off.

The man who had ordered Beano Grigio to be heaved out of the three thousand four hundred and seventy first floor, was so pissed at Beano that his goons hadn't even opened the window first.

Miss Ann Thrope was having a pedicure. Beano came through on the neural net. It only took Miss Thrope a fraction of a second to assess the situation.

She excused herself and found the bathroom, all the time communicating with Beano. The main thing was to slow his descent, because whatever he landed on was going to hurt. Water would be like concrete. A mountain of cardboard boxes would do it.

"The fair ground," came the suggestion from Beano.

"Of course. Give me a target."

Beano looked down. The wind ripped at his tearing eyes.

"There," he showed her, "the flat grey roof."

"Perfect," agreed Miss Thrope.

The roof was still quite small but approaching rapidly. The noise of the wind was deafening, and his cheeks were pulled back with the force of it. He blinked strongly trying to clear his vision. There was Miss Thrope standing on the edge. He angled his body, arms and legs spread like a star, as he aimed for the centre of the roof. Talk about trust.

The Heavy was really enjoying himself. He had a glass of spirit in one hand, whilst the other held the binos to his ice like eyes. The Goons were laughing and joking and placing bets on everything from the place and time of Grigio's impact, to the size of the splat when he did.

The optics of Glos binos were so enhanced, the Heavy could see the individual hairs trailing back in the wind. He kind of admired the guy, holding his shit together, returning fire even as he was going out the window, and now holding a disciplined shape like an old-fashioned paratrooper in free fall. He seemed to

have selected a large flat roof to die on for he was definitely controlling his descent.

Suddenly on the roof below him an elegant mature woman in a fuchsia silk robe and bare feet appeared on the edge of the parapet. The binos instantly gave him both images in super crisp detail, and he found himself admiring her beauty.

Grigio was still hurtling towards the roof, but now the Heavy was feeling pangs of doubt. At the last second, he clearly saw Grigio blow the woman a kiss, and then, like in a magician's trick, he was gone.

FORTY-SEVEN  
SPACE

Billy was mumbling in Italian. He was dreaming of another William, William Wallace. In the movie he had watched with Beano, he had identified with the Scottish warrior who had lost his family, and been taken by an uncle to France and Italy where he had learnt languages, culture, and the way of the warrior. Billy wondered when he grew up whether he would return to his roots to find true love.

His meanderings were rudely interrupted by a heavy wash of freezing water and Billy returned to the pain and disorientation of torture.



FORTY-EIGHT  
STAR LIGHT CENTRAL

Power and money. In the end it all came down to power and money. The Corp existed for this simple combination.

In another time and place, Billy feverishly dreamed of William Wallace in 13th century Scotland. When the serfs and peasants got married, the Lord raped the virgin bride before her new husband came to the marital bed. It was his right, *droit du seigneur*. It was an exercise and maintenance of power. Throughout the history of a million worlds it was the way of power. The only way to damage the Corp was to take away their power and money.

King Canute made out he could command the tide, but he got wet. Each weekend millions of Englishmen mow their lawns, and every following weekend they have to do it again. The CEO of the Corp had been removed for personal reasons by Miss Thrope, and yet

another nameless monster rose up like a mushroom in a field to take his place. There is a certain naïveté in the heart of the idealist, but the three men waiting in the great atrium were not set in the idealist mould. The only way they were set was in the steely determination of their hearts.

Lord Stiletto, Beano Grigio, and Goden, sitting in the huge lobby of Star Light Central, small cogs in the ticking clock of Karma, patiently waited for their moment to strike the hour.

Wealth is always relative. There is always someone with more. It is a universal fact that most of the resources of the 'Verse are held and controlled by a tiny percentage of beings. Miss Thrope's chosen twenty-first century home was the fifth richest nation on The Earth, and yet one million of its population were dependent on charity to feed their families.

On account of her work as a galactic assassin, and the incredible fees she charged, Miss Thrope herself, by Earth standards, was incredibly wealthy. Her permanent suite at Jammies would cover the entire debt of a third world continent. Still, compared to her friend with the future space station, rare library and high-tech development facilities, Miss Thrope was a pauper.

Lord Stiletto was truly a man of substance, yet like all philanthropists, lived mostly an anonymous existence, where he enjoyed the simple pleasures of life. The magic of the moment; around his dining table with friends, watching the sun setting on myriad

worlds, or experiencing the moments of surprise and spontaneity on the life and death tightrope of the cosmic adventurer, were his pleasure.

Still, as a potential investor in the Corp, Lord Alphonso Stiletto was a man to be taken seriously.

FORTY-NINE  
SUNSHINE

For the first time there was dissension amongst the friends.

Beano and Miss Thrope, 'Schripp and The Book Fairy, were all for immediately locating Billy and mounting a rescue. Lord Stiletto argued for delay so that the con might succeed.

"But he is only eleven years old," Stiletto heard for the umpteenth time. Seeing that he almost had a rebellion, he put up his hands and conceded.

"Who knows what suffering the kid is going through?" growled Beano, who thought of Billy as a brother.

"Alphonso, we must act right now," Miss Thrope said in a tight voice, the angriest Stiletto had ever seen her.

Bof was buzzing around the room like an angry bee, the drone of her wings rasping in the tense air.

Smiling to himself, Lord Stiletto knew he was in control. Everything was going to plan.

FIFTY  
SPACE

"Okay Billy?"

The question came out of the dark.

Billy couldn't stop shivering. Naked, wet, and freezing, he lay in the dark cell. He felt, though could not see, the strong hands lift him from the floor, and felt the comfort of a blade as it was passed into his hand. He velcroed the straps of its sheath around his wrist, holding out his empty hand in the dark. The heavy weight of the Walther nestled there like an old friend.

"I thought you would like these," said Stiletto handing him dry clothing. "A bit of warmth on a cold night."

"Aye," replied Billy softly, "and a cup of Bovril wouldn't go amiss."

Slipping down the corridor, there was only one incident. The guy in the mask stepped out of a doorway.

Before Stiletto could shout a warning, Billy had put one silenced bullet into his forehead.

Lord Stiletto looked at the boy.

"It could have been worse."

Stiletto wasn't sure if Billy was talking about his treatment or his retribution.

FIFTY-ONE  
SUNSHINE

Stiletto opened his eyes, and looked into the concerned eyes of his valet, who was holding his coffee on a silver tray. The dream of the boy faded from his memory as he took the cup and sipped its bitter yet delicious contents.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Only bad," the valet replied.



FIFTY-TWO  
SUNSHINE

"May I please ask a question?" Billy had enquired.

"Of course," replied Lord Stiletto, "fire away."

"Where are all the robots?"

"Ah, good question, young Billy."

"Don't patronise me," said the boy. "I have been in the 'Verse now for two Earth years. Your facility here has technology beyond the dreams of the brightest visionaries of my time. Where are all the robots?"

"Destroyed or banished tens of thousands of years ago. Throughout the 'Verse they are nearly all gone."

"Tried to take over, did they?"

"Mankind anticipated it. Technology, artificial intelligence increasing at an exponential rate. Even in the twentieth century, the military had jet aircraft that could take off, fly, fight dozens of other aircraft simultaneously, and land again without the pilot on board."

"What was he there for?" asked Billy.

"Political decisions. He couldn't actually fly the

aircraft if he wanted to. The really advanced aircraft were so finely balanced and on the edge for aerial combat that only the onboard systems could actually fly it."

"But surely now, with intergalactic and dimensional travel, that must be even more true."

"There was a change. By the twenty third century computers controlled everything, and robots did everything. By then the technology was so good that you couldn't tell a humanoid robot apart from the real thing. They sweated, their pupils dilated, they smelt exactly the same."

"But they weren't sentient?"

"No, they weren't," said Stiletto, surprised at Billy's astute understanding.

"Mat told me that some of the stations were almost sentient. They controlled everything, were aware of everything."

"Ah, yes," Stiletto said, "almost. In fact, even here there is a degree of control that is almost unimaginable. But it is our control. The machines are incredible. My old Bugatti back on Earth is beautiful, fast and a joy to interact with. However, it doesn't think for itself, make its own decisions, and have its own agenda,"

"It doesn't have a mind at all."

"But the robot problem, it did get messy," admitted Stiletto.

"But once robotics had advanced so far, wasn't the danger that they could switch *you* off, instead of the other way around?"

At that point the conversation had been interrupted by Miss Thrope and The Book Fairy entering the Library with a pot of tea, and they had never finished their conversation. Now, biting on the stem of his empty pipe, Lord Stiletto looked out of the window at the towering clouds of the Horse Head Nebula, and worried about the young scamp all alone in his dark freezing cell.

FIFTY-THREE  
SUNSHINE

Stiletto made them wait. He had located the boy and knew that his treatment was moderate, if being kept bound and naked in freezing wet conditions was moderate. He knew in truth they were looking after the boy like the valuable commodity that he was. Convincing his friends of this was proving difficult, and taxing even his skills of persuasion and diplomacy.

The con was going well. He had been accepted as an investor and was worming himself a way into the Corp. Unfortunately, no one had alerted him to the link between Billy's appearance in the bar and his abduction. Perhaps the few who knew hadn't made the connection. If Lord Stiletto had known, he might not have been so confident about the positive developments he thought he was making in his dealings with the Corp.

FIFTY-FOUR  
STAR LIGHT CENTRAL

It is universally held that business is business. The only morality involved with business is the goodness and right to make a profit. At some point in the evolution of the process whereby the one in the playground held all the marbles of the ninety-nine, there came a point of realisation that a better place was required to keep them than under the mattress. So, the banking system was born. Banks are a cornerstone of business.

Just like there are ethical businessmen, there are ethical banks. In a parallel universe, the Jedi and the Sith are essentially the same. Warrior elite who utilise the force, to power their energy weapons, and their connectivity with existence. They are light and dark, good and evil. They choose their path. So too is it with all things and beings. It is always easier to follow the dark side.

The men who took the gold from the mouths they

had forever closed, found a welcome in the land of mountain banks. It's just business.

To the CEO and his representative, The Heavy, they didn't distinguish between light and dark, only growth and profit. The man in the lobby was a serious investor and already they could hear the tills ringing.

FIFTY-FIVE  
TEWKESBURY - PRESENT DAY

Billy and Beano had gone to visit the medieval festival, celebrating the battle at Tewkesbury during the fifteenth century War of the Roses over five hundred years before. Billy had tried to tell Beano it wasn't a real battle.

"But they dress up in authentic armour and hammer it out?"

"Yes," agreed Billy, with a smile.

Beano enjoyed the camping. Goden had arranged hospitality with the Regiment of Rooks. The views by the river were spectacular, although not quite in the same league as the mountain training camp.

After all Beano had been through, he thought he was pretty fit and strong. The Japanese Samurai, when he fought in armour, had light weight armour made of small plates of iron or leather. This enabled ease of movement for firing a bow from horseback as well as fighting on the ground. However the plate armour

Beano Grigio was wearing, enclosing the body and designed to deflect heavy blows and ward off arrows, weighed 126 pounds, or two plus sacks of potatoes, as Billy had cheerfully informed him. Beano was hot, dehydrated and seriously uncomfortable, and the battle hadn't even started yet. Beano was beginning to develop a healthy respect for those ancient warriors, and the nightmare they must have gone through in actual combat.

Suddenly a simultaneous deafening noise and disorienting vibration filled his helmet. It had been struck from behind. Turning around, his vision hampered by the eye slits, he saw the follow up blow that hit him in the face. This time he dropped to his knees as if poleaxed. A metallic-gloved hand reached down to help him up, and he recognised the gruff voice of the old man, who was asking him if he was having a good time.

The mock battle had lasted an hour and it was a hot day. Beano had never been so exhausted. The fighting had been exhilarating at first, but the physical strain was utterly draining. He lay on his back feeling the rays of Earth's yellow star burning his flesh, but unable to do anything about it. Without Billy's help he wouldn't even have got his armour off.

Oh well, he smiled, it's something to do!



## FIFTY-SIX

### SPACE

There are levels of secrecy. In Switzerland there has evolved a whole system of covert banking where the rich and powerful, criminal and bad alike, enjoy certain specialist services. But Switzerland was not the kind of banking choice the Corp made to hide its money. One main disadvantage was that like Fort Knox, everyone knew that it was there.

The Corp liked its banking vaults well hidden, both physically, and behind a shadowed web of intrigue.

It was the location of these deposits that Lord Stiletto was so keen to find.

His plan wasn't a particularly original idea. In an old movie, a crew of mercenaries stole the gold from the Vault on Wall Street, and then sank it in a ship in the Hudson. Taking that much out of the system would be catastrophic. Stiletto's ruse was more sophisticated. The con was his way of getting into the system, and

locating the deposits. The banking and business systems, always, in the end, depend on the existence of actual commodities. There was nothing virtual about deposits of gold, diamonds, or iridium. Stiletto's plan was to locate the wealth and then remove access to it by manipulating the space time continuum. His first mistake was in underestimating the abilities and ruthlessness of his opponents.

FIFTY-SEVEN  
THE RETREAT - PRESENT DAY

A flash of light lit the room and the drum of rain filled the dawn air. Beano Grigio counted to eight, and the thunder struck. Eight miles away. He had learned so much from the young Earth boy.

It was time. Thirteen Earth days Billy had been missing. Thirteen days of not knowing the fate of his friend. It was time to act.

He knocked on the door. It opened silently, and Miss Ann Thrope moved through like a breath of air. She was dressed simply and elegantly in a black material that seemed to absorb all light. Protruding above her left shoulder was the woven silk tsuka of her Konami blade, and in a holster, a gun of some sort. Without a word she quietly touched Beano's shoulder, indicating they should re-enter her bedroom. When they went through the portal, they found themselves in a metallic corridor, well lit, and ventilated. For complete stealth, they were not using comms or net.

Miss Thrope gave Beano a hand signal and silently they moved down the corridor.

There was only one guard outside the door. Silently Miss Thrope withdrew a tranquilliser gun, with a dart of the kind one would sedate animals, and in one motion shot the guard in the neck. He would feel dreadful when he awoke but at least he would awake. Beano raised an eyebrow at her mercy and her preparation for it. Smiling mirthlessly at him, she pressed the button which opened the electronic door and revealed a comfortable room with a man and a boy engrossed at a chess board.

"Port?" asked the man in the bright orange paisley waistcoat, without looking up. "I'm afraid Billy has my King pinned down and I'm about to lose my Queen."

FIFTY-EIGHT  
SUNSHINE

The boy was dressed like Miss Thrope in a black material that absorbed all light. Getting up from the game, Lord Stiletto removed his favourite waistcoat, hung it on the back of his chair, and walked past the drinks trolley, to the rack of weapons and kit beside it, where he started to arrange its contents about his person. Billy was already prepared to go. Miss Thrope had taught him the art of simplicity. Like his hero, Aiasdotter, he favoured a sword, a modified silenced Walther PPK with an endless supply of bullets, and short-bladed double-edged knives in sheaths on his wrists and ankles. For an eleven-year old, he was quite a formidable warrior.

Beano, meanwhile, had been standing like an unexpected guest at a shotgun wedding. Finally overcoming his surprise, the pale faced Beano was just about to explode with righteous indignation, when the

door behind him whispered open, and in walked Goden , followed by Grois, both armed to the eyeballs.

"Hi, Beano," the gruff warrior greeted with a pat on the shoulder, "how's it going?"

FIFTY-NINE  
SUNSHINE

"Is it true?"

'Schripp entered the room, instantly got his bearings, and rushed over to Billy, plucking him out of his chair and hugging him tightly.

The blank skin over his missing eyes drilled into Stiletto. "You have a lot of explaining to do my friend," and with that, everyone was talking at once, laughing and crying, and trying to get to the bottom of whatever had actually been going on.

SIXTY  
SUNSHINE

"I felt your pain," said 'Schripp.

"Me too," said his Guardian and mentor.

"That's why Lord Stiletto insisted I went through the whole freezing cell, cold water treatment," Billy explained. "He told me that there is a communication going on at a deeper level between us, and that it is not dependent on distance or relative time, even across the 'Verse. It is a spiritual thing, below consciousness."

The Book Fairy just snorted, although very elegantly, but Miss Thrope smiled in understanding.

"I see you have found another mentor, Billy."

"That's alright isn't it, Mat?" he asked with a note of concern.

"Yes, Billy, I have had several, although usually only one at a time."

"But you travel in time!"

"Yes, I do Billy, but we live our lives sequentially, moment to moment. Although I am constantly travel-



ling backwards and forwards in space time and even in parallel universes, my own existence is only ever in my universe. All these other universes only exist in one universe, mine. Thanks to my choices, including my choice of mentors, and my path, of following their wisdom, it has been a rich and exciting experience. You are the same. That is what Papa Rouge saw in you, and why he chose me as your guardian."

Bof had been following this conversation with fascination. "I so love you both," she said, "and I am so pleased you are my friends."

"Friends," they said simultaneously tapping the plastic coffee cups together.

Friends.

SIXTY-ONE  
SUNSHINE

"The plan for us now is relatively simple," said Lord Stiletto as an introduction. "Think about it as, on one side, Fort Knox and the Bank of England. On the other, secret accounts in Switzerland and the Cayman Islands. One is the system, one is Nazi gold. Then magnify it up to the 'Verse.

We don't want to affect the system even though it is controlled by the Corp. Even a blip in the system will affect billions of beings on millions of worlds. Of course, the Corp does that all the time. That's how they make their gains. What we are after is the funds that are squirrelled away in some secret dump somewhere. At the end of the day actual wealth is in gold, iridium, or something solid. Beano, if you could expand the plan for us please."

"Yes, thank you," said the con man. "We are not interested in taking the money. We are not thieves. We are simply going to make it inaccessible. Lord Stiletto's

plan was to find out the locations of these deposits, by infiltrating The Corp by way of myself and an old friend of mine who was on the inside."

"The Heavy," gasped Miss Thrope, from the audience, "but he had you thrown out of a two thousand story window."

"Yes," smiled Beano, "it was all part of the con."

"But that means..."

Miss Thrope gave Billy a very hard stare. He calmly met her gaze, proud of his role in events.

"Yes, Billy was a major part of the con too."

There was a loud buzzing, like a swarm of mutant locusts in the back of the room. The Book Fairy was not taking these revelations well.

"But," interjected 'Schripp in an angry voice, "you have been conning us too."

"Yes, my old friend," said Stiletto quietly, "I apologise to you all. But now we have it. Well, almost."

"What do you mean, almost?" asked Miss Thrope with a calm, yet menacing edge to her voice.

"We have the locations of thousands of deposits, but they are protected by a Central Security Control, a huge complex of omega technology, overseen by thousands of technicians and security personnel."

"Doesn't sound very secure to me."

"All the locations are incredibly remote. Once protection is removed, we will simply shift them out of sync with their or any other version of the 'Verse, and their hoarded chests will disappear. No amount of treasure maps will bring them back."

"And that's why we're all tooled up", came the clear voice from The Book Fairy at the back of the room, "to take out this security centre? The plan is to remove the deposits into another dimension, but to do that we have to eliminate the security centre, and all its occupants."

"In a word, yes," Stiletto said, entirely misunderstanding the mood of the room.

SIXTY-TWO  
SUNSHINE

"We can't just kill people!"

"But for goodness sake Ann, you are an Assassin," said Lord Stiletto, "it's what you do for a living."

"Yes Alphonso," she replied, "and a very honourable living too. Still we have a code."

"And this breaks it?"

"Most certainly."

"Whyyyyyyyyyy?" Stiletto howled his frustration.

"We are not brutal killers Alphonso."

"Oh really," he volleyed, "you killed one politician by replacing his false teeth with exploding ones."

"I don't have to justify myself Alphonso. What I do is art, not murder. All the beings I erase require a balance for whatever reason. Billy and I will not take part in this monstrosity, nor, I hope will any of the others. You will have to come up with a better plan."

SIXTY-THREE  
SCOTLAND - PRESENT DAY

Miss Thrope and Billy were back in Scotland. Billy's education in all aspects of being an assassin was polished and refined. It was time to teach him to master the space time continuum. It took almost a year of his life, and Billy was twelve by the time he could effortlessly move through time and space. When Billy was truly a master of his own destiny, Miss Thrope felt a lot happier about her ward. By the time they returned to implement the final stages of the con, Billy had become a major player.

SIXTY-FOUR  
EARTH - SMOLENSK - 1812

Lord Stiletto sat in his favourite chair, a Rennie Mackintosh he had picked up in a Glasgow antique shop he enjoyed browsing through, near the Art School. He was listening to Saint-Saëns' Cello Concerto Number One, and looking at the amazing view from his library window. The beautiful majesty of the Horse Head Nebula never ceased to satisfy and feed his spirit.

His mind however, was remembering being in a battle tent at Smolensk in 1812. Sat in a much less comfortable folding chair, a glass of port in hand, talking to the diminutive, yet mighty, General.

They had been discussing tactics for the battle on the morrow. This was the first major battle of the campaign and the Frenchman was confident, although anxious.

"Well my friend," said Stiletto in his excellent French, "each moment, each confrontation, is the one

and only. Survive tomorrow and you move on, lose and that is an end to it."

"Pah," retorted the General. "Of course I will survive, of course I will win."

"So, what do you need me for my friend?"

"Not just for your company and conversation," Napoleon said, and quickly outlined his strategy in detail.

Of course, he had won, and in time carved his place amongst the great commanders and strategists. His grateful gift had been a wagon load of the finest port.

Stiletto sipped from his glass, raising it in silent salute to his old friend.

One life time ..., a collection of finite moments. The man with the beautiful library finally focused on the view before him. He had been fortunate. Yet he knew it was not luck, for a man makes his own destiny. He had sought out the magic, and so he became a magician. He embraced like spirits, and their spirits resonated with friendship. He had embraced the universe, and the universe had revealed its secrets. Luck, fortune, whatever. Life was wonderful, and he raised his glass again, stared into the heart of being, and whispered his toast to the universe.



SIXTY-FIVE  
EARTH - ATLANTIC - PRESENT

It was on the third day of the Round the World Clipper Race that the boy first appeared. It was the middle of a moonlit night, about three am, and the Major had the helm. Suddenly there was a young boy stood next to him. The Major could see the boy wasn't scared, which was good considering the Atlantic swell, and the list of the boat. There was a look of steel in the boy's eyes, which he had seen only in men who had experienced things this boy was not old enough to ever have experienced.

"Don't be scared," the boy said quietly, his words penetrating the howl of the wind and clatter of the lines.

"Do I look scared?" replied the old man, with a grin.

"A little surprised," replied the boy, and held out his hand. "Ann sent me. I'm Billy. She hopes you can teach me, if you will."

The Major was surprised by the strength of the

boy's grip, which sat well with the fire in his eye. " And what would you like to learn, Billy?"

"Whatever you would like to teach me."

The boy stayed all night and they spoke of many things.

As the first rays of dawn broke the horizon, the boy stood up to leave.

"Can I ask some questions?" asked the Major.

"Sure."

"Am I going mad, will you be back, and why can't the others see or hear you?"

"No, yes, it's because I cannot be here. It is impossible, how could I be, so they cannot."

"But I can."

"Yes, because you are special. That's why Mat sent me to you."

"Mat?"

"That's what her grandchildren and I call her." M A T, Miss Ann Thrope."

"Please give her my regards."

"Yes Sir."

"And Billy,"

"Yes."

"Just call me Jay."

"Yes, Major."

SIXTY-SIX  
EARTH - LONELY CREEK - 1857

The trouble with 'Schripp was that he had been watching too much TV. Sick for a week, he had been holed up at a hotel by Central Park, New York. He had managed to hotwire the digital TV signal into his neural net. It wasn't as good as the training room on Sunshine, but it was pretty good for a blind man. On the second day he had hooked into reruns of Kung Fu. He had watched episode after episode, and now like Caine, he wanted to walk the earth.

He had learnt to ride horses when he was a kid. He was finding now there was a difference between hacking around Richmond Park in jodhpurs and paddock boots, and riding for days in the desert sun in the same stinking canvas trousers and heavy boots. He had gone to New York first to kit himself out, and discovered that 1857 was quite different from the 21st century.

The hat had been a mistake too. It was a magnifi-

cent homburg and he had loved it the moment he had seen it. Still, with its narrow brim, it was all but useless at keeping the sun off him.

Having no eyes, he didn't need to worry about the brightness, although, as he had quickly discovered, having no eyes was a major problem. Being six four, lanky and bald, he stood out anyway, but it was the smooth skin covering the orbits where his eyes should have been that really upset people. In the end he had gone down to the ship yards and got himself some welding goggles. He looked pretty weird with his hat and goggles, astride his beautiful horse, an American Saddlebred, but better to be weird than a freak.

He couldn't believe the weight of the gun at his hip. It was a colt 45 and he knew that the chances of hitting a barn door at ten feet with it were slim, but that it would blow a hole in it if it did. The gun was just to blend in, if that was possible. It was the razor-sharp Japanese blade in the specially adapted bamboo sheath, or saya, on his back, that he was hoping to bring some life to.

He had been tempted by the idea of going to Medieval Japan. He knew that Miss Thrope had spent time there, but he didn't have her gift for languages, and it had taken her years to master the nuances of the ancient dialects. Deep down he wanted to walk the Earth like Caine, and Caine had gone from China to the Wild West.

He had been riding for a week and was desperate for a bath, shave, and soft bed. In New York he had

stayed at what passed for a good hotel. Here in the West who knew what was waiting for him?

He had gone as far as he could by train, enjoying the slow steam powered journey. The rocking and vibration of the carriages. It reminded him of his travels in India as a young man. In a way, that journey had helped prepare him for the privations of his current circumstances. Just not much.

The dust for one thing. He tied the rein of his horse to the rail outside the saloon. The faint chink of an out of tune piano playing a jaunty melody leaked through to the baking street, and with cheerful anticipation 'Schripp pushed his way through the swinging door.

The rank odours of unwashed bodies, stale beer, vomit, and God knows what else was like a physical assault. He could feel about a dozen eyes bearing down on him, and pushed on inside into the darkness, removing his profile from the brightly lit doorway.

Even before losing his eyes, 'Schripp had always been different, unusual. He had been dealing with bullies his whole life.

Unerringly he walked straight to where the weaselly barman stood polishing a glass behind the bar.

"Whisky."

"Coming right up."

The loud click of the gun cocking behind him pealed like thunder.

They talked about what happened next for a long time afterwards in Lonely Creek, both those who had

been there, and those who pretended they had been. "Like nothin' you ever seen." One second Jake had the drop on the stranger, the next his hand an' gun were gone. The tall dude with black glass eyes stood there, sword in hand, waiting, then turned back to the bar an' drunk his whisky. Most 'mazin' thing I ever saw."

SIXTY-SEVEN  
EARTH - KYOTO - PRESENT DAY

Billy loved Japanese food. One of the great delights of his days in Paris with Mat, the time they spent dining at their local Japanese restaurant. For special treats, she took him to a unique restaurant in Kyoto. One that didn't cater to Gaijin, as foreigners were known. It was an ancient tea house in Gion, the old pleasure district. Stepping into its precincts was like stepping back five hundred years into Tokugawa Japan. It was here that he had first had sea urchin sashimi. Delicious.

Japanese was such a difficult language to learn, much harder than European languages, or even Glos. So many subtle inflections with completely different meanings. Still with Mat's help and several months at a monastery in the mountains in Japan, Billy was getting by.

"What you say about blue cat sushi?" asked the proprietor, a wizened old man who was a good friend of Mat's. Normally inscrutable, his face broke into a

huge smile. "Only messing with you Billy San, yellow fin sashimi and miso soup coming right up."

Billy didn't mind having his leg pulled. To be treated with this level of casualness was a sign of how accepted he was.

This was not a land of humour, or lightness. Here, all was honour, respect, and seriousness. Also, Takzo San had been educated at Oxford. A first in Greats, so he had an underlying English subtlety below his enigmatic native shell. Billy had not yet learnt that Takzo San was one of the most powerful men in modern Japan.

The attack, when it came, was sudden and violent. Billy was dining alone in a small booth. He was knelt at a low table, delicately taking morsels from the exquisite porcelain bowls with his chop sticks, sipping at his saké, which was replenished by the young girl in the exquisite antique kimono.

This was the oldest tea house in Gion, the ancient pleasure district of the Imperial capital, Kyoto. Four hundred years earlier, Mat had performed a contract for Takzo San's esteemed ancestor.

There were four of them. Ninja. A very small detached part of Billy's mind was incredulous at the incongruousness of Ninja in the twenty first century. Still, that tiny part of his mind didn't interfere with the functioning of his being.

As a guest, it was somewhat disrespectful to be armed, but he never went anywhere without two double edged blades concealed in his wrist sheaths.



One was currently protruding from the back of the neck of the Ninja attempting to cut down his host. The other was hidden in his palm as he glided across the tatami into the maelstrom.

Guests were screaming, but overall there was a sense of panicked calm so typical of the Japanese. Billy had been identified as a threat. Two black clad forms were advancing on him, whilst the last one was trying to complete the contract.

Billy moved in and under the flight of the black sword, catching the Ninja by surprise. His blade made a short fast scoop through the front of the throat above the Adam's apple. In one smooth movement, that Takzo San was to watch on the security footage again and again, Billy resheathed the knife at his wrist, took the sword from the unresisting hands of the dead Ninja, and cut down the second Ninja in one fluid movement. Beautiful. Such art.

The last assassin was calmly shot in the face by Takzo San himself, who also, was clearly not all he appeared to be.

"Billy San, I owe you a great debt," said the old man quietly, "but now you must go."

"It was my honour Takzo Sama," replied the boy. "There is no debt, only friendship."

He bowed deeply from the waist, turned and went back into his alcove. When the old man entered it, Billy was gone.

SIXTY-EIGHT  
SPACE - GORDAN

The planet Gordan, where the Corp's wealth was hidden was surprisingly, a well inhabited Earthlike planet with a nitrogen oxygen atmosphere that was close enough for most oxygen breathers, and a gravity that had been engineered for comfortable living. The ability to live without technological support, like on Earth and Glos, was comparatively rare in a universe with an almost infinite number of worlds. Like all the great magician's tricks, the card was in plain sight, and the art was misdirection.

The city of Crescent was beautiful. An architect's dream of curves, spirals, and spires. It was constructed with a highly advanced building material that caught the light and shimmered in rainbow glimmers that sparked and filled the observer with delight, whether from afar, or from the spacious balconies of the luxurious homes. For Gordan was a luxury planet, the home of the 'Verse's elite. Unique with its open space,

clean air, and clear skies, Gordan really was the Utopian dream.

Most citizens of the 'Verse didn't even know of its existence.

The best kept secrets are by their very nature, secret. In Miss Thrope's time on Earth there were enclaves, Martha's Vineyard, Monaco, small private islands. Places of luxury and privilege, imperfect because of the need for servants and staff.

Gordan was one of the few places in the 'Verse to still have Robotics. Beautiful machines, made of iridium, perfectly programmed. Polite, efficient, quiet, they performed every service required for a perfect world. No need for their ideal society to be sullied with hard-working ethnic outworlders. Gordan really was the perfect social environment.

Security was hot, really hot. Like all retreats of the comfortable set, where money was no object, they had the best of everything. Yet, this was managed without interfering with the privacy of its very privileged inhabitants.

The Corp had learnt from the rebels and detractors. When George Orwell created his dystopian society, 1984, written in the middle of the 20th century, citizens of his dystopia had cameras in their apartments, and televisions that spied on them. Controlled by fear, ignorance, and force, they had no choice. By the early 21st century the citizens themselves invited these spy cameras into their homes, sold to them as life enhancing conveniences. Even their televisions, like in

Orwell's vision, had concealed monitors, relaying their private lives back to data hungry states.

In worlds of the future, where everything was known and analysed, it was only very sophisticated operatives like Beano Grigio who could relax at home in comfort and privacy.

For the lucky citizens of Gordan, their wealth bought them complete isolation from not only the attentions of the masses, but also the attentions of whatever independent governance there was left in the 'Verse. It was a long-held truth on all worlds, that however noble and beneficial a government might be, there were always corruptible individuals, and those with sufficient wealth to corrupt them. In such ways do the Corps of the universe evolve.

Gordan's security systems, like a human's immune system, instantly recognised foreign DNA. Each citizen's DNA, although not individually monitored, no more than the brain individually monitors a cell in your liver, was a recognised part of the fabric. Any intruder from outside was automatically detected as alien, and the system's antibodies, the killer robots, would appear within seconds, to engulf and destroy the invader. Even the most humble maid or gigolo became a terminator, dealing instant annihilation to any unwelcome organism.

SIXTY-NINE  
ATLANTIC OCEAN

"So how does it work?"

"What, visiting you?"

"Yes, how does it work?"

The Major and Billy were sat in the galley of the racing yacht. The storm meant no one in the crew could hear the conversation. It was the Major's turn to sleep, but there would be no sleep on this watch.

"Mat is teaching me how to manipulate the space time continuum."

"Looks like you must be pretty good at it."

Billy smiled, young and enthusiastic enough to be pleased at the compliment. "Actually, we mostly live in this time. It was quite tricky at first, especially as the boat is so small, and in the middle of the ocean. I did get wet quite a few times. Mat said it was good practice. Two birds with one stone, so to speak."

"What, practicing your art, and having lessons from me?"

"Yes," Billy said, and then blushed. "But my art is being an Assassin. I'm Mat's apprentice. Manipulating the space time continuum is one of our tools."

"Yes," replied the Major, "I can see that would be an advantage." He had had no idea that his friend, Ann, was an assassin.

"Today was a lot trickier," continued the boy, "because I came from Lord Stiletto's place."

"And where is that?" enquired the Major.

"Oh, tens of thousands of years in the future, on a space station, near the Horse Head nebula."

For once, the unflappable Major found himself lost for words.

SEVENTY  
LONELY CREEK

Hot baths and a good soft bed. The only establishment in town with those kinds of facilities, also facilitated a large number of ladies. 'Schripp enjoyed the conversation at the breakfast table, but it wasn't quite what he considered civilised. Lots of comments about Johns and tricks, whatever that was about.

After breakfast, with clean clothes and a smooth face, 'Schripp was ready to face the day. The question was, was the day ready to face 'Schripp? The Sherriff didn't think so, and had given him a stiff lecture on law abiding citizens, and the nobility of life in Lonely Creek. Fortunately for 'Schripp, half the town seemed to have witnessed him defend himself against an unprovoked bush whacking, and 'Schripp was a free and somewhat respected guest.

It was just like the movies, he was reflecting, but he needed to do good. Caine was always doing good.

The child was cowering under the blows. When

the man's hands hit the boy, it was like the smack of a leather glove catching a wooden ball. Before the next blow could land, a grip like steel grabbed the man's arm. The child looked at 'Schripp and burst into tears. "Please don't kill my daddy."

Embarrassed, 'Schripp looked at the terrified child, released his Father's arm, and muttering an apology, pulled his Homburg down over his brows and meandered on his way.



SEVENTY-ONE  
SUNSHINE

"You have to understand," said Bof, "I am a warrior, not a scientist."

"That's relevant because?"

"Well, do you know how Stiletto's space station works, how its power source functions, what its power source is?"

"No," admitted Billy.

"Do you know how a plane flies, or how interstellar travel is possible?"

"No."

"Precisely," said Bof. "I was moving with the flow of human history. Occasionally I came across geniuses who could grasp some of the things I could tell them about, but in a world where the greatest technological achievements are architecture and clocks, where the epitome of transport is a wagon with wheels, or ships, how do you communicate the idea of flying machines?"

"So, was the closest Leonardo?"

"Yes, dear sweet Leonardo. Do you know what was most refreshing about him? Apart from cleanliness. His ability to adapt, learn, change his mind."

"Cleanliness?"

"Oh, don't ask. During most of Medieval history they believed washing was bad for you. Please don't bring it up again."

"So, he was adaptable?"

"Yes, like his anatomy studies. When he was young, before we met, he drew the brain based not on experience, but on Aristotle's philosophies. The Greeks believed there were cavities in the brain where the soul resided, so that's what he drew. Years later, I told him I didn't think that was right. The only way for him to solve the dilemma was to start dissecting cadavers. He did and found that brains were indeed full of unexplained spaces but couldn't work out their structure."

"So how did he solve that?"

"Well, that's not special knowledge. He filled them with hot wax, which then solidified. Got rid of the flesh and was left with a three-dimensional model of the spaces within the brain. Genius. His anatomical drawings are perfect. Mat and I went to an exhibition in London a few years ago to see them. That particular codex had sat in a drawer at Windsor castle for three hundred years. In 1512 he worked out that the blood leaving the left atrium closed the valve behind it, beautifully and perfectly illustrated. Human medicine didn't discover that until 1912. Four-hundred years.

What advances in your world's development didn't take place because some idiot put that book in a draw?"

"And what about helicopters? Did you tell him about those?"

"How could I? Helicopters were only made practical last century when the materials and engines were possible. They don't exist in space, or on any world I had visited. Leonardo came up with that all on his own. Human potential is an incredible thing, but most of your race never realise it."

"What's to stop me going and finding out for myself?"

"Nothing Billy, but be careful. I am a part of your world's history because I was there. Remember, one life, one experience. Every time you go back you create a parallel existence."

"But isn't that what the quantum physicists believe anyway? We are already bouncing backwards and forwards constantly through space time."

"I know Billy. I know. Just don't get lost, don't get lost."

"But if I'm the centre of the universe, then I am always at the centre of reality."

"Oh Billy, you have so much to learn."

And to Billy's surprise she vanished.

SEVENTY-TWO  
SUNSHINE

"Can't we just blow it up?"

"What, the money?"

"No, the planet."

"Billy Brambling, you should be ashamed of yourself."

Actually, twelve-year old Billy thought he was being provocatively amusing, but he recognised that tone in his Guardian's voice, and decided it was time to cloak. It wasn't lost on him that he was a party to this council of war in Lord Stiletto's magnificent library.

As if taking his point seriously, Lord Stiletto put down his coffee mug, and looking the boy in the eye, addressed the room, "We are the good guys Billy. We don't destroy planets, we preserve them."

Billy blushed. It wasn't that long ago that Lord Stiletto had wanted to take out the Corp's security control, killing all its operatives, but Billy had had the

good judgement to just keep quiet and sit it out. The conversation quickly moved on as the final details of their endeavour were completed, and Billy was proud that he was treated as an equal member of the team.

SEVENTY-THREE  
ATLANTIC OCEAN

"How many people have you killed Billy?"

"Humans?"

The Major raised an eyebrow and paused for a long time. Finally, it was Billy who broke the silence.

"I didn't think soldiers talked about things like that."

"For Pete's sake Billy, you are only twelve years old."

"I'd be rich if I had a penny for every time I have heard that one," replied Billy.

"Aren't you rich, with all those fees?"

"What's rubbing Major?" asked Billy. "I'm an apprentice. It's years of hard study and graft to come close to the level of Mat. She's the very best," he said, pride in his mentor in his voice. "I'm nowhere near that ability. However, I have received some exceptional training from Mat, 'Schripp, and Bof. We live an interesting existence. Cosmic adventurers, Lord Stiletto calls us."

"Sounds like a lot of nonsense," said the Major.  
"Who is Bof?" he added, in a more sympathetic tone.

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes, of course."

"Bof is just Beano's and my name for her. Her proper name is The Book Fairy. She sometimes has wings, can metamorphose, but is always the same size, about eight inches."

"You're kidding!"

"No, really. She's really small."

SEVENTY-FOUR  
LONELY CREEK

The Sheriff had delivered his final ultimatum. Either Joshua leave town, or he would be leaving every town. The message was not subtle. 'Schripp felt sorry that he had angered the Sheriff in some way. He sure had tried to be accommodating. Hell, he had even changed his name. What was wrong with 'Schripp anyway?

What was wrong with 'Schripp was a high level of delusional mental disturbance brought on by going to the Wild West, and trying to walk the Earth like Caine. What was wrong with 'Schripp was that he was on the edge, and it wouldn't take much more for him to fall over it.

Like the Wade brothers for instance. Hank, Frank and Wilbur Wade had come into town, as they were wont to do at this time of year, and it wasn't long before they had heard of the tall skinny stranger with the fancy hat, weird goggles, and lethal sword. Hell, that boy with his lah-di-dah English accent had got just



about everyone riled up including good ol' Sheriff Hendrix.

Goddamn Limey weirdo, killing good people with that curved sword of his, and living in a whore house and all. It just ain't right.

Joshua / 'Schripp sat in the barber's chair and felt the deadly blade rasp across his cheek, scraping the stubble from his handsome face. The barber was a professional. He had been shaving the good and the bad for twenty years or more, but Joshua was the most unsettling man he had ever had the misfortune to shave. A very slight tremor wobbled the blade and Joshua was acutely aware of the sanctity of life.

"Relax man," he said to the barber in a soothing voice. "Relax."

It was a good job he had insisted on keeping his goggles on. God only knows what would happen if the news hit town that an eyeless freak was responsible for dispatching fifteen citizens with his razor-sharp sword.

After his shave, 'Schripp headed for the saloon. He hadn't managed to do much good, in terms of helping people, well specific people anyway, but he had helped the general population of Lonely Creek by removing a high percentage of gun fighters, and ne'er-do-wells.

To be honest, he was having an amazing time.

"Doesn't it bother you," Louise, the Madame who rented him his room, had said, " that every moment of every day you could die?"

"Well, doesn't that apply to everyone?"

"Not with the odds you're creating Honey," Louise purred.

'Schripp was playing poker in the saloon with the three Wade brothers, and threw his winning hand onto the table. It was a straight flush.

"Why you low down stinking skunk," cried Frank, the meanest and stupidest of the brothers, reaching for his gun. There was a massive explosion beneath the table as 'Schripp's colt 45 let rip. At this distance, even a barn door wasn't safe. Frank Wade flew back out of his seat, bits of wood from the chair, mixed with bits of Frank, decorated the chintz wallpaper behind, along with a spray of bright red blood.

"I reckon you boys owe me a pile of money," said 'Schripp in his best Hollywood drawl. It was all he could do not to ask them, "Do you feel lucky, punks?"

At that moment the saloon doors burst open and there, silhouetted by the dazzling sun was a man in a bowler hat, and a bright orange waistcoat, holding a gun of some sort.

"Enough," shouted the man. "It really is enough."

Hank and Wilbur had been diverted by this new spectacle for about three seconds, and then they both leapt up, spilling drinks and cards from the rough baize surface of the card table.

Hank's head, parted from his thick neck by 'Schripp's blade, hit the green surface with a crash and rolled onto the beer stained wooden floor. The eyes seemed to glare accusingly at 'Schripp each time they came around.

Wilbur was the quiet, intelligent Wade brother. Mean as the others, but the middle brother, so not the leader, but utterly calm and capable. Without any rush or flap he carefully drew a small pistol from the artfully concealed holster beneath his waistcoat, unfortunately not brightly coloured, and levelled it at 'Schripp's head. That was the moment when his own head went bang, shot by the man in the bowler hat, standing in the doorway.

Seconds later the Sherriff and his deputies burst through the swinging doors, shotguns raised, but apart from half a dozen traumatised cowboys blinking tears away from the cordite filled air, the room was empty. The tall gangly Limey and his bowler hatted friend were gone.

SEVENTY-FIVE  
SPACE - THE CASINO

The spinning coin fell through the smoky murk of the casino, and lay under the concealing hand of Grois. They had decided to toss a coin to see who would go first.

"Tails."

It was heads.

"Then it's down to me."

Goden wasn't happy. He had every faith in Grois' ability, but Grois was his son. That protective instinct never went away.

It had all gone wrong on the turn of a card. Goden and Grois, unknowingly invited into a crooked game. The deck was rigged. In the excitement of his incredible hand, Grois gambled more than he should. With ashen face he looked at the Jack of Clubs on the table completing the royal flush. Casino rules, all debts to be paid at the end of play. Unable to cover his losses to the

house, the casino would more than recover them in the ring.

They were in a tough spot, but they had been in tough situations before. Now all Goden could do was watch.

The ring, although the term was being generous, it was a pit, was like half a giant barrel sunk into the ground, or a fairground wall of death without the bikes. Goden missed his bike, but he'd never been on a wall of death. Damn, he must be stressed. Where was his mind going to?

The pit boss gesticulated to Grois, who took off his shirt as directed, then walked down the rack of weapons. There were all sorts, mauls, bats, axes, even an old broom. Someone had a sense of humour. He selected a blunt sword. It was made of some alien composite, but it was as close to a bokken as he was likely to get, and he considered it a good sign.

He reconsidered when he saw what he was fighting. Grois was slight; about one fifty pounds on a good day, but in great condition. His opponent was, he guessed, about two fifty, just as lithe as he, but moved like a cat. It didn't spend time selecting a weapon, it went straight for a spiked metal ball on a chain.

Grois turned to glance at his father and saw the whiteness of his face, and the pain in his eyes. He held the eyes, and smiled, and maintaining eye contact gave a tiny bow. Then turning back to the ring, he held the practice sword lightly in his right hand, and gracefully jumped down into the arena.

The creature might move like a cat, but its face was more like a slug, with a gaping maw full of scything teeth. Grois couldn't believe the stench. This thing could weaponise its breath. Its skin was rough mustard coloured scales, oozing slime. Still its limbs seemed normal enough. Two legs, two huge powerful arms.

Grois was just getting its measure when it exploded at him, swinging the terrifying weapon at his head. Holding his ground, Grois moved like liquid fire, avoiding the attack with ease, and struck a hard blow at the creature's maw. There was a loud cracking of splintered teeth, and a high-pitched bellow, half scream, half curse, harmonised with the sigh from the crowd.

Only a few punters, probably high, had bet on the underdog, and as the growl subsided it was replaced by a tense silence.

Grois was wondering what he had to do to take this thing down, but remembering what he had learnt from his lessons with 'Schripp, he breathed in, breathed out, and all was as one.

The beast was wary now. It was strong and fierce, but it was also in pain. It was a very long time since it had experienced pain.

Grois inched forward, then appeared to stumble. Instantly the beast attacked, all its power and muscle accelerating at the wiry man. Grois held firm and became one with the floor of the miniature amphitheatre. There was another deep sigh from the crowd, and then they were cheering. Even the ones who had bet

on the beast. The beast whose mighty power had driven it onto Grois' bokken, which skewered its neck like a sausage on a cocktail stick.

Grois wrenched the weapon from the dead creature's throat, and rotated in a victory pirouette, holding the blade out horizontally as he spun, spraying the crowd with its blood. The crowd, unused to such theatrics, cheered all the louder.

Watching from the sidelines, Goden sighed in relief. He was proud and anxious all at the same time. A rude shove from behind reminded him of his own predicament.

"Come on old man, you're next up. You know the score, pick your weapon."

SEVENTY-SIX  
SUNSHINE

"What?" asked 'Schripp with a note of frustrated indignation. He was sat in a comfortable armchair sipping a large mug of hot chocolate, staring out of the huge window at the Horse Head Nebula. "What?"

Lord Stiletto sat opposite him, just watching his friend, and ignoring the view. "You know what!"

"It was just a bit of R&R. I needed a break."

"A break, walking the Earth like Caine?"

"How did you know about that?"

"I know lots of things my friend."

"I needed a holiday."

"You could have died at any time."

"That's what Louise said."

"Louise?"

"My landlady."

"In the brothel?"

"Yes, in the brothel. They had the best beds and baths in town."



"Shows you can find wisdom anywhere."

"Is this a ten-minute inquisition, or do I get the full hour?" 'Schripp said, and was immediately sorry for his words.

"Just the ten-minute," replied his friend, and stood up to leave.

'Schripp held him with his empty eyes, and stood up too.

The two men hugged unselfconsciously, only to be disturbed by young Billy coming through the doorway.

"Have you seen the book I was reading?"

"Ape and Essence?" enquired Stiletto breaking his hold. "It's over there, on the table, by the window."

SEVENTY-SEVEN  
THE CASINO

Goden was a hard man. He had trained as a warrior since he was a child. Now in his sixties, he was slower than in his youth, slightly heavier and less supple, but he was meaner than a nest of vipers, and as spiritually powerful as ever.

The long-handled axe, with the spike above the axe head, could have been purposely built for him. He felt its balance in his gnarled, scarred hands, and smiled like the Cheshire cat. Perfect.

Goden smiled at his opponent. It was humanoid, two eyes, a nose, and mouth. The flaking blue skin of its naked torso was covered in scars, but it was the face that held Goden's gaze. It hadn't been a handsome thing starting out, but with his ears and eyelids cut away, his unblinking wide-eyed stare was decidedly off putting. The flaking skin was worse on the face, which was purulent with running sores.

It was armed with a chainsaw. When it started up,

its savage roar tore through the murmur of the mob. A formidable sight. Goden's smile broadened. A gift. What a stupid choice.

As Slit Eyes raised his screaming weapon, Goden stepped forward and sliced through the freak's right arm between the wrist and the elbow. Turning the axe about its axis, he reversed its direction of travel, passed through the neck, and severed the grotesque head from its shoulders.

The chainsaw and the head hit the ground not quite together, but with enough separation to make a pleasing *der dunk*, and not to be out matched by his son, Goden flourished a charming bow to the crowd.

SEVENTY-EIGHT  
ATLANTIC OCEAN

"How many people have you killed Major?"

"What is this Billy, quid pro quo?"

"Maybe."

For a long time, there was silence. Then, "You were right before, it's not something we talk about."

"How many pictures have you created?"

"I don't know. Quite a few."

"What is your medium?"

"Mostly pen and ink, what about you?"

"I love working with red chalk," said Billy.

"Like Raphael."

"Yes, like Raphael. Did you see the exhibition at the Ashmolean?"

"Yes. Just before I left."

"What was your favourite?"

"The horse's head."

"Wow, really, me too."

"That's spooky."

"Not really. When you understand connectivity, you get to realise there is some strange synchronicity in the universe."

"Really?"

"Yes, but I thought you were the teacher?" asked Billy.

"That's my lesson."

"What?"

"The lesson is in the experience of the moment."

"You are still thinking of me being twelve years old."

SEVENTY-NINE  
THE CASINO

For the next ten hours Goden and Grois alternated in the pit, the floor of which had become like a swamp from the copious amounts of blood.

The crowd was like a nest of vampires, sated on the blood of a hundred virgins. The bookies had closed down long ago. No one would back anything other than the Majestic Father and Son.

The casino activities had come to an end too. They had to, to cut their losses. The mob actually booed as Goden and Grois, together and unarmed, faced the pack of ravening monsters. Not even the most drugged punter would back the two heroes now.

To the cheers of the mob, the two men embraced. And then with steel and grace they fought, and died.

EIGHTY  
ATLANTIC OCEAN

"You're the Coxswain." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, how do you know? Have you been watching me?"

"I read your blog."

"Ah," grumbled the Major, "my blog."

"Can I ask a question please?"

The Major nodded.

"What's it like, living with the ocean every day, every moment?"

"Liberating."

"In what way?"

"On deck, every moment is full of action, the trim of the sail, the next wave, the wind, spray, rain. Because we are racing, every action by the crew, working in harmony, must be near to perfection."

The boy smiled, loving the moment. The connection of his teacher, the magic written in the lines of his

face, the sparkle in his eyes. The Major's face answered his question more than any words could have.

Spontaneously he jumped up, hugged the Major tightly, and with a parting wave, stepped from the boat into a kitchen in Scotland where he could smell breakfast cooking on the range.

The Major stared into the emptiness where the boy had just vanished, sure he could smell the aroma of bacon. The boat lurched on the next wave, and in the blink of an eye, the boy was forgotten.



EIGHTY-ONE  
TEWKESBURY

It was a cold snowy afternoon in February. The friends had gathered with Ruth, Goden's wife, mother of Grois. The field where the two men had fought so many times was barren. As the wind blew, their ashes mixed with the powdery snow and drifted away across the battlefield.

Stiletto had arrived at the amphitheatre of the casino, too late. Only in time to recover some of their body parts. The funeral had taken place on Sunshine. Half the ashes, all mixed together, had been sent out into space, the other half released here on the field at Tewkesbury.

"They would have liked that," Ruth said to 'Schripp as they watched the grey mist disappear.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"The best I can. I am going to stay on at our apartment on Sunshine. Ann has offered me use of her

homes. We still have our little cottage. The best I can." Her eyes were wet with tears. "Come on," she said, "let's go and celebrate their lives."

EIGHTY-TWO  
SUNSHINE

The group that assembled in the library that morning on Sunshine was very different to the last time they had met.

Lord Stiletto surveyed his team. For him it had only been a few weeks, but the others had been having adventures. Ann and Billy had spent a year on Earth completing Billy's training. The twelve year old had an aura about him now that was both powerful and chilling.

Beano exuded a quiet level of confidence. He had been invaluable in their preparation of the final manoeuvre, as well as maintaining an inner nucleus with Billy and Bof.

His old friend 'Schripp seemed to have recovered from his diversions in the *Wild West* but now had a slightly manic air, and a warped sense of humour.

Thank goodness for The Book Fairy. With the

unexpected loss of Goden and Grois, the unflappably fairy was keeping him in good spirits.

EIGHTY-THREE  
SPACE - THE RESTAURANT

Beano Grigio sat down in the restaurant and ordered a salad.

He was impeccably dressed, and the Maître d' with his team of waiters, hovered around him like bees around a honey pot.

He sipped his cool wine alone, seemingly in a world of his own, but behind the calm patrician face, Beano Grigio was counting.

At an adjacent table an elderly couple was enjoying a celebratory meal with their grandson. The conversation was bright and loud. They were celebrating the boy's successful exam results from some exclusive school, and grandad and grandma were doting on the rather precocious school boy.

The window of the restaurant looked out at an incredible vista. Billions of years ago two planets had collided, and the combination of fragmentation,

impact, gravitational forces, and waves, had created a beautiful kaleidoscope of light and shapes, highlighted by the suns of neighbouring solar systems. It was too wild and unstable for evolution or habitation. Yet, there is always a hardy entrepreneur who will see an opportunity to make a fast buck. The station here was an incredible luxury resort, with its fabled restaurant, and its even more fabled chef.

The Man dining by the window was unassuming, wearing power and authority like a quiet cloak. When the tall waiter with the dark glasses approached his table pushing a trolley with a large silver dish, the hairs on the back of the Man's neck raised a warning. There was something sinister about the way the waiter moved, as if he glided across the floor.

Still, he was distracted by the noise at an adjacent table. An elderly couple with a child was engaged in voluble conversation, and it was affecting his harmony. He made a mental note to complain. He didn't come to his favourite restaurant to dine accompanied by children.

Temporarily distracted by his musings he looked up and saw that the waiter was standing right beside him. Tall, with a shaven head, dressed impeccably as all the waiters were at Grebans, he took off his dark glasses to reveal empty eye sockets covered in skin, and with a flourish removed the large silver lid from the serving dish.

The Man's pupils widened in surprise as he stared into the barrel of a small pistol, held in the rock steady

grip of a beautiful woman, also impeccably dressed in a dazzling pink silk dress. From the top of her expensively cut hair, to the toes sticking out of her couture shoes, she was only about eight inches tall.

"Time to die," she said, and squeezed the trigger.

EIGHTY-FOUR  
ATLANTIC OCEAN

The Major had the helm. It was late at night, the sea was calm, and the sky was full of stars. But the stars were all wrong. He marvelled at the beauty and strangeness of the universe.

Suddenly he was aware of the boy beside him.

"Hello Billy," he said into the darkness, "how have you been?"

He had missed the boy, who hadn't visited for several weeks.

"Good, thank you," replied the boy, although in fact, he had been having quite a difficult time of it.

The Major turned to look at the boy and noticed he had a cool-box with him.

"What's in the box?"

"A cat," Billy said with a straight face, "shall we see how it is?"

He lifted the lid of the box, reached inside, and brought out a glass flute with a long stem and offered it



to the Major, who took one hand off the wheel, and held the glass by its stem.

"A bit delicate even for these calm conditions, but very thoughtful of you," he said as Billy took a cooled wine bottle out of the box, peeled the foil from the top, unwound the wire, and gently eased the cork from its neck. There was a faint pop that was almost lost in the wind, and carefully, despite the tilt of the boat, Billy poured the sparkling wine into the glass in Jay's hand, before pouring a second glass for himself.

The odd pair touched their glasses together.

"Congratulations, it's not every day that you cross the equator."

They sipped their champagne, enjoying the magic of the moment.

"This is exceptional," said the Major, indicating the champagne. In days of old, dining in the mess, there had always been fine wines, and the Major was a connoisseur.

"Oh good," replied Billy. "Mat helped me choose it. She has taught me about good food and wine from the day Papa Rouge took me to her, after my mum died.

"Who is Papa Rouge?" asked the Major.

"You would never believe it," replied the boy, and was saved from further explanation by a sudden explosion of noise and water. Young Billy squealed with delight, for a moment a child again, as a huge whale broke surface next to the boat.

The crew was all shouting and smiling, and Sarah, an artist from Yorkshire, glanced over at the helm and

swore blind next day at breakfast, that the Coxswain had been steering the boat one handed, whilst the other held a champagne flute.

"Too many days at sea my girl," the Cook laughed. "Next thing you'll be seeing fairies."

The Coxswain just smiled, lifting his mug of tea, and toasted, "Absent friends."

EIGHTY-FIVE  
THE RESTAURANT

"Have you been watching movies again?" 'Schripp asked The Book Fairy.

"I love that scene on the roof top, when the dove flies away. It makes me cry every time."

He wasn't dead, the Man, he was just captured. For good measure they had taken the whole restaurant. Fortunately, apart from the Man and the waiters, most of the diners had been Friends. There was one diner in his own booth entertaining a lady friend, but he was so engrossed in his seduction that he was quite unaware that he had been temporally and spatially borrowed, and would be back in place before the arrival of their coffees and petit fours.

The unconscious body of the Man was lying on the restaurant floor, and kneeling beside it was an unusual being, also impeccably dressed, its ochre coloured skin, wrinkled like a walnut, its palms resting lightly on the Man's forehead.

In an age of high technology and neural nets, Beano marvelled that Stiletto had brought in a Psychic to get the information.

Beano and Billy stood to one side chatting quietly, waiting for the next step.

"Sidekick," said Billy with a straight face, "if they wanted a sidekick, I could have lent them you."

"Funny kid," replied the con man with a smile, "Psychic. Not sidekick," he said, playing with the joke.

"Come along you two," Miss Thrope said in her headmistress voice, "no time for larking about." The two just looked up and smiled. There was always time and anyway, they were ready.

The strange being on the floor didn't move his palms from the Man's head, but looked straight into Beano Grigio's eyes, speaking in his echoing alien voice. "Overconfidence, Mr Grigio, leads to mistakes."

Beano, slightly red faced, caught the eye of Lord Stiletto, who was watching and absorbing it all. He leant over, nodding towards the Psychic, and whispered to Billy, "That guy gives me the creeps."

EIGHTY-SIX  
SUNSHINE

You want to change our DNA?"

"Not actually change, no," replied Lord Stiletto.

"Then how changed?" asked 'Schripp.

"It's more like a cosmetic change than an actual change."

"Like wearing makeup?" enquired The Book Fairy.

"Yes, a bit like wearing makeup."

"Make up for DNA?"

"Yes."

"But it won't actually change us?"

"Or our DNA?"

"No," said Stiletto confidently.

"But the planet will be fooled?"

"Yes."

"Because you will have changed our DNA?" said Beano.

"Are we going to go around and around in circles? I am not going to actually change your DNA, but the

process will make it appear to have changed, enough to fool the planet. Then we can go to the planet and finish our objective."

"Alphonso, I don't think I have ever heard you raise your voice before."

"Well," he replied, smiling as he placed his spoon in the empty pudding bowl, and drained the last of his Monbazillac, "there is a first time for everything."

EIGHTY-SEVEN

GORDAN

When they reached the planet surface all was dark.

It was as if there was nothing, when in fact there was everything.

"Who is thinking this stuff?"

"I am."

"No really," said Beano Grigio, "who is thinking this stuff?"

"I am," replied the voice, "for truly it is I."

"This is way too weird for me," said Beano.

"Be still," said the voice. "BE STILL."

The voice resonated as if the whole planet was a vibrating string on Beano's double bass. The bass had been a present from Stiletto, and he had taken it to the Village for lessons. The jazz cafe down on Washington Park Square. That dude from the house band had spent serious time after hours teaching Beano to play.

"Beano wake up, WAKE UP."

Beano's mind was foggy. It was the boy, shaking him. Billy, that was his name.

"Beano," his head rang with the slap on his cheek, "BEANO, FOR PETE'S SAKE, WAKE UP."

Grabbing the tendrils of his sanity, Beano Grigio opened his eyes, and seeing reality, began to scream.



EIGHTY-EIGHT  
GORDAN

"Beano seems to be having some kind of psychotic episode."

"No kidding," said 'Schripp. "When he started screaming, I thought it was all part of the plan."

"You are the one kidding," said Stiletto, concern in his voice.

"Yes," said 'Schripp with a smile, "just messing with you."

Lord Alphonso Stiletto frowned. He didn't need messing with. At this moment in time, he felt quite messed up enough.

"Pull it together, Old Friend."

"Is it time to walk the Earth?" 'Schripp asked, still smiling.

Stiletto just grimaced.

"Still kidding."

EIGHTY-NINE  
EARTH - FRANCE - 1 YEAR BEFORE

Beano had been driving through the night. He was dog-tired, but smiling. As he came around the final curves of the corniche, the strains of the cello and flute played the last bars of My Funny Valentine. He had recently had a state of the art sound system he had come across in New York installed in his car, and he had been listening to the Chico Hamilton Quintet for the last hour through the mountains. The roof was off, the stars were glittering, and the vintage Jag had clung to the road like glue. Perfection. On his home world of Glos they didn't even have roads, never mind classic cars. The only thing better than driving overnight from Yvoire, by Lake Geneva, to the Mediterranean coast in Southern France, was doing it in the sunshine when the views were magnificent, although the roads busier. Beano had done both many times, and many other journeys besides. He had travelled on this amazingly beautiful planet by car, motor

bike, train, boat, horseback, and biplane, and never tired of it.

He had heard some human yarn about finding aliens, an obsession with the UFO fixated community. Alien tourists would be found at the sites of total solar eclipses, so rare within the universe. Whilst he had sympathy with this view, Earth peeps hadn't seen the vista from Lord Stiletto's library window, or even from the guest bedrooms, or arrived from space at the Crystal City.

What Earth peeps mostly took for granted was the incredible beauty of their home world. The magnificence of a ballerina dancing Giselle at the Royal Opera House, the vibrancy of a Blues band in a Memphis back bar, the sun setting over the domes and towers of Rome. Last week Billy had taken him to a club in the Village, in 1950's New York, to experience the quintet perform live. Wow. He could still feel the vibration in the air from the bow on the cello. The mixture of sounds from the five instruments, the strain of the fingers plucking the double bass, the puffed-out cheeks of the saxophonist, the way the band was so tight and connected. Perfection.

Of course they had music, dancing, and incredible beauty in the future, and in his part of the universe, but old Earth was truly an amazing conglomeration of experience. What was that joke from Billy's audio book? "Life was wasted on the living." Well he had a modification. "Earth was wasted on the Earthlings."

All these thoughts were going through his mind as

he drove the wonderful car along the coast road, the sun's first rays illuminating the sea below. A small fishing boat returning to port with the morning's catch reflected the sun's rays. Beano pulled off onto a quiet track that angled back up the mountain, and drove until he reached tall wrought iron gates. The gates opened smoothly, and as he entered the grounds of the beautiful villa, he could almost taste the coffee. Breakfast; it just doesn't get better than this.

NINETY  
GORDAN

"Billy, look after Beano."

"What am I, a nurse maid?" replied the boy, but his face was full of concern, and he half pulled, half guided Beano into cover.

"Come on Beano, hold it together," he said, and taking a small silver device from a pouch on his belt, held it to Beano's neck, as it scanned the confidence trickster, and administered a cocktail of chemicals into his blood stream. Billy felt the tensions drain out of his friend as the drugs took effect, and with a sigh, sat back next to his him, and nursed the pistol that had appeared in his hand.

NINETY-ONE  
GORDAN

The planet had recognised Beano as alien. Stiletto's DNA transformation had only partially worked.

With humans it's often incorrectly assumed that the immune system detects and destroys invading aliens like viruses and bacteria. Whilst it does this very effectively, it is a by-product of its true role, which is to detect mutants.

Billions of times a day a human's cells reproduce; identical copies that replace the original. Millions of times a day the copy is imperfect. Mostly the copy isn't good enough to survive, but occasionally it is perfectly suited to its new home, and is happy, and so carries on replicating itself. But now it no longer belongs in the heart or brain department, it's just a mass, with its own agendas, ideas and expansion plans.

Luckily humans developed an immune system to detect and destroy its little mutant interlopers.

The planet's defence system was the same. It detected alien DNA and destroyed it. Its chosen method today was the invader's mind. Beano Grigio's psychotic episode was a lot more serious than Billy or his friends had realised.

NINETY-TWO  
GORDAN

Billy was calm yet alert. The pain that exploded in his leg seemed to come from nowhere. He was reacting fast, very fast. Nothing had approached their hide. As he looked down towards his leg, his body felt as if it had hit by a sledgehammer, and he could see now, the blade between his ribs was attached to the hand of his chosen brother.

Lord Stiletto's instructions had been quite clear. Once in, they stayed in place. Any use of the space time continuum would ruin everything. This was why Billy was staying hidden with Beano.

His first thought had been to break protocol. To go to the villa in Tuscany, or Beano's apartment on Glos, leave his friend, and go to Sunshine to be fixed by Stiletto's technicians. Instead he held the gaze of the vacant eyes for a fraction of a second, before he created a third eye, and ended his friend's suffering.



NINETY-THREE  
GORDAN

Stiletto, 'Schripp, Miss Thrope and The Book Fairy were in place. The deposit was immense. The plan was simple. Create an anomaly in the space time continuum so the deposit was placed between existences, between universes. As long as it could not be undone, it would become a ghost existence, hovering, lost in the 'Verse.

Stiletto's problem, one of Stiletto's many problems, was that it is a lot easier to pick up a toy truck with your hand than an actual giant articulated truck. To pick up an old earth truck would require an old earth crane.

Stiletto's crane was the control room of the power station. Master as he was of the space time continuum, he could harness the station's energy to power his manoeuvre.

The fire fight had been raging for an hour. Stiletto had no feeling in his left arm, which had been shot.

The analytical part of his mind told him he needed treatment. He had been taught of ancient warriors who through mind alone could stop the flow of blood to a wound. He was relying on a tourniquet, and he knew that time was limited.

Across from him, he saw Ann and Bof preparing to make an assault, and he prepared to move. He could feel the frustration of 'Schripp beside him. Despite his lethal presence in close combat, his lack of eyes made shooting over a distance difficult, especially without the benefit of the neural net.

Just as they were about to go, the fire from the laser canons seemed to lessen, to be focused behind them. Without conscious thought, Miss Thrope, with The Book Fairy perched on her shoulder, raced forward into the void created by the change.

Lord Stiletto stared in horror at young Billy staggering down the street, blood staining his clothing, pistol in hand, a look of cold fury in his eyes. The air and ground around the boy exploded with the energy of laser cannons and fragments of shrapnel, but the Boy seemed to have some kind of force field around him.

Miss Ann Thrope moved in plain sight, although seeming invisible. Bof understood it as being part of her assassin's art. The gun in her hand was like a part of her, guided by a sixth sense. Whenever the trigger was squeezed, something ceased to exist. The Book Fairy was lethal in her own right. Her own pistol, although miniature in size, fired an awesome destruc-

tive energy. If her miniature weapon had fired bullets they would have stung like tiny needles, but her weapon was a portal that took energy from the nearest star, and transformed it to a terrifying burst of power.

There seemed to be an understanding between Mat and Bof, as they rarely selected the same target.

Stiletto recovered almost instantly from the shock of seeing Billy. He seemed to be impervious to harm, so after letting off a few bursts of covering fire, he raced out with 'Schripp at his side and they hoisted Billy between them. It was true. Stiletto was in awe. Billy must be creating this phenomena subconsciously, fueled by his rage. Now that they were within his aura, the explosions around them did not penetrate their space, which had an eerie calm, shattered only by the recall of Billy's pistol, as he unerringly shot anything that presented as a target.

In minutes it was over.

"Billy, Billy," Stiletto yelled to the boy, "are you alright? Where is Beano?"

Billy turned, facing his mentor accusingly, cold fury still burning in his eyes. "Beano's dead."

## EPILOGUE

It was the second leg of the race, Buenos Aires to Cape Town. The Coxswain was at the helm feeling every movement of the boat as it moved through the South Atlantic swell. He had got used to the stars of the Southern hemisphere by now, and tonight they were magnificent.

He sensed a sudden movement behind him and a cough, almost lost on the wind. He half turned to see a tall man of about forty, dark, with a beard. His eyes were hard and dangerous, and even with all his combat experience the Major felt a slight shiver of doom.

"Hello Major, don't you recognise me?"

"Billy," the old warrior whispered.

"Yes."

A good judge of men, the Major saw there were echoes of the boy, but the demeanour of the man in front of him told him that he had lived a harsh and difficult life.

The Major held out his hand, but the man stepped forward and hugged him tightly.

"Can I stay for a while?" he asked politely in his disconcerting new voice.

"Are you endangering the crew?" asked the Major.

"No, I wouldn't have come if there was any danger," replied Billy, looking the Major in the eye. "I can help at night in the dark."

"You can sail?"

"Yes, you taught me, well a parallel you, in a parallel dimension."

"Okay," said the Major, "can we slow down? Did you bring a drink with you? I think I could do with one."

The man smiled, then took a small silver hip flask from his pocket. He unscrewed the top, poured a measure, handed it to the Major, and raised the flask in a toast.

"It's so good to see you Jay," he said, looking at his old teacher with eyes that sparkled. "Friendship."



## BOOKS BY JHEDRON LUCKSPAR

### **The Friendship Series**

**Revenge Of The Hrym #1**

**The Adventures Of Miss Ann Thrope #2**

**Beano Grigio #3**

### **The Polly Granger Books**

**The Lift #1**

### **Collection Of Short Stories**

**Equations Of Being**

More books coming soon.





## REVIEW

If you loved the book and have a moment to spare, I would really appreciate a short review. You can leave a review on the Amazon webpage. Your help in spreading the word is gratefully appreciated and reviews make a huge difference to helping new readers find the series.

Thank you!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jhedron Luckspar is a writer of Science Fiction stories and books.

Jhed has been busy working on the Friendship Series. Three Novels, "Revenge Of The Hrym," "The Adventures Of Miss Ann Thrope," and "Beano Grigio." He is currently working on book four, as yet untitled.

Jhed has recently finished a children's fantasy book which he is publishing with the Illustrator, Faramond Frie. They have already started work on its sequel.

Jhed is lucky to have some excellent friends who enrich his life experience, and he lives in a small village in the Cotswolds.

His life is further enriched by travel, music and sharing good food with said friends.

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