

**Earplug Adventures**

**The Medusa  
Compound**

**Jean-Jacques  
Bivouac**



**The 51st in the Series**

# Earplug Adventures: The Medusa Compound

Jean-Jacques Bivouac

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## Prologue

Far away (in both space *and* time) from the Museum of Future Technology...



...and the era of Cushion Smethwyke's tenure as chief curator, current era M.O.F.T anthroplugologist, Doctor Gideon Snoot...



...who in an effort to further his search for the legendary Portal of Everywhere had visited the distant world of Scroton, quickly gained a pilot in the shape of Flaxwell Maltings...



...and inadvertently stole the people of Scroton's latest and greatest scout spaceship, the Scroton Five...



Snoot and Maltings had, somehow managed to find the Portal of Everywhere...



...which had named itself Noodles...



...and returned it to Scroton, where that wondrous world's leader – Nigel the Golden One – awarded them great honours and gifted them the Scroton Five...

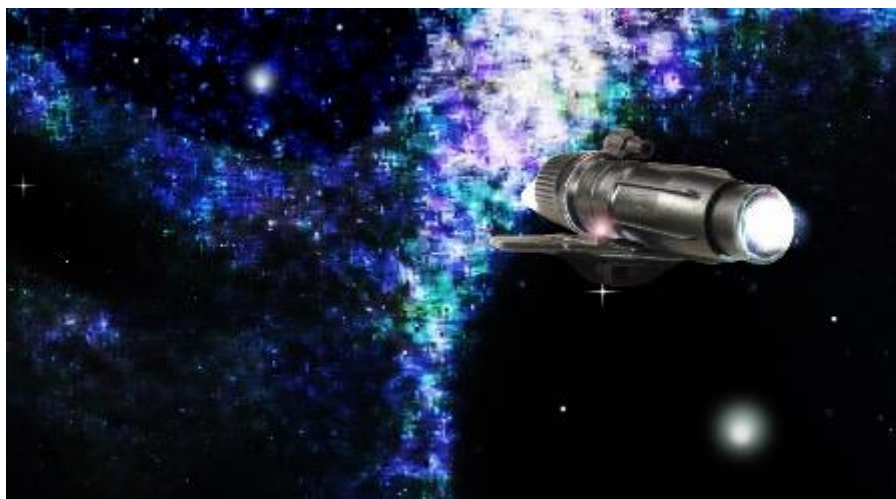




Naturally the two adventurers put the advanced vessel to good use and began exploring the Galaxy. However, following a couple of rather exciting years gallivanting about numerous star systems, they would eventually stumble upon something that they most definitely had not expected and which shook them to the very core of their collective being, as you will now discover.

### Chapter One

The *Zephyr* hung like a highly stylized and magnificently engineered piece of space flotsam at the very edge of a region of the Galaxy known as Fractured Space...



It's drive quiescent, the powerful scout ship held station, as though reluctant to continue it's journey into the unknown. Aboard the product of Scroton, the three crew members, Flaxwell Maltings, Gideon Snoot, and the ship's Oracle...



...pondered their next move.

“Ooh-er,” Gideon said as he peered around the bulk of the control panel, “are you sure that three dimensional space map you bought in the bazaar on Fladder-Fladder is accurate? It doesn’t look right to me.”

If truth be known, the pilot was also harbouring doubts. “Um...yes, of course,” he replied. “What do you think, Oracle?”

The Oracle existed for only one purpose: to listen to questions; then try to answer them accurately or as best it could. “You what?” It blurted. “Are you kidding? I don’t have the first iota of data with which to formulate a meaningful response. Why don’t you ask the microwave in the galley?”

Moments later Flaxwell led Gideon towards the flight deck’s exit...



“I was being sarcastic.” The Oracle yelled. “I didn’t mean that you should actually consult with a kitchen implement. Return to your stations – before I have the climate control reduce the oxygen content of the air in here by seventy-five percent.”

However, having waited for the two silicon lifeforms to resume their seats, the cyber-being finally realised that it had been the victim of a joke...



It ‘*harrumphed*’ loudly several times before issuing a suggestion:

“Proceed,” it said rather tetchily – or so thought Gideon, “in a forward direction.”

Naturally, now feeling absolved of any potential blame should the situation worsen quickly, Flaxwell eased the *Zephyr* forward – towards the unknown, and possibly the unknowable...



At first trepidation gripped the crew's hearts like a squelchy vice...

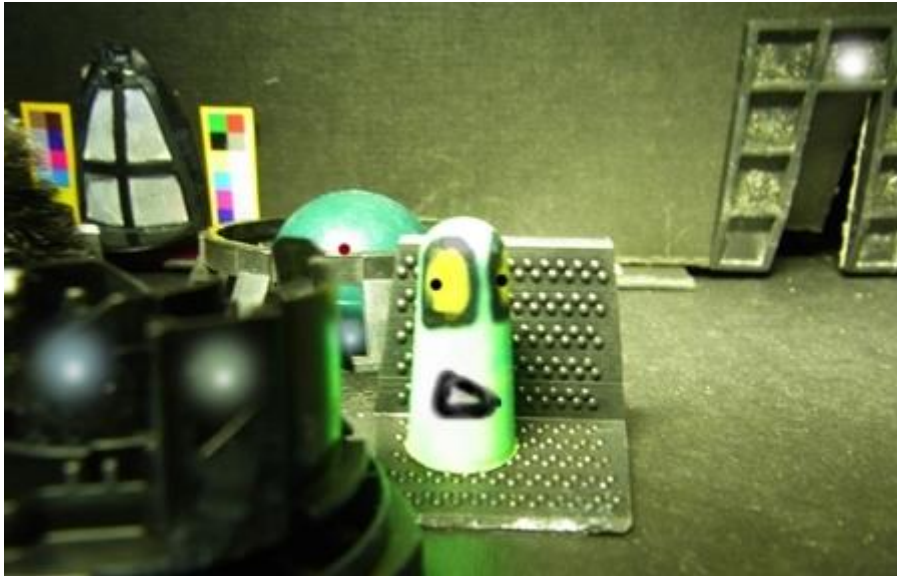


However, after several minutes during which nothing whatsoever happened, the impatient pilot opened the throttles, which, of course, increased velocity so much that (quite by chance) allowed the vessel to break through the invisible barrier that separated Fractured Space from everywhere else...



Naturally with every passing parsec of Fractured Space traversed by their vessel both earplugs aboard gained confidence. Before long even the previously uncertain Anthroplugologist had become blasé...





“I’m off to the bathroom to sort out my itchy bum.” He informed Flaxwell. “I’m passing the galley: how do you fancy a toasted cheese sandwich?”

“Fine,” his friend and pilot replied, “but might I suggest you put the toast on to...er...toast, *before* you take care of other business?”

Five minutes must have elapsed before Gideon returned...



Of course his professorial mind had forgotten their snack entirely. However, on this occasion, it really didn’t matter. As he regarded the main viewer he inquired in an uncharacteristically high pitch:

“What’s that Flaxwell?”



It was a fair question, well put. *What, indeed was it?*



The question wasn’t aimed at the Oracle directly; but it was that fountain of knowledge that answered:

“Judging by sheer volume and constituent atoms, I would wager that this is the Fractured Space equivalent of a planet.”

Flaxwell was out of his pilot's seat like someone had lit a roman candle beneath it – but without all the spectacular sparks, obviously...



“Conference!” He bellowed.

Moments later he and his partner had crowded, as best two earplugs could, around the Oracle...



“Right then,” Flaxwell began authoritatively, “if that’s a planet, then it stands to reason we can land there. You never know, we might find something really interesting.”

The Oracle turned away to consult a read-out. “By ‘*interesting*,’” it said, “I assume you mean ‘*valuable*’. Well you might be right: I’m getting some very anomalous and downright incongruous readings from the sensors.”

“Excellent.” Flaxwell responded loudly.

“Shall I pick a spot?” Gideon suggested.

## Chapter Two

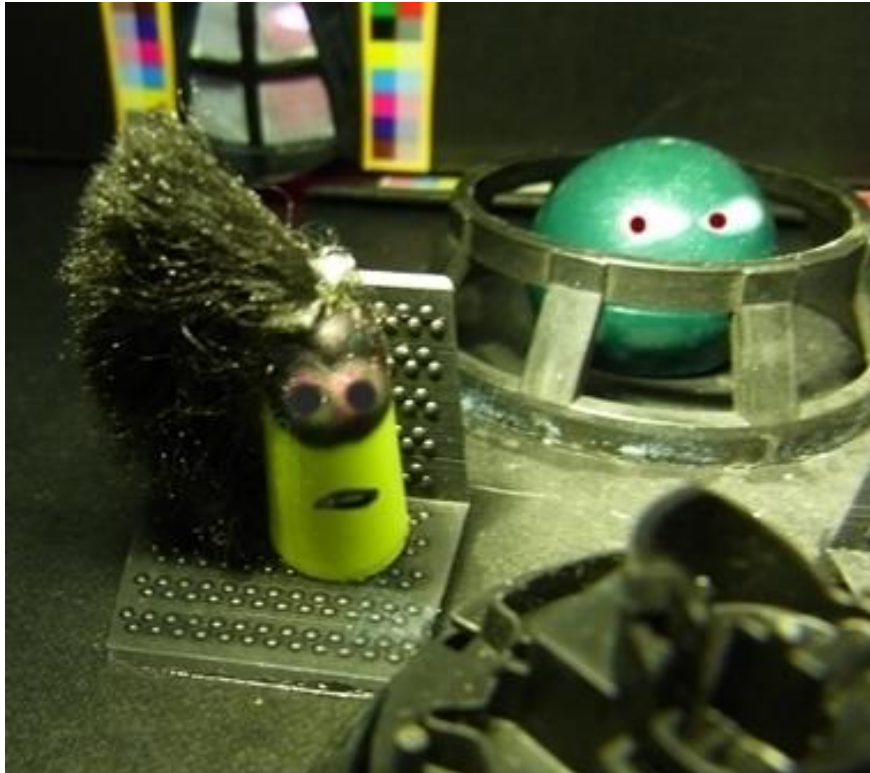
Despite his professorship, vast education, and more than the average number of brain cells, it had proven very difficult for Doctor Gideon Snoot to select a landing place from all of the disjointed detritus that (supposedly) constituted a planet inside Fractured Space...



“Do you think that once upon a time planets and stuff were normal in this region, and that the arrival of Fractured Space altered them?” He asked.

“You’re asking me?” Flaxwell replied in his best ‘astounded’ voice. “I’d never heard of the place until I read that space map. What say you, Oracle?”





Unbeknownst to the *Zephyr's* pilot, the Oracle gave him a filthy look before answering with:

“Fractured Space cannot be found in any reference file: there is no reason I should know any more about it than say...the average Scrotonite.”

“They know about Fractured Space on Scroton?” A surprised Gideon inquired.

“Yes.”

“What do they know about it?”

“That planets and stuff were perfectly normal around here until it arrived from regions unknown.”

Flaxwell sighed. “Well we got there in the end. Is there the possibility of an atmosphere and some gravity somewhere amongst all this junk?”

The Oracle took a moment to reply:

“If we look hard enough.” It said.

So they looked throughout vast regions of turmoil and atomic strife...



Hours passed and both earplugs' eyes drooped with fatigue. Meals were snatched; and visiting the toilet could take place only if the earplug left alone on duty was sufficiently alert. Of course the Oracle scanned far and wide, but such was the instability of Fractured Space that those sensors would often lie leading the *Zephyr* on wild goose chases which always ended in bitter disappointment. Eventually though a scan bore fruit.

"I think I've detected a Dyson Sphere." The Oracle announced excitedly.

In an instant both earplugs cast off their ocular droopiness...



“What, where?” Flaxwell yelled as his eyes scanned his instruments.

“The main viewer, gentlemen.” The Oracle replied.

A moment later all eyes...er...eyed the huge screen before them...



“What am I looking at?” Gideon asked in a puzzled tone.

“A Dyson Sphere,” Flaxwell answered confidently, “is an artificial structure constructed by an advanced race of beings utilizing the entire material supply of their solar system. Asteroids; comets; planets; the lot. As the name suggests this material is formed into a sphere that surrounds the system’s star, thereby allowing one hundred percent of that star’s energy to be harnessed for the benefit of the entire civilisation, who live on the inner wall of the sphere.”

“Cor,” Gideon responded intellectually, that’s some feat of engineering. It must be millions of kilometres across and have taken...well it must have taken *yonks* to build.

“How long must remain a mystery.” Oracle replied. “There are no known civilisations currently capable of completing such a task.”

For a moment Gideon liked to think he could visualise the great exodus when it was realised that continued existence within the sphere had become untenable...

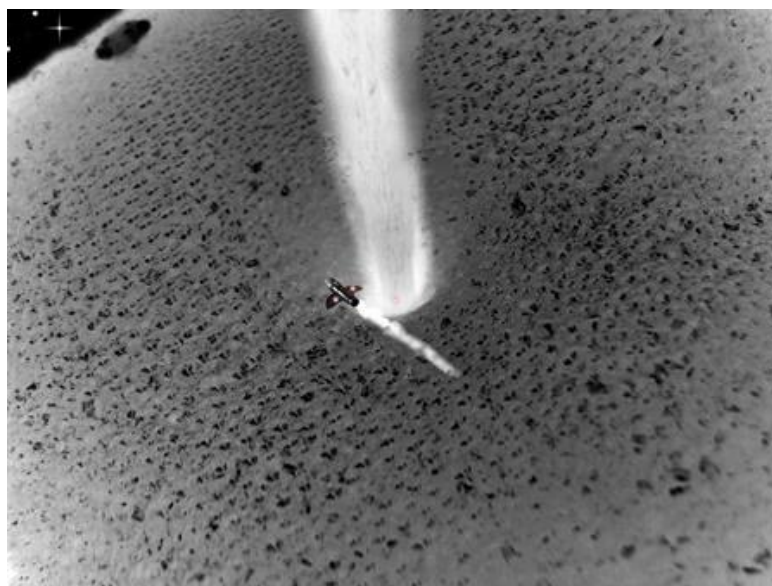


Flaxwell broke the reverie with a question:

“What’s that huge jet of something squirting out of that hole?”

“It’s only conjecture, you must understand,” Oracle replied, “but I think that could be the remnants of a dying star, bursting out through an opening in the sphere.”

All the while Flaxwell had been easing the *Zephyr* closer to the sphere...



“Look,” He yelled as the tiny craft passed uncomfortably close to the spume, “that looks like another opening in the sphere!”



“It could be a way inside!” Gideon yelled.

“But, but...” Oracle began.

However it never made it past that initial stutter: a moment later the *Zephyr* raced through a breach in the sphere’s armour that might have been millions of years old...

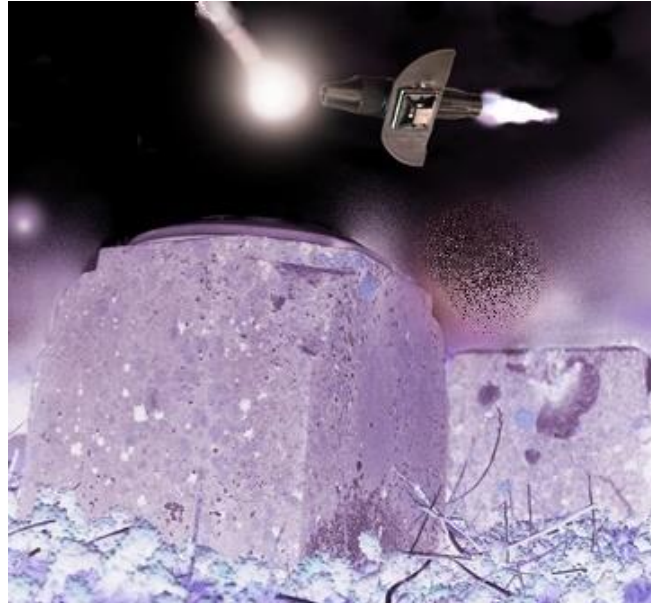


And when Flaxwell took his craft to the ‘surface’ of the incredible world, he found the remains of structures...



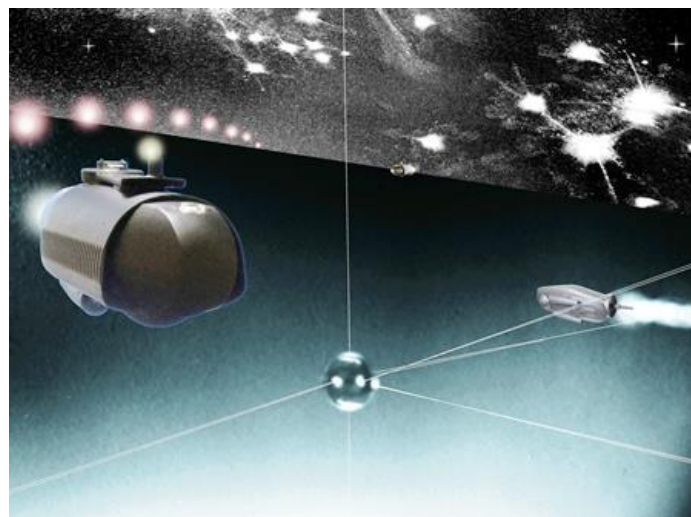
“Looks like you were right, Oracle.” He called over his shoulder. “Let’s see if we can find some buildings intact.”

Shortly they did just that...



“How about air and gravity?” Flaxwell asked with a hopeful tone in his voice.

Again Gideon’s imagination reigned supreme. He wondered what earplugs could do with the remains of the Dyson Sphere. It might, he conjectured, become some great hub of interstellar commerce...



“Rather you than me.” Oracle replied to Flaxwell. “But I guess it’s sufficient for your meagre needs.”



Gideon wasn't entirely sure he liked what the ship's cyber-intelligence had inferred. And Flaxwell felt rather insulted. However neither earplug would allow such alarm that it caused them to dismiss the idea of landing and investigating. No, they were definitely up for it!

"You just never know what you're gonna find." Flaxwell concluded the subsequent and very brief debate upon the subject.

So, after a quick change of underwear; a cheese and pickle sandwich; and a visit to the lavatory, the intrepid explorers disembarked their vessel and made straight for the nearest intact building...



“After you.” Gideon said politely.

The entrance to the strange alien building stood dark and foreboding before Flaxwell. “Are you sure?” He inquired.

“Quite.” Gideon replied. “Come along now, we haven’t got all day...or night, or whatever passes for the passage of time here.”

However, and much to their delight, the interior wasn’t half as dark as they’d expected...



Moreover, when they discovered an inoperative device that looked suspiciously like a power generation plant, their heady mix of delight and uncertainty took on a new identity...



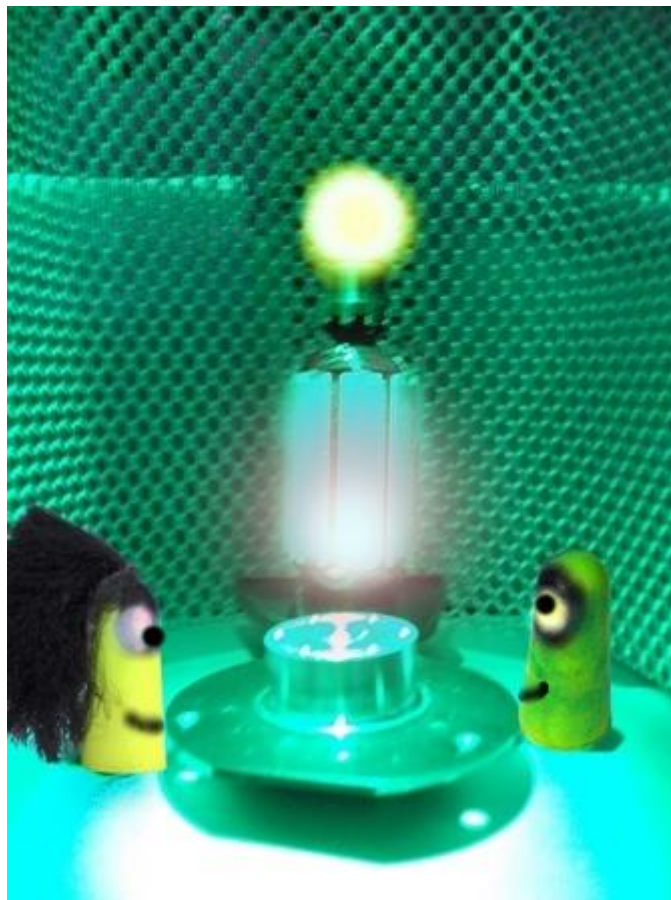


“I hope we can get this thing kick started.” Flaxwell said...er...*hopefully*.

“Me too.” Gideon concurred as he placed his hat upon his head – the better to think with. “I’m an anthroplugologist; anthroplugologist’s know exactly what to do with old tech like this. Where, do you suppose I should kick it?”

“Relays can get sticky with time.” Flaxwell replied. “I’d suggest we give it a good battering and see what happens.”

Thirty seconds later, and with Gideon’s hat cast aside by all the exertion...



...the machine burst into life for the first time in uncounted centuries. Power coursed through it and into other regions of the structure.

“They don’t make ’em like this anymore.” Flaxwell observed.

“Except on Scroton.” Gideon corrected him.

With light came purpose and direction. They set off down a short tunnel-like corridor...



This led them to an apparent warehouse that had clearly been long abandoned...



In places sections of the ceiling hung down like long-dead bats...



...that had failed to let go as they expired. It was from here that the two earplugs emerged from the claustrophobic shadows, into a room that could only be described as pristine...



Gideon read Flaxwell's mind. "You're right," he said into his partner's admiring silence, "even Scroton couldn't build something that would last *this* well. It's like everyone moved out this morning, but without all the resultant mess and half-finished cups of coffee."

Flaxwell didn't reply; he merely pointed to a portal through which light shone invitingly. Naturally the scientist followed the pilot's lead...



To their collective amazement an active control panel and a pair of alien chairs grabbed their attention.

"Hi," the panel spoke loudly and with a clarity that would have rendered some old duffer's hearing aids redundant, "I see you're in search of a worthwhile education. Pull up a pew and I'll give you all the gen, know what I mean?"

Flaxwell looked at the chairs: they appeared heavy. They were also designed for creatures with buttocks considerably different to his own. He wondered if he might do himself a mischief by perching his dainty bot upon something so...*alien*. “Okay,” he said uncertainly.

Meanwhile the Oracle – alone aboard the *Zephyr* for the first time in...oh...yonks, jumped at every creak and rumble made by the settling and cooling vessel...



“They’ve been gone ten minutes now.” He grumbled. “They know what I’m like; I’m gonna worry myself sick now. At least they could have left the radio on for company!”

Deep inside the building, Flaxwell and Gideon eased themselves into the chairs...





They were surprisingly comfy, though Gideon found he lay back slightly more than he would have normally, and Flaxwell was pitched forward by his stupid hair. But any thoughts of poise and elegance were despatched to the hinterlands of reality when the control panel spoke again...



“Right then,” it said in a fair facsimile of Flaxwell’s speech pattern, “what do you wanna see? *The Coming of Fractured Space? Constructing the Dyson Sphere? Abandoning the Dyson Sphere? Or The Fall of the Museum of Future Technology?*”

Neither earplug could believe their sodding ears.

“The Museum of Future Technology?” A stunned Gideon inquired of the Control Panel. “As in The Museum of Future Technology on Earth? The same Museum of Future Technology that I once worked for...before becoming freelance that is?”

“The Museum of Future Technology made famous by the Earplug Brothers, Cushions Smethwyke, and the Yabu Suchs Academy of Heroes?” Flaxwell added.

“I can see you’re keen.” The Control Panel replied. “Yep, that’s the one. Want me to roll VT?”

Both earplugs’ mouths opened, but very little other than dribble emerged; so the documentary entitled *The Fall of The Museum of Future Technology* began to play...



“This is the Museum of Future Technology.” The Voice-Over announced, “Famous across the Galaxy for housing fabulous technological artefacts from the future that have been sent back through time for safe keeping in the past.”

Flaxwell and Gideon weren’t so much agog; more they couldn’t quite accept the situation.

“I’m having a job getting my head around this, Flaxwell.” Gideon said with a slight squeak that characterised him when presented with a situation for which he was ill-equipped to deal...



“I’m a bit bamboozled myself,” the mucho-haired one agreed. “It was only last week you contacted your old department in the museum, and everything was relatively fine then. How can we be watching a documentary about something that hasn’t happened...on technology that was built aeons ago, by a race that abandoned it in the distant past?”

Aware that a conversation was underway amongst the audience, the playback slowed so that they wouldn't miss anything.

"Gentlemen," The Control Panel said, following a false clearing of a non-existent throat, "the story? Look, there's a nasty bunch of red sentinel robots. You wouldn't want to meet *them* down a dark alley."



The documentary continued:

"There was a time when red sentinel robots invaded the museum from the future. Using head mounted energy weapons...



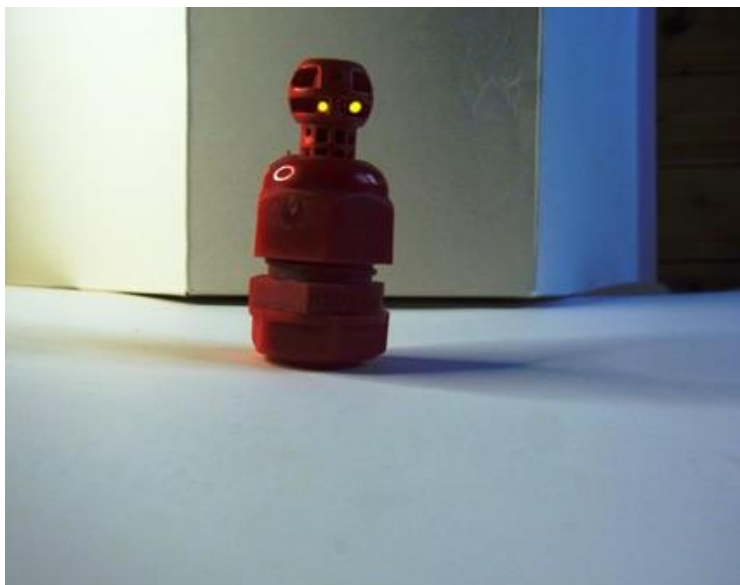
...they shot the place up good and proper...



“But it was their mesmeric wave that allowed them to overwhelm the occupants and visitors to the museum so easily that day. Many foolhardy defenders ended the day by inadvertently pooping vastly in his or her pants, rendering him or her ineffective upon the battleground. Of course the Earplug Brothers saved the day by infiltrating the robot’s defensive shields and turning the mesmeric wave against its perpetrators, and all was well. But that was not to be the end of the red sentinel robot’s desire to rule the museum – as you will now discover. Hold on to your hats!”

### Chapter Three

The moving image that followed the commentator’s invitation made the watching earplugs shudder with fear and loathing...





It was a red sentinel robot from the future. Moreover, its shoulder insignia indicated that it was high ranking and currently somewhere upstream upon the river of time. It was thinking aloud: it had evolved sufficiently to growl:

“I detest earplugs.” It said to no one and nothing except itself. “I desire to return to the era in which the Earplug Brothers exist and defeat them in battle for the Museum of Future Technology. Yes, that is what I want to do. Already a plan is fomenting in my advanced positronic brain. I shall share these ideas with another of my rank: together we shall conjure up a plan that will result in that little pinky-orange git, Magnuss Earplug getting a good kick up the arse.”

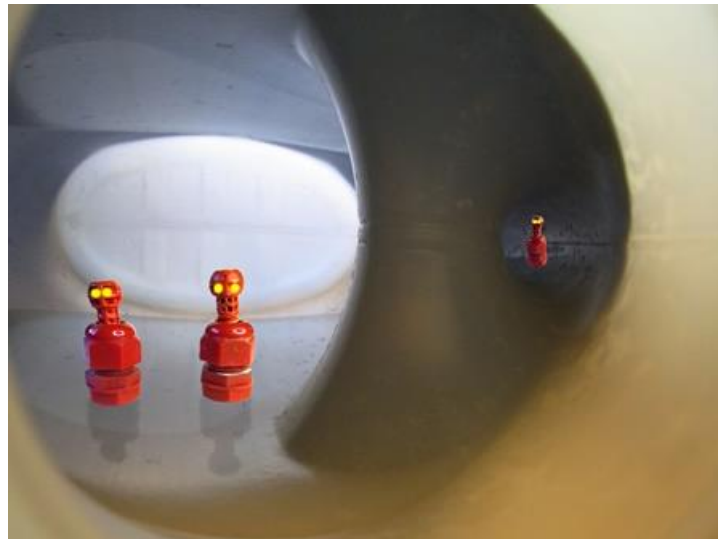
Shortly the robot made contact with another of its kind...



The taller of the two robots sensed that something was bothering its shorter colleague. It wondered if the shorter robot was feeling height anxiety. It considered winding its own neck down by several notches. Then it thought that perhaps the robot was concerned that the circle of wigwams that had appeared overnight in the garden might contain some ne’re-do-wells, hell bent on ruining the local area with their tarmac trucks, discarded litter and flapping supermarket bags, stolen motorcycles, and their children’s faeces.

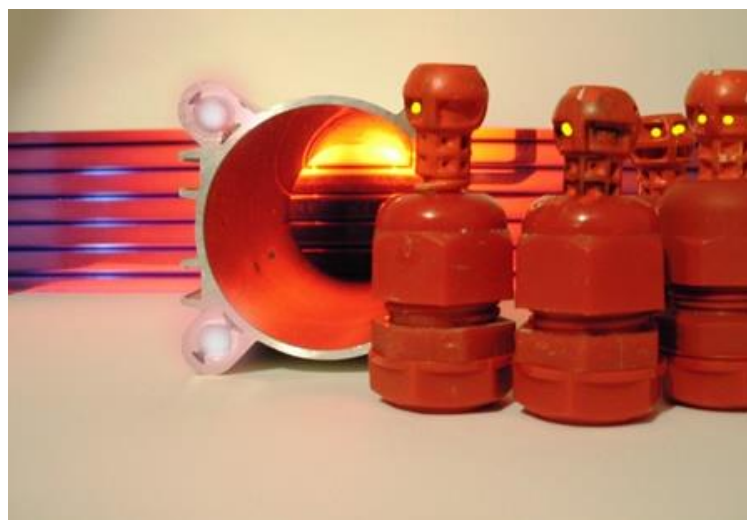
“Chancellor,” the shorter robot spoke, “might we move away from this window: the view disturbs me. I feel the need for a foray into the garden and indulge in a moment’s extermination.”

“Of course. Of course.” The Chancellor replied. “Is this any better?”



“Thank you, this is vastly improved. Now to business: may I link my brain with yours via Wi-Fi? I have a plan to retake the Museum of Future Technology: I just want to check with you that it is fool proof.”

Robots being robots, no time whatsoever was wasted in organising an expedition into their past. With no need for supplies, haversacks, emergency protein bars, travel toilet tissue, shaver adaptors, or fond farewells of loved ones, a group of red sentinel robots made straight for the Tubo di Tempo; punched in the temporal co-ordinates...



...and disappeared into the era best known for the almost ceaseless attacks upon the Museum of Future Technology. In doing so they startled the heck out of two of the museum's maintenance crew...



"Hey," the normally affable Marcus Bellosprout roared, "don't you know time travel is strictly out of bounds in this era, you mindless curs!"

"Never heard of time storms?" Marcus' partner, Nooxan Crannies added angrily. "Sodding about with chronological equipment is punishable by incarceration and a dip; head first, into the museum's sewage works. Boy, are you gonna be in the sh..."

But Nooxan got no further in his foul mouthed tirade. Likewise Marcus...



Two of the more impatient robots in the party hit them with perfectly aimed mesmeric waves. Unlike the mesmeric waves utilised in the original invasion, these were finely tuned to create an effect in their victim's brains. Whereas Marcus Bellowsprout thought that everything in the world was simply hilarious, all Nooxan Crannies wanted was to find a nice little cubby hole in which he could curl up to sleep for a week...



Leaving one robot behind to report the successful landing, the remaining five robot invaders slipped away inside the Museum of Future Technology...

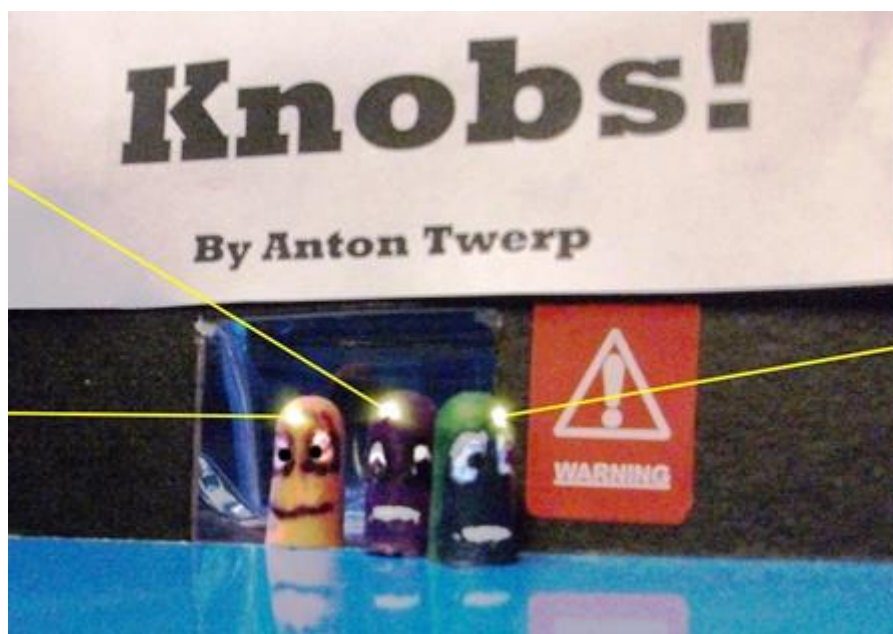




...where they raced along minor corridors as unobtrusively as a party of large red sentinel robots from the future could hope to...



At one point they encountered three earplugs as they departed an art exhibition mounted by the museum's most reviled artist, Anton Twerp. It was a perfect opportunity to mesmerise some earplugs who they commanded to find them some nice quiet rented accommodation, away from all the crowds in nearby Ciudad de Droxford...



They used them again on some passing polystyrene blobs as they rushed out through the entrance...



This time the command was far simpler: 'You never saw us.'

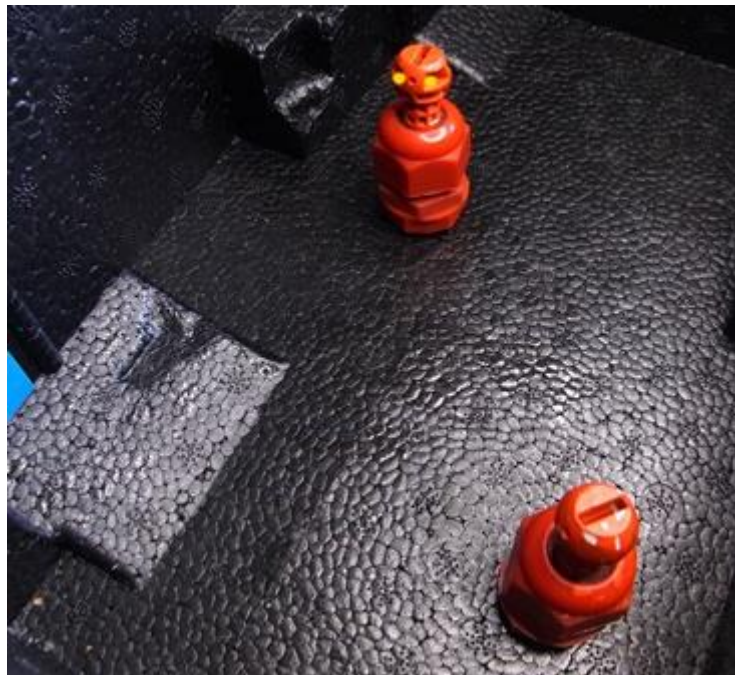
Then it was time to slip into the shadows cast by the towers of Ciudad de Droxford, and await notification of success from their property-finding slaves...



It was a long wait, and several times the robots eluded detection by nosy earplugs by adopting the role of post boxes. Eventually though they moved into their 'new pad' in the yet-to-be-opened Civic Centre...



...a building owners of which had experienced difficulty finding customers for the available office space. The robots were not surprised at this...



“Décor is lacking.” One of them observed. “To use a colloquial term: dull as dish water.”

“When we take command of this establishment,” another assured its colleague, “the situation will be remedied”.



What couldn't be remedied, however, was the fact that the robot's office suite came on two levels, with wheelchair access only. Traction on the ascents was at a premium: and grip upon the descents was practically non-existent...



“Bum!” and “Save me: save me!” were to become common phrases throughout their stay.

Unsurprisingly, by now the Oracle had given up fretting. It had become so concerned for the earplug's safety that it simply couldn't go on: instead it chose to shut down for the duration of their absence...



Of course it needn't have worried: Flaxwell and Gideon were giggling their underpants loose at the antics of the beleaguered robots...





However they quickly sobered when the commentary continued.

“The Ciudad de Droxford Civic Centre had been constructed by an out-of-town company that had employed cheap labour from overseas – mostly Rapid Marker Tops, who weren’t exactly known for their precision engineering...



They had also built it on cheap land in the wrong end of town, in an area that was rife with mindless crime and infamous for arson attacks. Now that the week-end had arrived, most of the workforce had gone up-town to spend their wages, leaving only a caretaker to watch the place, in the form of Douglas Tetrahedron...



He didn't much like being alone, so he was grateful that one of the office suites had been rented and that the occupants had moved in. He hadn't met them yet, of course, and so far none of them had responded to his hearty hails through their letter box. He wondered if the Public Information Panel could tell him anything about the new-comers...



Sadly it quickly became obvious that (like everything else) the panel had been wired by Rapid Marker Tops: it could tell him nothing about anything. It didn't even recognise the term 'urinal'. So he flicked the OFF switch and turned away...



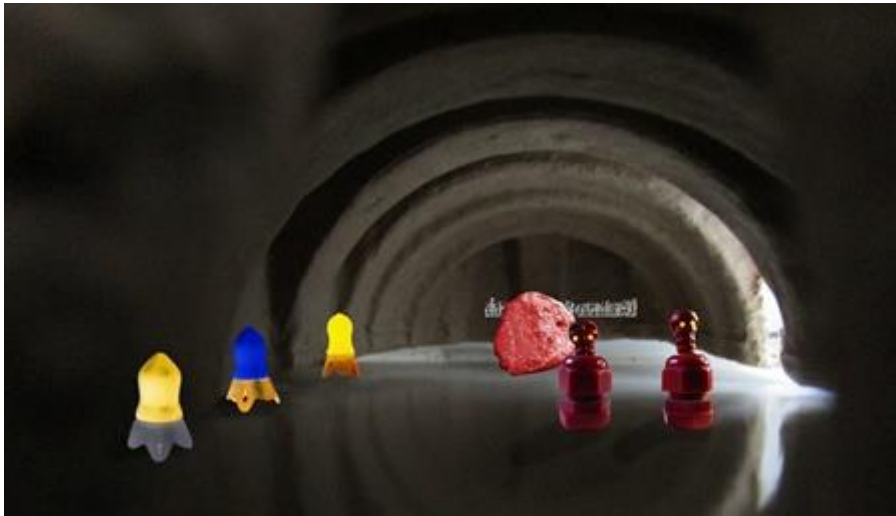
...grateful he had been one of the plumbing gang that had installed the aforementioned urinal.

"At least I can have a wee with confidence." He grumbled to himself.

Meanwhile, far into Douglas' future, the red sentinel robot that had returned to report the successful temporal-journey through the Tubo di Tempo had moved on to its next task...



It had perambulated into the catacombs, where it joined a munitions expert...



As the taller robot allowed its gaze to wander to the ancient stonework that supported the massive structure above, the robot, whose designation was Seven Wibbly-Woo, absorbed the information in the munitions expert's brain via Wi-Fi. It instantly learned that the munitions expert had created some ballistic missiles that could, not only, travel enormous distances through the air, but also through space, time, hyperspace, and alternative quantum realities. It also learned that one of the missiles had been cunningly disguised as a meteorite. It was even painted red so as to appear hot. It was with these missiles that the red sentinel robots intended to contact potential allies in other places, such as the past, far away and other dimensions.

Time, being of the essence, Seven Wibbly-Woo instructed the munitions expert, whose designation was Munitions Expert, to launch a test missile...





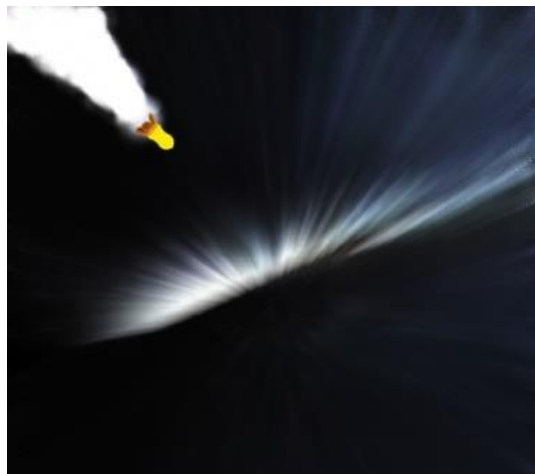
The launch was performed exceptionally well. Sadly the targeting parameters had been set incorrectly, and the missile simply crossed town, where it impacted...



...in the red sentinel robot's garden, utterly eradicating the temporary village and all its anti-social inhabitants, their tarmac trucks, and their children's faeces in one fell swoop...



Whether this result might possibly have been deliberate, no one would conjecture: but the second launch ran straight and true, and soon the missile carrying instructions regarding the red sentinel robot's intentions and how to join the endeavour was headed straight for a hyperspace conduit opening...



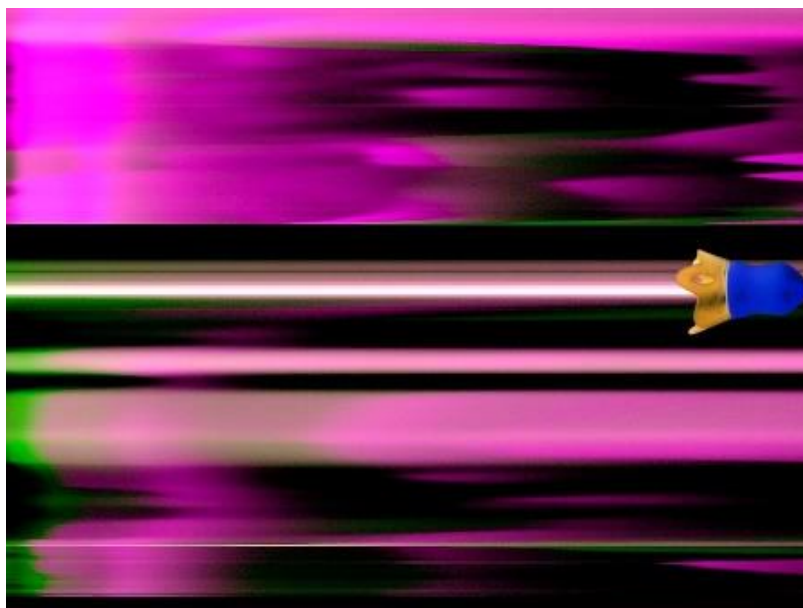
“Well that’s the Hyper-space End Caps taken care of.” Munitions Expert remarked as the missile disappeared from sensor view, “what next?”

Seconds later the missile disguised as a meteorite was on its way...



...upon its voyage through time – its intention to make contact with an earplug whose dislike of the Earplug Brothers equalled or surpassed its designer’s own. It was disguised as a meteorite so that it would slip, unsuspected through the defensive sensor grid of its intended final destination.

The third launch aimed the projectile to a location that existed in the past and in an alternative reality. What that missile must have experienced on route no one could imagine...



...but it must have been rather pretty and probably quite scary too!

The final launch...er...*launched* a missile that was intended, firstly to visit a location far, far away in space, then travel backwards into the same era that the Chancellor had despatched the infiltration and invasion team...



The invasion had effectively begun. It was just that no one knew it yet.

#### Chapter Four

Captain of the Guard, Luke Blister, was out in the woods that stood close to the End Cap military base at which he was stationed, looking for his absent pet plugmutt...



“Oh Shagblaster, where are you?” He called.

But he received no response from the indifferent creature. Then his ears caught the distinctive wail of a military siren in the distance...



It could mean only one thing: someone wanted to speak with him on the com-panel. The unlovable Shagblaster forgotten, Captain Blister raced to the radio shack as quickly as his tiny feet could carry him...



“What is it? What is it?” He asked breathlessly.

“Listen for yourself.” An orange subordinate replied. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“It’s a mother ship.” The other subordinate added. “It has just entered orbit.”



This shocked Luke...



Mother ships never entered orbit: they simply landed wherever they fancied – including the recreation ground, cricket pitch, or (if the pilot was feeling particularly daring that day) the skateboard park.

“This is Captain of the Guard, Luke Blister,” he replied when an agitated voice wanted to know if anyone was there, “ready, willing and able to do your bidding. How may I and my insignificant military outpost assist you?”

“You got a Suicide Squad stationed there?” The voice snapped impatiently.

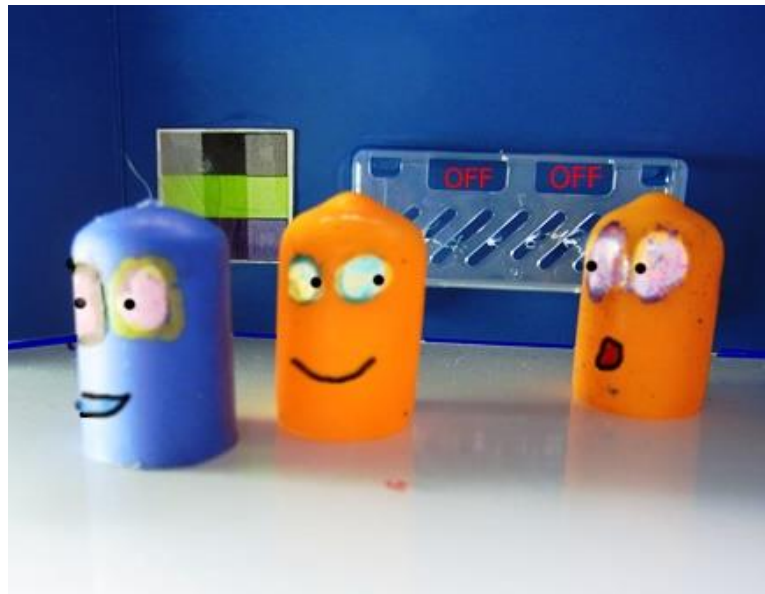
“Er, we do, sir.” Luke replied. “They’re a little out of practise, but I don’t suppose you ever really forget how to blow yourself up for some worthless cause. They’ll be prepped and ready to go at a moment’s notice. I’ll just have to call them back from the beach first.”

“How many regular troopers you got stationed there,” the voice replied, before adding, “you obsequious little git?”

Luke thought of a number: thought about doubling it: but decided to go with his original estimate. He relayed it to the mother ship.

The owner of the disgruntled voice sounded a little more accommodating. “That’ll do.” He said. “I’m sending down a saucer to pick you up. Don’t forget to lock up behind you: you never know this might not be a suicide mission at all. We just like to cover all the bases.”

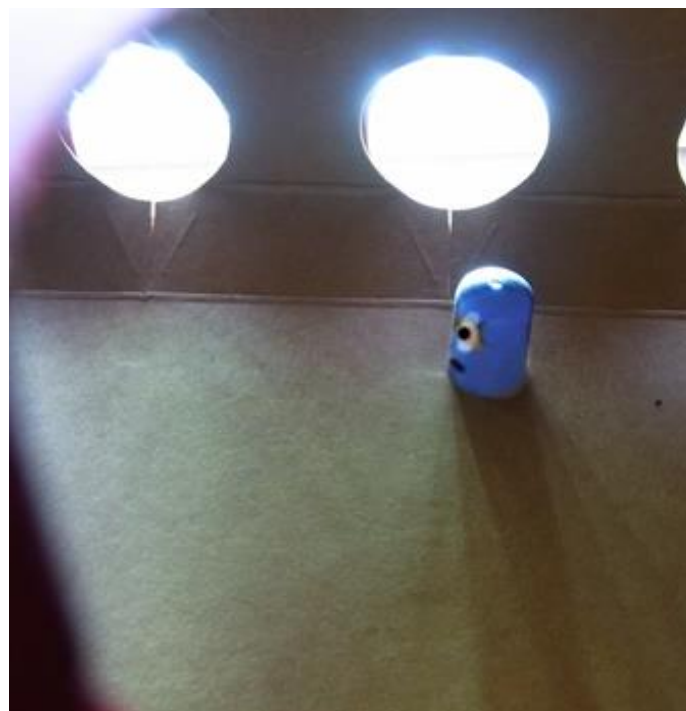
Naturally Luke was thrilled...



...as was his closest subordinate: finally they had something worthwhile to do; they could be proper soldiers. The other was less certain though:

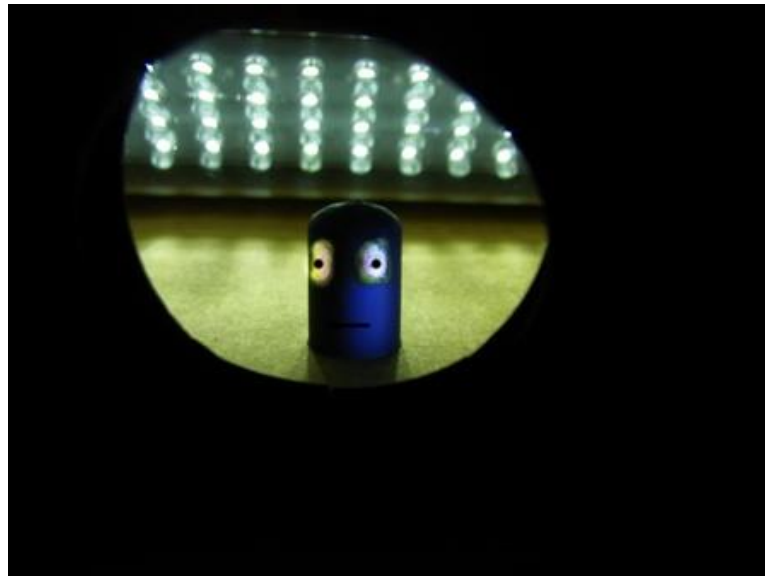
“He said it ‘might not be a suicide mission’.” He wailed. “Equally that is exactly what it might turn out to be. Captain Blister; Ronald; this is not a time for unbridled celebration.”

However as Luke made his way along the veranda that would lead him to the path down which he would find his way to the beach...



...his pace slowed. Was the doubtful subordinate right? Might this be his and his command's, first and last action? It was all well and good having a suicide squad in their company; but that didn't mean they all had to follow suit, to use a card player's vernacular. He didn't have long before his stint was up: he wanted to draw his generous military pension. He most definitely did not want to die gloriously because someone else decided that he should.

"Hmmm," he said as he regarded the plantain patch through a side window...



..."I think I might, possibly, avoid putting too much effort into this. I just need to rein Ronald in a bit: he's a bit gung-ho."

Meanwhile, in the Civic Centre, Douglas Tetrahedron continued to go about his business...



And in the watchtower that looked out over the gorge that led to the mountaintop citadel of Lemon Stone, the imprisoned felon, Mister Zinc and his biological girlfriend, Blue did as they always did since being incarcerated at high altitude; they watched for weary travellers that they might fleece with exorbitantly expensive passes ...



“Party of five to our left.” Blue reported. “On foot and wearing identical clothing. Could be pilgrims. Probably as poor as a church plugmutt.”

Mister Zinc was only half-listening: he too had spotted a figure standing tall in the wintry conditions. “Fine,” he said to Blue. “Now cast your gaze to the right.”

Blue did as she had been instructed. “What the flip is that?” She inquired.





“I would say, at a guess, with only a modicum of information,” Zinc replied, “that it is a red sentinel robot from the future. Now I wonder what it wants: it can’t be a warm bed and a hearty meal.”

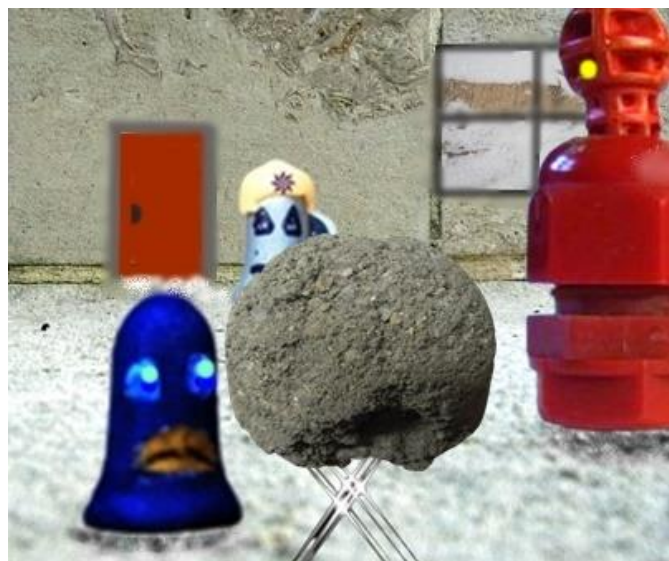
“Mister Zinc,” the robot’s voice boomed loudly as it echoed off the canyon walls and caused small avalanches of powdery snow, which greatly inconvenienced the pilgrims because it got into their haversacks and threatened to ruin their spare dry socks, “I would speak with you.”

Mister Zinc had become used to his life in the watchtower: the last time he’d attempted to better himself, it had all ended (once again) in miserable failure. He wasn’t happy where he was; but he knew things could be a lot worse. And it wasn’t often that the monks from the nearby monastery came round to enjoy a good kicking of his backside. “Bog off!” He shouted in return.

If Zinc expected the machine life-form to turn around and depart, he would be disappointed. “I am from the future.” It bellowed electronically. “Allow me ingress: I have an offer you will not want to refuse. Please. I’m quite good with frozen pipes: I can fix some, if you have any that are playing up.”

Zinc considered this: okay it wasn’t often he got a good arse kicking; but once was enough for a lifetime. “Yeah, okay.” He replied without enthusiasm. “You’ll have to duck to get through the door.”

Two minutes later the robot watched as Blue stood before a frozen haggis and prayed it would melt before spring...



The robot then explained that its group were recruiting all the best enemies of the Museum of Future Technology. He described how, once they had gained dominion over the curators and inhabitants, many more sentinel robots would pour in through a re-activated Tunnel Temporale...



...and cement their victory with sheer numbers.

“And our mesmeric wave is ten times better than it was when we last invaded.” It added.

It then looked out of the window and awaited Zinc’s response...



It waited a long time because Zinc and Blue had turned their attention to their secondary evening meal. It too appeared frozen, and might have been the fossilised brain of some extinct animal.

“Oh,” it added nonchalantly, “did I mention it? Um, we have a very well stocked larder. There’s something of everything in it. Tasty, so I’m told. I am a robot: I don’t eat”

Whether Zinc was really listening, the heartless device could not tell. It decided to play its trump card:

“We are going to do something to Magnuss Earplug that will so shame him the thought of it will haunt him to his dying day. He will effectively become Target Earplug. We’re out to get him: everyone will be out to get him: he’s going to be toast!”



Zinc didn’t require a second to consider his next act: “Blue, my dear,” he said as he made for the door...



..."I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you here alone to man the watchtower: we don't want the monks to think we've abandoned our duty and reneged on our prison terms. Just in case this fabulous plan from the future founders once again, I'd like everyone to think I'd never left the place."

Of course Blue wasn't happy, but as Zinc went to stand beside his new acquaintance she could see that, for once, her boyfriend was using his brain. He actually had an escape plan!



However what she didn't know was that whilst the robot had been improving its offer, Zinc had been formulating a more devious plan: one that would mean that Terrestrials would play more than a junior role in the defeat of Magnuss Earplug.

"I know someone you really should recruit." He said to the red hulk beside him. "His name is Ballington Cork, and he so feared that he is incarcerated in suspended animation on Henhouse Island..."





The robot reacted favourably to this suggestion. It offered to find its own way back to Ciudad De Droxford, which would leave his 'flying bathtub' available to Zinc. So, consequently the last Blue saw of Zinc...



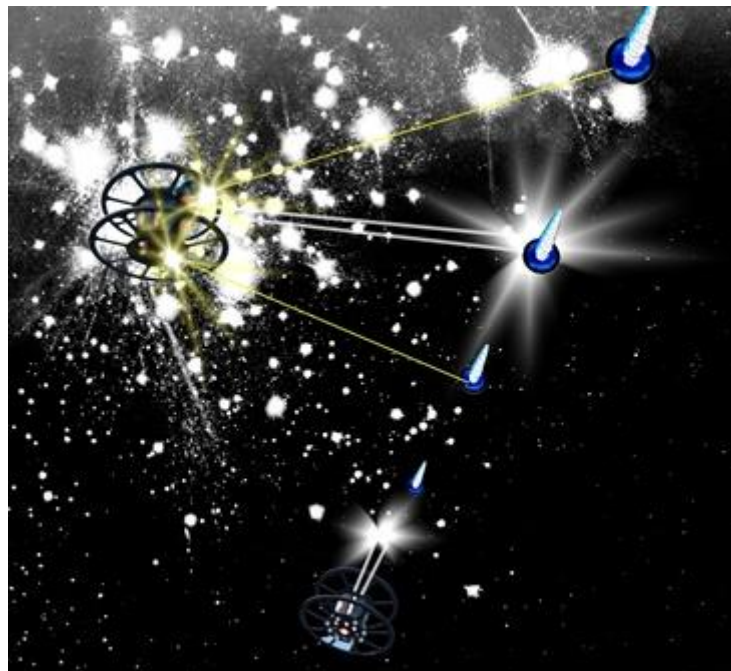
...was his vapour trail as he rocketed away from Lemon Stone...



At that very moment, still far from Earth, a Catheter Cap star ship made its way across the ether: its destination, Ciudad de Droxford...



The Incense Cones and End Caps were also heading for Earth; but unfortunately neither knew of the other, so a space battle broke out as the End Caps reverted to type and tried a piratical attack to plunder any potential booty...



So well matched were the opposing forces that neither side could gain an advantage. Not that Mister Zinc knew or cared: he now headed downwards towards Henhouse Island...



The first time that Ballington Cork realised that he was not alone and now in possession of his wits in real time was when the light above him turned green and he was capable of thought; self-awareness; some air in his lungs; and the smell of his first fart in ages...



“Thank flip for that!” He exclaimed. “People think that nothing happens in your brain when you’re in suspended animation. That it’s like being unconscious. Well they’re wrong: it’s like one long nightmare you can’t wake up from. It’s

enough to drive you berzikwack, that's what it is. If it's supposed to put people off re-offending...well it does a bloody good job. It doesn't work on me of course, because I'm narcissistic and a recidivist power-monger. Honestly I should hate myself; but I'm far too clever, imposing, and attractive for that."

Of course he was equally unaware that Mister Zinc had heard every word of his awakening oratory. "Flipping heck," the nut-job earplug whispered to himself, "he's worse than me. But I hear he makes great psychic and technical advances whilst in a catatonic state: so I'm betting he can help me with a little idea I've had recently."

Once Ballington had thawed out properly, Mister Zinc introduced himself to the huge cork...



He also mentioned that they were both victims of the Earplug Brother's special talents and horrendously good luck. At the point when he judged Ballington to be most receptive, he slipped in a mention of his 'little idea'. To back it up he informed him that an 'axis of evil' was assembling in Ciudad de Droxford and that Ballington could be an important part of it."

"The most important part of it." The cork replied adamantly. "I'm in. Would you like a ride in my RD125 Landing Craft?"

Zinc declined – not so much because he often felt nauseous sitting on the sides of swimming pools, but because he could guarantee a flat-bottomed craft would be purgatory for him; and because he really enjoyed swooping about the sky in the futuristic 'flying bathtub' instead.



So Ballington set metaphorical sail for Ciudad de Droxford alone...



Talking of the Ciudad de Droxford, now that the obnoxious and often belligerent workforce were elsewhere, visitors began appearing at the new, slightly unfinished Civic Centre...`



Some were rubber-neckers; others the sort of people who couldn't resist the smell of fresh paint, vinyl flooring, grout, and mastic. However some earplugs had a genuine interest in renting for potential business use. People like...



...Dongler Dolt and Shoreham Bycie, who hoped to expand their small restaurant business into catering for office workers. But there was something about this particular unit that displeased them...



“Red walls,” a rather annoyed Dongler grunted, “it’ll give our customers a headache. Probably bring on one of my migraines too!””

“True,” Shoreham agreed with a somewhat reduced sense of antipathy, “but this floor surface will clean up a treat.”

Elsewhere in the building, Douglas followed his regular security route...



He was supposed to alter the route every time, but he was too afraid of getting lost and being forced to backtrack.

It was as he rounded a corner that led past the suite rented by the red sentinel robots that Mister Zinc arrived...



It wasn't a fanfare welcome, but the two robot guards were polite and not too intrusive when they elected to search him.



“What is this slip of paper in a self-sealing plastic bag doing in the crevice between your buttocks?” One of them demanded.

“A photograph of my mother.” Zinc replied. “I keep it there to remind me what a butt-wipe she was when I was small. I blame her for all my insecurities. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll have my underpants back, thank you.”

The guards had less success with Ballington. Apart from being much larger than the earplug who had preceded him, he also possessed psychic abilities, which he wasn’t afraid to display...



He said: “Touch the botty; I’ll melt your brains.”

By the time that the Catheter Cap delegation arrived, all thoughts of security had been dispatched. The grey beings wore side arms and looked quite keen to use them...





The End Caps appeared very much less intimidating. In fact they looked a little shell-shocked, as though they had been in a space battle...



Likewise the Incense Cones, who's pleading looks cried out: "Hold us: make us feel safe!"



Unimaginably far away in the ruined Dyson Sphere, Flaxwell and Gideon felt compelled to pause the playback...



“Giddy,” Flaxwell said, “what are we looking at?”

“Is this history?” Gideon replied, “Science-fiction, or something that has yet to occur?”

Flaxwell wasn’t sure it was any of these things. He said: “Or something that is happening right now?”

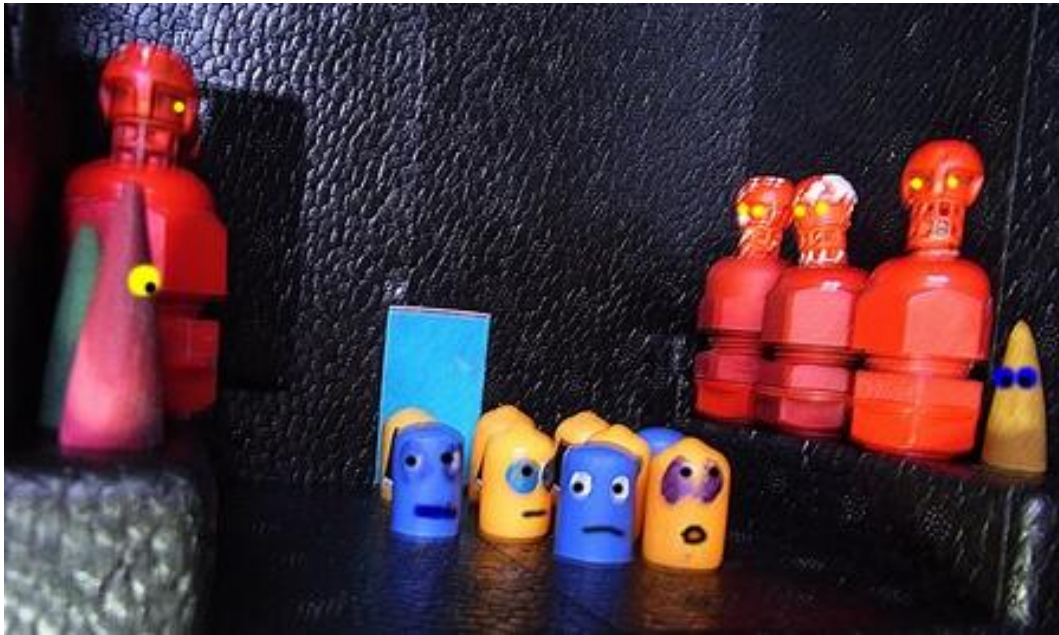
“Let’s see what happens next, huh?” Gideon replied.

A moment later the playback resumed...



Unlike their arrival at the front office, now the Incense Cones were treated to a full fanfare – the red sentinel robots reproducing the sound of huge brass horns through their super-advanced plastic speaker grills. They were also capable of reproducing the sound of a massive cheering crowd. Moreover they

did just that for the first arrivals and those who followed – the first being the apologetic End Cap party...



...who really didn't like being glared at by the still-smarting Incense Cones. They cheered up somewhat when the suicide squad made their appearance...



The Catheter Caps followed next and wondered why they could detect a sense of animosity in the air. They assumed, incorrectly that it was the other species' sense of inferiority in the company of Catheter Caps...





...which, in Captain of Guard, Luke Blister's case might have been the truth. He was feeling very out of his depth.

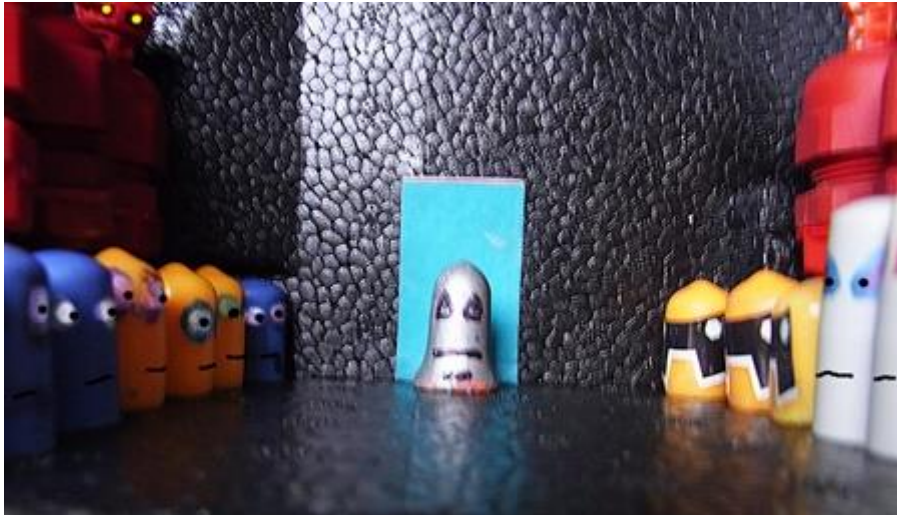
By chance Douglas had paused in his patrol to try a cardboard mug of Café Puke's finest coffee...



Of course he could clearly hear the cacophony, so decided to wait it out and try to form some kind of understanding of the situation.

Mister Zinc made his appearance. The fanfares still blared so loudly that they were in danger of becoming discordant...





This was as well because the robots had looked up Zinc's record, and knew him to be a very unpopular earplug – even more that the Museum of Future Technology's most reviled artist, Anton Twerp. So they lay off the mass cheering and threw in a few 'boos' instead.

Ballington made his appearance to the full gamut of the robot abilities...



The noise was soul-crushing. Worse than standing behind a full grid at the start of a two-stroke-only motocross race. The fake audience called out his name. This was, perhaps a step too far. Douglas knew exactly who Ballington Cork was, and where he was supposed to be. For a moment panic gripped him: he must escape and warn the world...



By chance, Dongler and Shoreham were taking a moment to consider an office area in which they might prepare sandwiches, rolls, bagels, and the like for potential customers in the civic offices...



So when they heard the patter of leaden feet and a wailing sound that reminded them of a startled foghorn, they grabbed their principal chef, Wong Pu-Tong, and raced bravely towards the source of the noise...



“What the heck is wrong with you?” Shoreham snapped.

“Yeah,” Wong Pu-Tong added from behind the mottled, but shiny green earplug, “pull your bloody self together, you noisy so-an-so git thing.”

As quickly as he could Douglas related the pertinent information to the trio of earplugs. “You go for help,” he finished. “I’ll keep watch on those monsters in there.”

Any one of the museum’s enemies would have seen the three earplugs dashing from the civic centre: but with so many in one place, their minds almost became addled.

“Yeah-yeah,” Shoreham managed as his two associates turned to run...



...“we’re on it.”



And they were as good as their word. Emergency lights came on as they rushed down unlit corridors towards the nearest fire exit...



Soon they were aboard the transit system that would take them quickly and efficiently to the Museum of Future Technology...



As they stumbled, half-exhausted from the terminal, one name formed on all three pairs of lips...

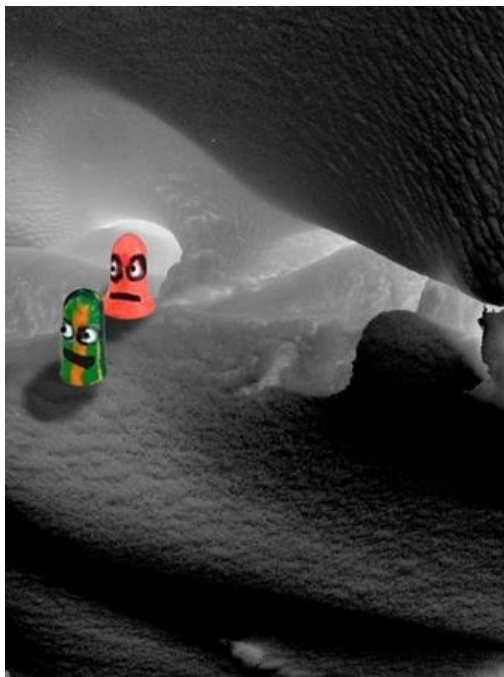




Magnuss Earplug: the museum's greatest hero.

### Chapter Five

It had been a long day for Magnuss and his lovely wife, Hair-Trigger. After breakfast they had sampled a little pot-holing in the arctic exhibit inside the museum...



They had done it several times during the past month and thought that perhaps they might try something slightly less dull and tedious. So they drove

their race buggies into the pea farming area in the mountains and conversed with former burglars, Erroneous Bosch and Hellfire McWilliams...



“What’s this, boys?” Magnuss called out, “Has an unexpected hurricane blown all your seedlings away?”

“Nah, it’s not like that, Magnuss.” Erroneous replied. “We’re trying something new.”

“The world’s first high-altitude rain forest.” Hellfire blurted. “We’re gonna make a haven for all those hairy critters who have been chased out of their natural habitat.”

“We’ll also grow coffee beans.” Erroneous added, “So we won’t starve.”

“Yeah,” Hellfire did some adding of his own, “Skanki Kaffe have agreed to buy every bean we produce. It’s for a special line in their Museum of Future Technology outlets.”

Of course the heroic twosome wished their friends well and returned to the M.O.F.T. where they crossed the putting green on their way to the Age of Stone exhibit...



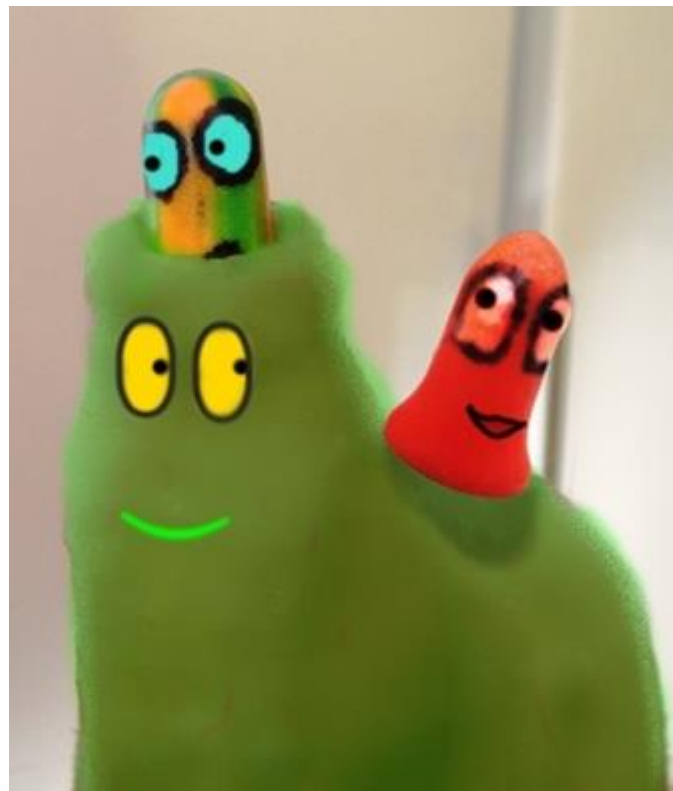
When they arrived at their destination they were still giggling at the way one pitch and putt user had followed his ball into the hole to avoid being run over...



Hot and steamy, they dismounted and cast off their race helmets. From there it was a mere few hundred metres to Susan's apartment...



They hadn't seen the huge green amorphous blob that had been sent from the future to curate and protect the high-tech Age of Stone exhibit for several days. She had been instrumental in helping the Earplug Brothers defeat the Wonky (false) Supreme Being, and in doing so became Magnuss' younger brother, Chester's love interest. She was also a pal to them all, and liked nothing more than to adopt all kinds of crazy shapes to entertain her predominantly pinky-orange chums...





And so it was today. She was playing the role of a headless elephant with a conning tower, when Hair-Trigger heard her emergency cell phone buzzing like a looney in the foyer...



“I’m sorry, Susan, I really must answer that.”

Shortly Magnuss joined his wife in the foyer. “What is it, Hairy? You look worried.”

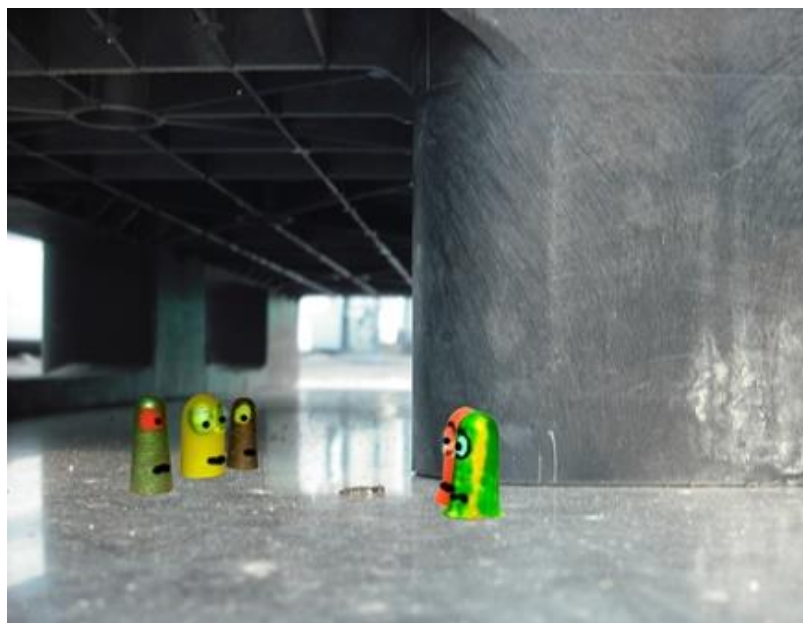


“I don’t know, Hair-Trigger replied, “but we have to meet some panic-stricken earplugs in the Fort Balderdash exhibit. Magnuss, I don’t know why, but I have a really nasty feeling about this. Perhaps we shouldn’t go.”

Fear made her speak the words; but she would never react to them. Five minutes later they met with Dongler Dolt, Shoreham Bycie, and Wong Pu-Tong in the appointed place...



Immediately Shoreham suggested they take the maintenance lift to the level below the fake fortress...



“No one’s gonna hear us down here,” Wong said loudly, “Nosey sods.”

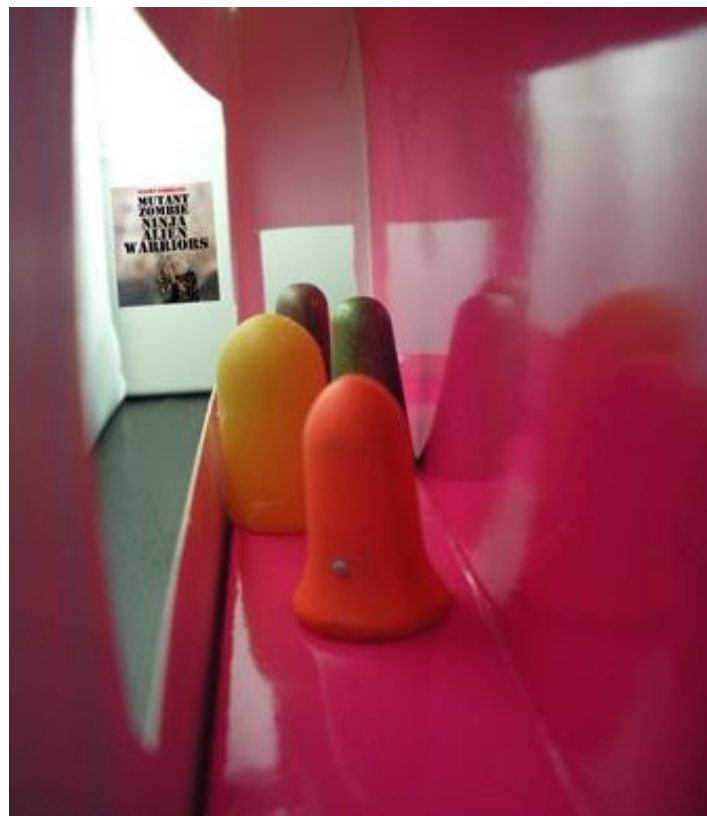
Of course both Magnuss and Hair-Trigger wanted to know why they had been called away from a pleasant romp with the resident shape-shifter. Between them the trio of would-be sandwich makers told Douglas Tetrahedron's tale.

Wong concluded with, "The big dope's waiting for you now."

Hair-Trigger was dismissive: "Sounds like an over-active imagination to me."

Magnuss wasn't much more impressed. To Hair-Trigger he said, "You've got that lecture at the Mother's Union Hall in half an hour. You stick to the schedule: I'll go check out this Rapid Marker Top. You know what these cheap workers from overseas are like: drunk most likely."

Although Hair-Trigger felt a little uncertain about leaving her husband to face the unknown alone, she also realised that a booking is a booking, and she owed it to the Mother's Union to uphold her side of the deal. Of course Magnuss wasn't entirely alone: he had Shoreham, Wong, and Dongler to show him the way to the Civic Centre...



However, as Hair-Trigger arrived at the Mother's Union hall, she was met with the friendliest of welcomes by four members of the ruling elite curator's...



Hair-Trigger's sharp eyesight quickly noted that Auntie Doris had coloured her hair blond; that she was wearing green contact lenses; and enjoyed smearing a most vibrant red gloss upon her lips. Clearly she and K'Plank the Space Wanderer no longer constituted 'an item', and she was on the hunt for a replacement male earplug. "Looking good, Doris." She said cheerfully. Of the others she inquired after the paucity of her expected audience.

"Cancelled." Pretty Boy Plankton replied.

"The Mother's Union is old hat." Bubbly Salterton added.

Big Purp was a little more forthcoming in the information department: "Couldn't sell enough tickets to make it worthwhile employing a tea lady. Sorry. They sent this high-ranking delegation to inform you."

Hair-Trigger was amazed: not so much that she couldn't get enough bums on seats for one of her lectures; but the fact that she now had four curators exactly where she wanted them. Instead of reminding them that they could have called her on her cell phone, she said:

"Guys, this is most fortuitous: I have something very important to tell you. Something so important that I should have gone straight to the Curator's Suite instantaneously. Cushions is going to want to hear this, so listen good."

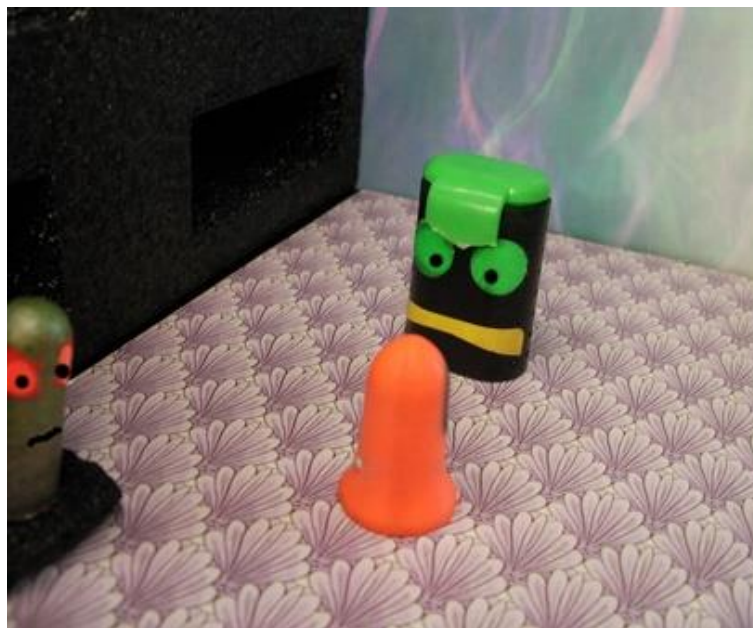
Meanwhile the quartet of earplugs had found Douglas as a Café Puke dispenser...





“You know who I am?” Magnuss asked Douglas.

Douglas might have been from out-of-town...



...but he recognised the museum’s most decorated hero standing before him.

“I do,” he replied, “and I’m honoured to meet you.”

He then told the tale of the noisy meeting in the only rented space in the whole building.

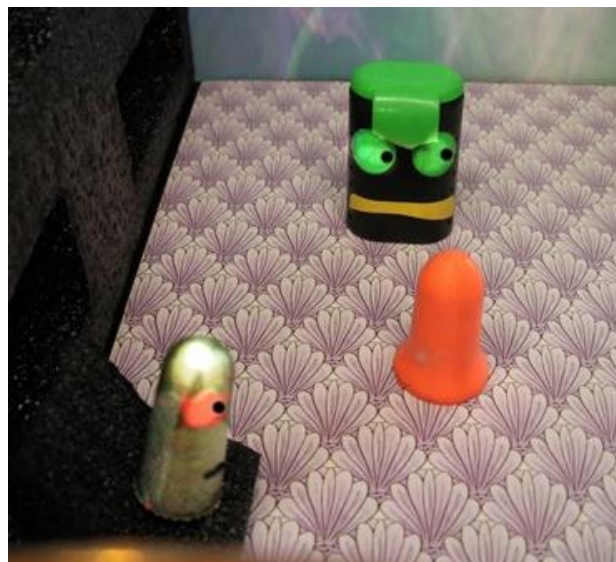
He concluded with: “I swear I haven’t been anywhere near those cider apple lollies in the ice-cream dispenser in the foyer. I’m one hundred percent sober and as honest as a Scrotonite!”

As the coffee dispenser *dispensed* a half-glass of cold milk for Dongler, Magnuss had no alternative but to believe the stranger standing before him: after all, anything was possible in the Museum of Future Technology; so wouldn't it be equally true of Ciudad de Droxford's Civic Centre? After all as the crow flies, the structures stood very close together...



"Show me these rented offices." He said.

Douglas was naturally reticent...



"I'll take you as far as the corridor." He replied. "But after that you're on your own."

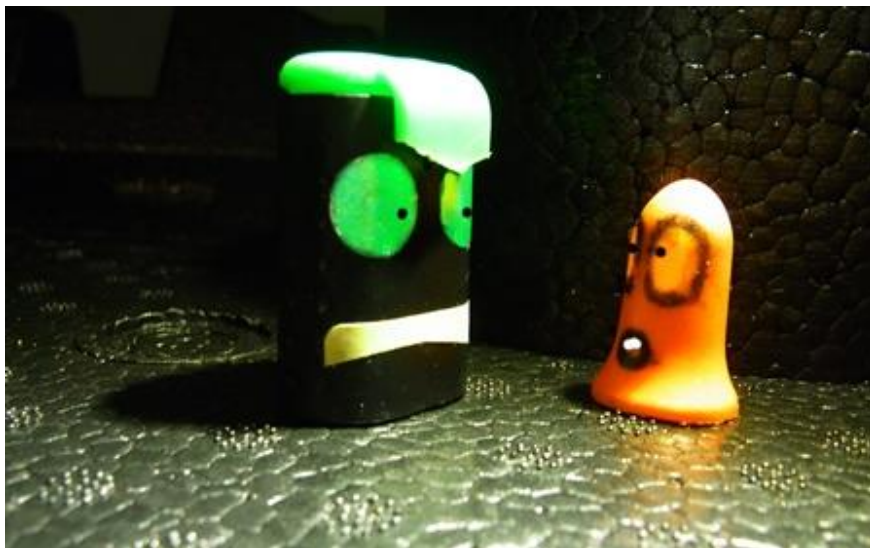
Wong, Shoreham, and (to a lesser extent) Dongler watched on as Douglas led Magnuss to what they feared was his doom...



Magnuss wasn't entirely confident himself. He placed a restraining hand on Douglas.

"How many of them do you think there are?" He asked.

The Rapid Marker Top looked the earplug in the eye...

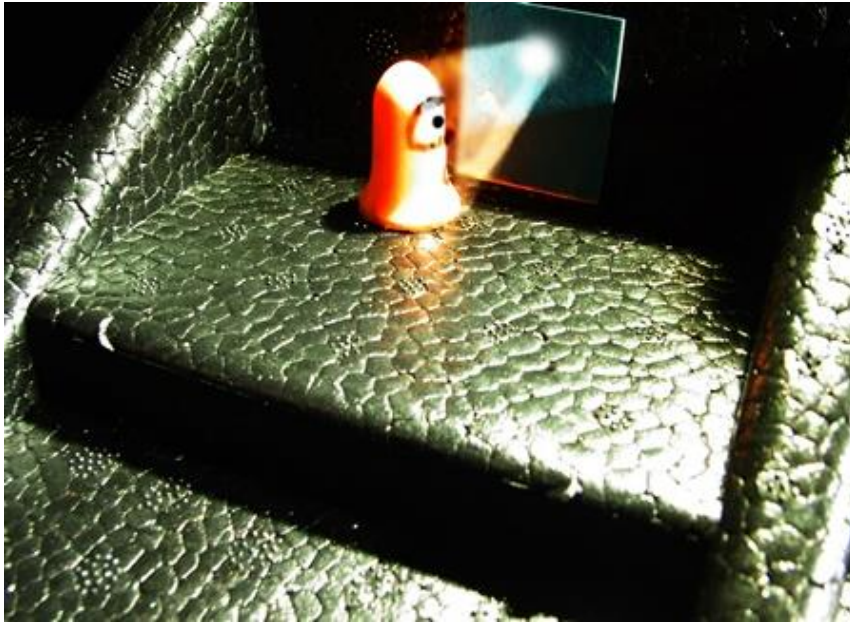


"Well there must have been half a dozen horn blowers." He said, unaware that the word 'trumpeters' would have done perfectly well. "And they welcomed in a minimum of five visitors. Then there was the cheering crowd: there must have been loads of them. Take it from me – you're outnumbered."



## Chapter Six

Now had Magnuss used his brain instead of a slightly elevated testosterone level that his doctor had discovered the day previous, he would have returned to the Museum of Future Technology for a squad of Seventh Cavalry troopers and maybe a couple of inductees into the Yabu Suchs Academy of Heroes. But he didn't, so faced the consequences of his impetuosity alone. Real doubts surfaced when a light shone upon him from the door of the office suite...



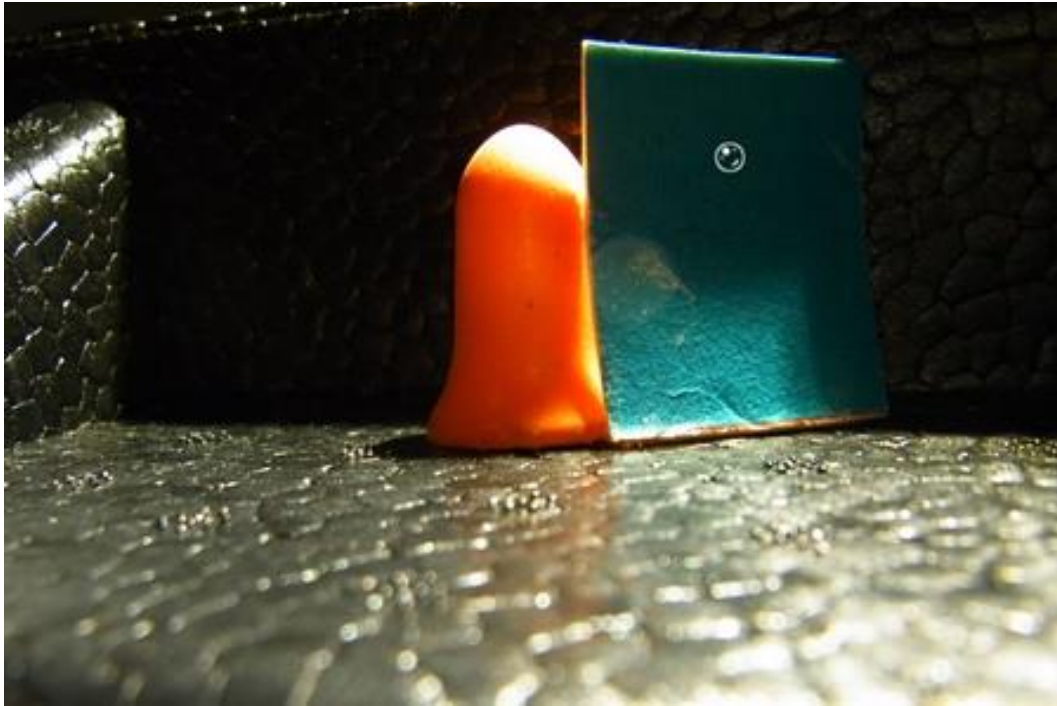
They evaporated when a happy voice said, "Well knock me down with a feather: it's Magnuss Earplug! Wow, how ya doing Magnuss? Come to watch us rehearse?"

Magnuss was a little surprised at this welcome. "Um, rehearse?" He managed.

"Yeah," the voice replied, "we're a repertory company from Nibblers Flatch. We've self-penned a play about...well...about you. Well actually about your acts of bravery in protecting the museum from all sorts of...ah...nasty stuff. This is our first dress rehearsal. Would you like to see it? We'd love your input."

Magnuss wasn't one for responding to an ego massage, but he couldn't see any harm in helping a bunch of young (and probably hungry) actors in their endeavours. He replied in the affirmative. Moments later the door swung open on brand new, squeak-free brass hinges...





However, as Magnuss entered the office, his nose caught a whiff of something that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand erect...



He couldn't recognise it, of course; but he knew it came from a time in his past. But as he stepped away from the door, and the lighting improved, he was greeted with a sight that curdled the milkshake that festered in his stomach...



“What do you think of our costumes, Mister Earplug?” The red sentinel robot spoke in the same voice that had invited Magnuss into the room...



For a split second Magnuss was placated by this explanation as to why he apparently stood before four of his mortal enemies, but an almost apologetic expression on the face of Luke Blister sent warning signals to the experienced hero. He turned to flee – only to be confronted by an unbelievable sight: Ballington Cork in cahoots with Mister Zinc!





“There is nowhere to run.” Ballington hissed. “The door is self-sealing.”

Magnuss now recognised the elusive stench. He thought quickly. Probably quicker than he had needed to in a very long while. Aware that Ballington possessed considerable psychic abilities and could influence people without their knowing it, he produced a vile fart; condensed it into a sphere; and, using his telekinetic skills hurled it at the large cork...



Though the others grew nervous, Ballington snorted his contempt at the attack – stalling it mid-flight and allowing it to dissipate all over Magnuss...



However, as bad as this situation was, it would become far worse. Upon opening his tear-filled eyes, he caught sight of this...



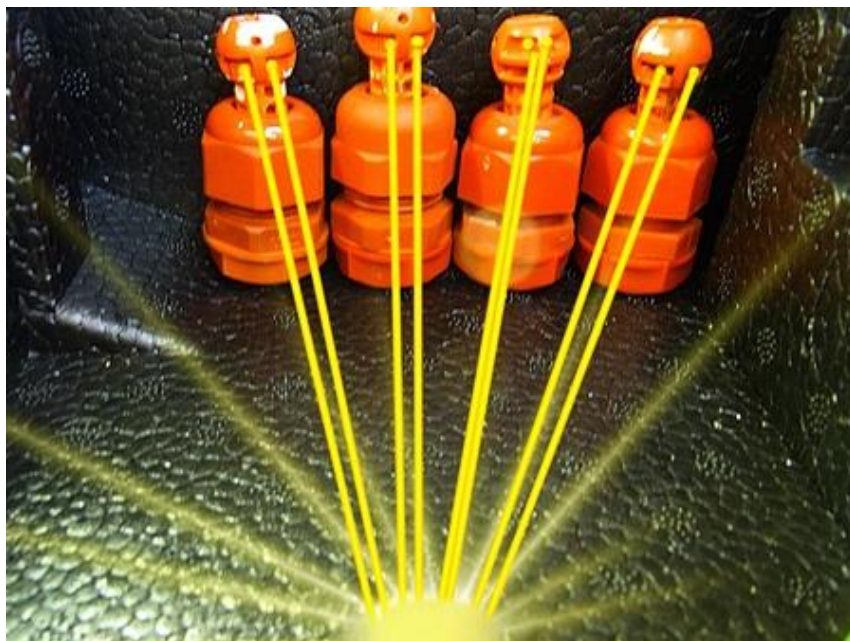
“Aaargh, no!” He wailed. “What a total twonk I’ve been: I’ve walked straight into a trap laid by...ah...what could only be described as an Anvil of Evilness!”





Ballington roared with mirth. “Your gaseous emissions are addling your brain, Magnuss, sodding, Earplug. It’s an *Axis of Evil*. An axis of evil against which you, alone, have no defence. Let him have it boys!”

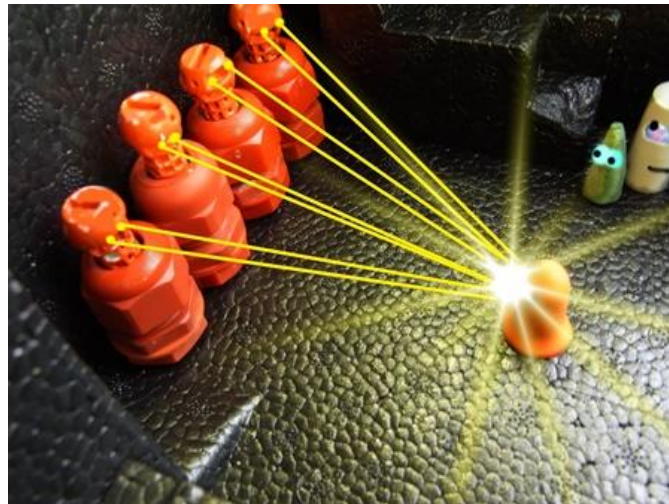
Instantaneously all four red sentinel robots let rip with their mesmeric wave emitters...



After a sustained blast, Magnuss was still yelling, “Aaargh!”



So he received another dose of advanced cyber-medicine...



Ten minutes later, Douglas, Shoreham, Wong, and Dongler watched as Magnuss approached them as they stood at a Café Puke Dispenser...





“Guys,” he said with a smile. “False alarm. But understandable: they had no idea these walls were so paper thin.”



He went on to describe the literary and acting antics of the repertory company from Nibblers Flatch. This was greeted with relief by the earplugs. Douglas, however, was less convinced. He had been spending the past three months attending crochet evenings in Nibblers Flatch. In all that time he had never set his eyes upon a theatre. This thought irked him as he departed...



Inside the Dyson Sphere cinema, the playback ceased and the machine’s cyber-voice invited both viewers to visit the urinal...



“It’s just through those doors on your right.” It informed them.

Although grateful for the intermission, Flaxwell was alarmed by the developments taking place on the so-called documentary. He made an understatement: “I don’t like the way this story is panning out.”

Gideon had decided that a little denial can be good for one sometimes:

“It’s just an amazing work of fiction, Flaxwell. A play, if you will. I mean, it can’t be real, can it! And like we said earlier: we’re thousands of light years from Earth. This place was probably abandoned before earplugs attained sentience. This is all one incredible coincidence. A story about a museum that really exists, featuring characters that also really exist, doing things that they almost certainly would in the circumstances. I bet a half-decent mathematician could argue that something like this would be inevitable eventually. So, is it real? Not at all.”





Flaxwell remained to be convinced. However Gideon's argument did ease his concerns sufficiently to allow his regular character to emerge; so, as the playback resumed he raced Gideon to see who could regain their chair first...



On-screen Magnuss and Hair-Trigger were riding one of the museum's 'up' ramps...



"I don't know what to say, Hairy." Magnuss said to a clearly doubtful stripy earplug. "I visited the offices to which that splendid fellow, Douglas Tetrahedron led me, and found a group of actors and their director running through their first dress rehearsal of a play they'd written, with which they hope to spend a season in the Museum of Future Technology. I even took a quick glance at the script: they've got you off to a tee."

Hair-Trigger was only half-placated. “Well if you say so, Mags. But my internal bad-guy radar is pinging like a looney right now. I can’t shake off the thought that’s it really more than you think it is.”

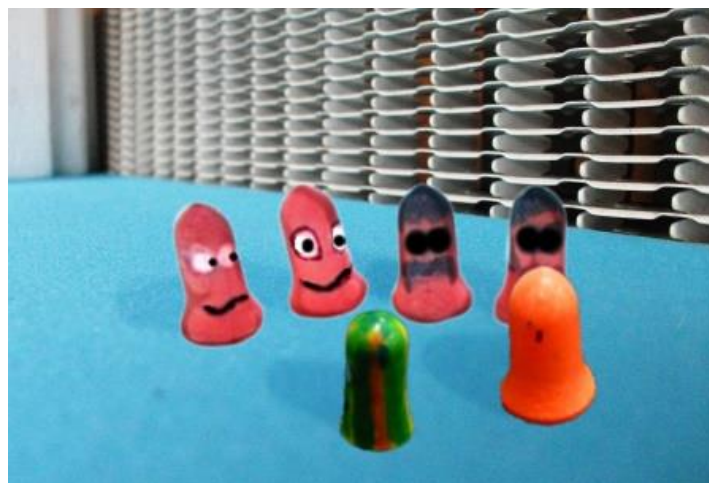
They were on their way to visit the Chief Curator, Cushions Smethwyke. By the time they’d arrived, Hair-Trigger’s smile had returned. It fell slightly as Magnuss related his tale once again, but not so much that Cushions noticed.



“That’s a relief.” Cushions replied. “But perhaps you should take your brothers along...you know...just to make sure you haven’t been duped.”

Hair-Trigger was all for it. “Brilliant idea, Cushions. Come on Magnuss; there’s no time like the present.”

As a consequence of this, Magnuss and Hair-Trigger soon met with the other four Earplug Brothers on a main thoroughfare...



“A play, you say?” Eldest brother, Rudi inquired. “I’m a cartoon kind’a guy: plays are a bit high-brow for me – know what I mean?”

Valentine was more responsive. “Sho-nuf, man.” He said to the offer of a free show in the Civic Centre, “I can dig it.”

Chester and Miles, being the youngest of the brothers by some margin thought they probably had something better to do; but a smile and a “aw, come on” from Hair-Trigger convinced them otherwise. However, when they arrived in the rented office suite, all five guests became slightly wary and began to wish they weren’t there...



“Hey, Magnuss, man,” Rudi said to the middle brother, “why y’all standing over there? Someone smell bad or something?”

Whether Magnuss would have responded to this jibe from his brother, no one will ever know, because, at that moment five red sentinel robots from the future stepped from the shadows....



Hair-Trigger and the boys didn't know what to think. Hair-Trigger managed a brief, "Magnuss?" before this happened...



"There," Magnuss said as five mesmeric waves found their cranial targets, "I told you it was a good show, didn't I?"

Rudi managed to maintain enough self-awareness to call out to Magnuss:

"The psychic shield: it needs all of us guys to work properly. Without you we aint got enough mental power. Magnuss, you gotta join us. Raise the psychic shield. Fight these..."

A while later the party of six marched cheerfully along one of the Civic Centre's many corridors...



"I really liked that bit when you lost your trousers." Chester said to his twin.



“And I think that End Cap carried off her impersonation of you brilliantly.”  
Magnuss said to Hair-Trigger.

“Yes,” Hair-Trigger agreed, “but she doesn’t have my elegant calves.”

“So,” Rudi inquired from the back, “we gonna recommend they let these guys loose on the M.O.F.T?”

The response from everyone was resounding and in the affirmative.

Night had fallen in the Ciudad de Droxford...



...but far up the river of time, the red sentinel robots couldn’t give a toss. A junior robot raced to catch the Chancellor and its attaché...



Had it been constructed of flesh and blood it would have gasped: “Chancellor; good news; the Earplug Brothers are ours!” But, of course it didn’t, because it wasn’t.

Fiction or not, Flaxwell and Gideon were reduced to silent screams by the story’s latest development...



Flaxwell found his voice first: “Gideon, I’m really not happy with what we’re seeing here: let’s get the heck back to Earth: I need to see that the museum is okay – with my own eyes!”

Gideon was tempted. However he retained remarkable decorum and presence of mind:

“No, Flaxwell, it’s too soon. Don’t be rash. We must see the documentary through to the credits. Only then will we have formed some considered ideas concerning our next move.”

### Chapter Seven

Because Mister Zinc believed that the safety element of his early work (on his ‘little idea’) in the shed behind the watchtower had been compromised by lack of facilities and (because it was unheated) the need to rush off to the toilet every fifteen minutes, he thought it wise to continue his study in the basement of the Civic Centre. But even here he ran into a technological brick wall that even Ballington’s technical brilliance couldn’t resolve. So, whilst the incense

cones enjoyed a lay-in; the end caps pored over Mister Zinc's Flying Bathtub; and the catheter caps drilled until their advanced sole leather began smoking, Zinc and Ballington took their shared problem to the red sentinel robots...



"There are two key ingredients we require." Zinc informed the huge automaton beside him.

"Two ingredients," Ballington interjected, "that we cannot obtain here and now."

The robot understood in an instant. "You are asking if we might procure them for you from our era." It stated, rather than asked.

"What are these two key ingredients?" the second robot asked Ballington.

"Hoalnite Healiweelium." Ballington replied, "And something quite common here on Earth, but in anti-matter form."

The robots communed electronically. Moments later the senior of them said:

"Uh-oh, no-can-do. Hoalnite Healiweelium hasn't been seen in generations; and any anti-matter can only be obtained from a quantum reality that is the reverse of our own. What is so important that you complete this work: surely, with the Earplugs doing our bidding, the battle is already won?"

"They're a tenacious bunch, these earplugs." Zinc said bitterly. "They don't give up, even when they know they're beaten."

“I can vouch for that.” Ballington added. “Unless we have something to stop them dead in their tracks, they’ll keep needling us until we cry ‘enough’ and surrender.”

“Medusa Compound will do that.” Zinc spoke conspiratorially. “Stop them dead in their tracks, I mean.”

Again the head robot displayed a fleetness of mind. “Medusa Compound.” It said. “From the ancient fable of the Medusa, the sight of which would instantly turn an earplug to stone. You intend to petrify our opponents.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” A somewhat impressed Mister Zinc replied. “Only in our case the medusa element will only need touch its victim. We haven’t decided on a medium yet, but we thought gas might prove a little unwieldy.”

“The wind could blow it back over us.” Ballington explained needlessly.

In what form does the anti-matter need to exist?” The second robot (that had clearly been making calculations whilst the other spoke) inquired.

“Sesame seeds.” Ballington replied.

The robot accepted this without response. Instead it said:

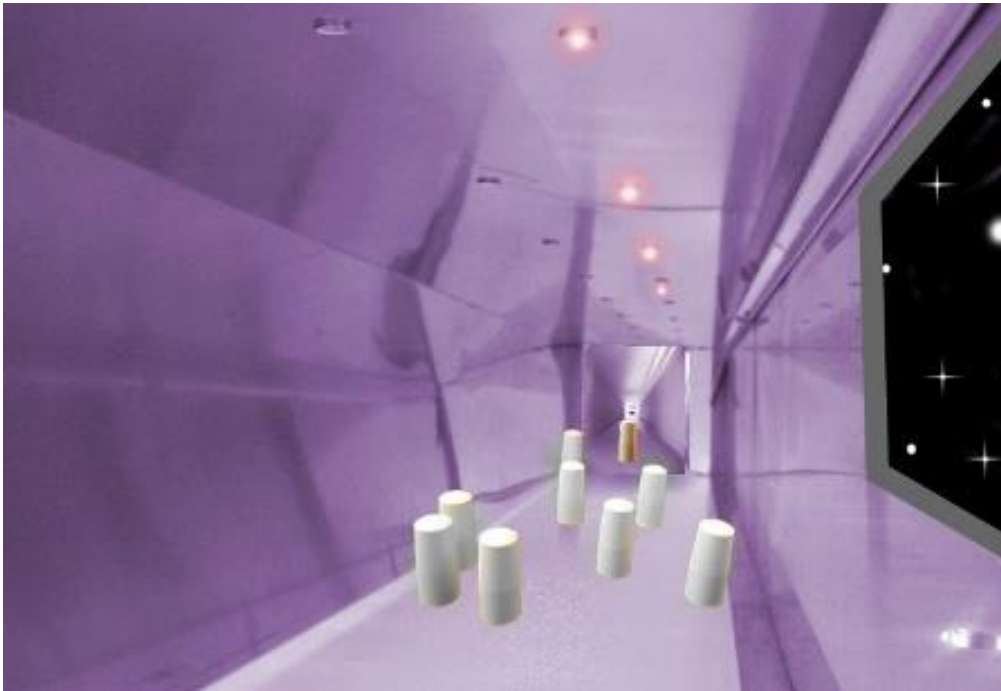
“The Hoalnite Healiweelium exists in a natural state in hyperspace.”

Five minutes later the end cap Mothership opened a portal into Hyperspace, and duly entered it...





A further five minutes later catheter caps could be seen rushing along corridors towards their flight cradles...



Their vessel then interacted with the gossamer thin sub-atomic film that separates alternative realities from each other...



...and accelerated into the unknown. Unfortunately not every catheter cap aboard was entirely successful in their search for a flight cradle...



Grazed knees and nose bleeds abounded.

Meanwhile Douglas continued in his task – ceaselessly fretting about what he had witnessed earlier...



He also feared that he might yet witness more events for which his pay grade was far too low. Even now he could hear excited voices in front of him. Who could they be? What might they want in a largely unpopulated building this late in the evening? Of course he could answer neither question, so he picked

up the pace and closed the gap. Keeping largely to the shadows he closed sufficiently to see a mixed group, five of whom appeared to be dancing girls. Then it struck him: these people were the first ever inductees to the Yabu Suchs Academy of Heroes...



Douglas's observation was correct. In the sub-optimal lighting Magnuss and Hair-Trigger led the Greenhorn Girls, plus Hambledon Bohannon, Jibbering Johnson, Jessica Fury, Hunki McCallister, Gunston Warbler, and Bob Chalk on an extended walk into the Civic Centre. Belle Ching had just turned to Poki Kitchener to tell her how excited she was to see a play about themselves, when, quite suddenly and without warning, in the blink of an eye and a half-heartbeat, out of nowhere and without an observable point of origin, everyone there (save for Magnuss and Hair-Trigger) was struck by mesmeric waves...



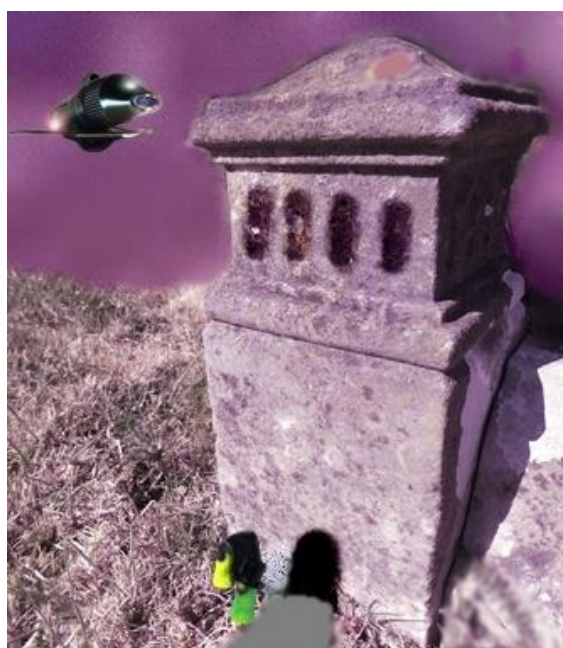
Of course Douglas was horrified, but only half as horrified as Flaxwell and Gideon who watched from far away and in the distant future...



“That’s it.” Flaxwell said as he leapt from his chair. “I’m done watching: I need action. We’re outta here!”

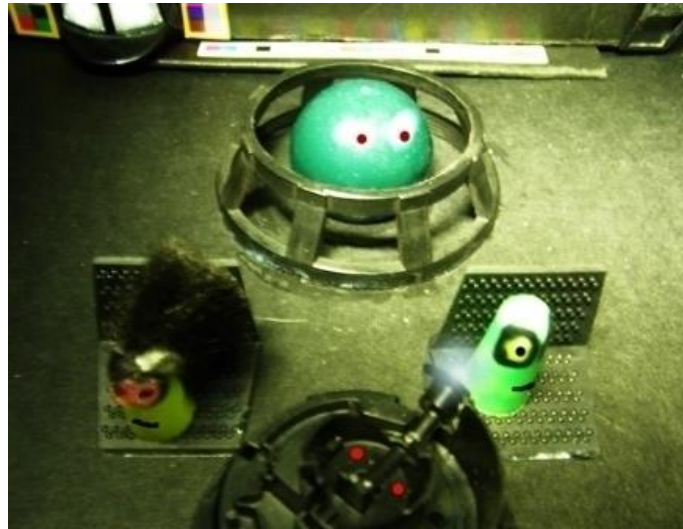
Gideon, who formerly held reservations concerning any intervention on their part, primarily because it wouldn’t do a bit of good and would only waste their time and effort, agreed. To see the Museum of Future Technology fall to such low curs was too much. He joined Flaxwell upon his feet. “Put a call in to the Oracle.” He instructed the pilot. “Tell him to have the *Zephyr* waiting by that tower we came in through.”

So, a few minutes later, the explorers emerged into a mauve world, above which their Scroton Five hung like a welcome home sign...





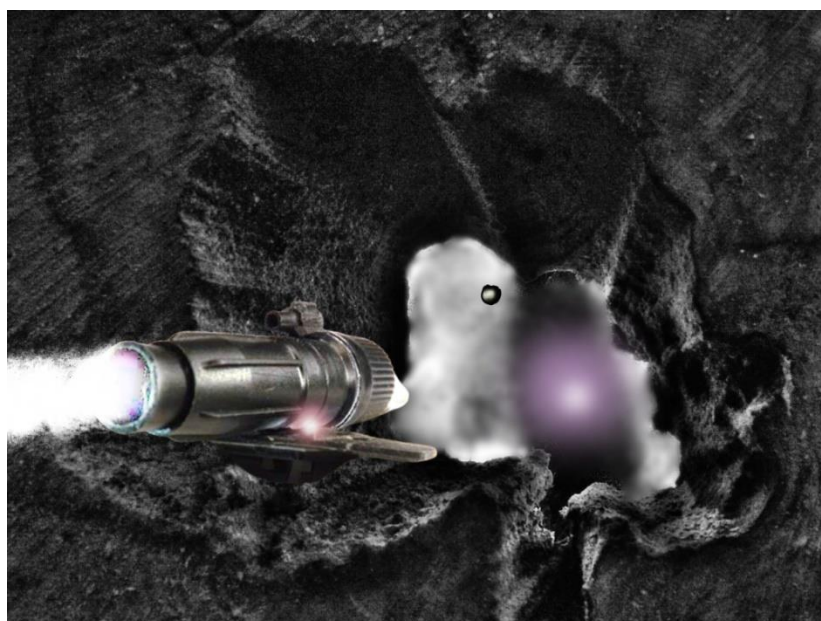
And a few minutes more saw them hurl themselves into their respective seats...



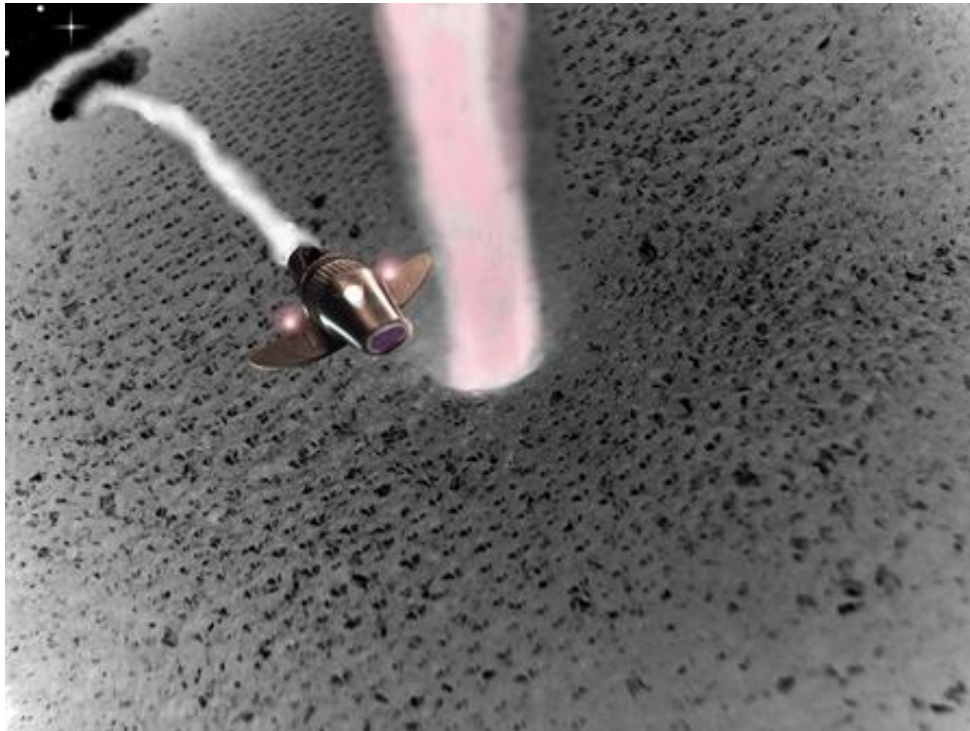
“Would anyone care to explain?” Oracle complained. “I was in hibernation mode: your panic-stricken call caused quite a jolt to my systems, I’ll have you know. Where are we going?”

“The expedition is on hiatus, Oracle.” Gideon said as he and Flaxwell rushed through the barest minimum pre-flight system checks. “We need to get back to Earth, pronto.”

A couple more of those minutes later, the *Zephyr* approached the ancient breach in the even more ancient (or ancier) Dyson Sphere’s external wall...



Moreover, having immediately plunged through the abyssal opening, the ship took off like a scalded plugmutt across the sphere's outer surface...



...and lifted away from the colossal gravity well that the vast structure created.

“Right then,” Flaxwell said to Oracle, “now that the initial adrenaline rush has subsided, I guess we’d better tell you what’s what.”



So, with the backdrop of fractured space upon the view screen, the pair of earplugs gave a brief resumé of the unfinished documentary...



Meanwhile and now unwitnessed, an end cap attack saucer exited a hyperspace portal, just a short distance from Earth...



Its sole occupant – being Captain of the Guard, Luke Blister – stood proudly beside a family-sized bottle that he claimed contained Hoalnite Healiweelium...



“Great,” Zinc responded to the good news. “Where is everyone else? Where is the mothership? We might need your suicide squad, though I guess it’s unlikely.”

“Transmission problems. Caught a trans-dimensional pothole.” Luke explained breathlessly. “Had to limp to the nearest space dock for repairs. So I volunteered to make the journey in an attack saucer. Here’s your Hoalnite Healiweelium: glad you called us end caps in to help now?”

“Yeah, well done.” Ballington replied in a tone that sounded a little begrudging. “Now take it to the makeshift lab; the catheter cap ship has just entered orbit.”

Luke hadn’t been long gone when a catheter cap, whose name was unpronounceable (and therefore of no interest) stood equally enthusiastically beside the produce of his quest...



The taller of the red sentinel robots scanned the special jar that contained the anti-matter sesame seeds. “This is acceptable: you have performed your task



adequately. Follow the footprints of the end cap to the makeshift lab. Take the sesame seeds with you.”

“So now it’s up to the incense cones to show a little creativity.” Zinc said into the silence that followed the departure of the catheter cap. “Can one of you robots summon one of them?”

One could and did. Luke and the deliberately unnamed catheter cap followed the small creature into the room...

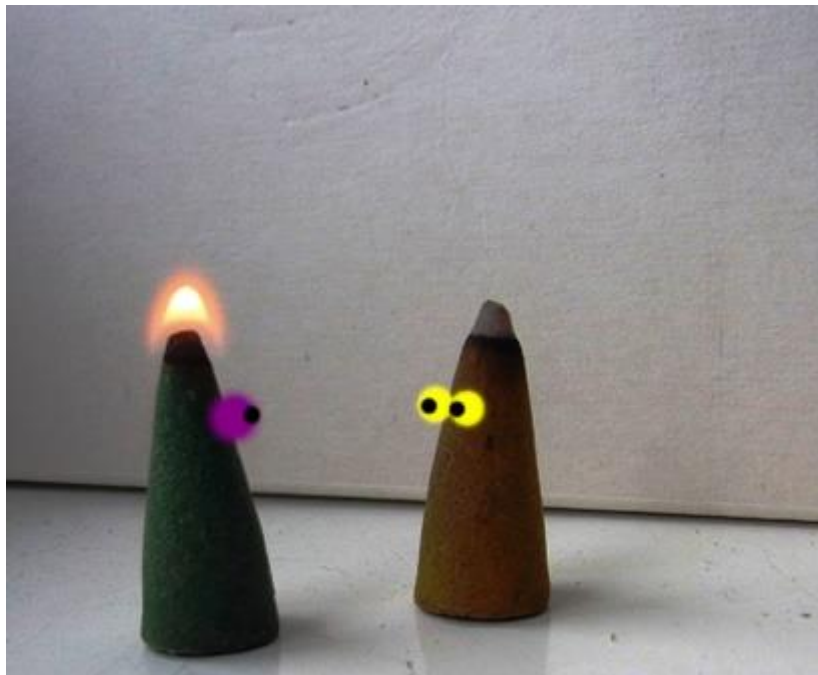


“Good news,” he said, “we have our means of delivering the Medusa Compound. We have fallen back on ancient ways. We are proud to live up to the name of our species. But it means smearing us with a thin veneer of grease first. Hopefully it won’t be too smelly.”

So as another day passed pleasantly at the Museum of Future Technology, and Submarine Space Freighters came and went with metronomic regularity...



...one of the incense cones set his head on fire...



“How do I look?” He asked of a female colleague.

Shortly the aforementioned female asked the same question of two red sentinel robots...



“I do not understand.” The baffled cyber-mechanism groaned.

“We mix the Medusa Compound, which Zinc and the big cork can produce so that it’s inert at room temperature, into a paste: rub it into our heads; set fire to it; and go walk about the museum. Anyone that gets touched by the smoke gets petrified. Neat, huh?”

The second robot understood in a nanosecond. “The thin veneer you spoke of protects you from the smoke.”

“That’s right.” The incense cone replied proudly. “And the heat makes most of it rise away from our bodies anyway.”

The first robot suggested a problem that it thought might be unsurmountable:

“How do you breathe?” it asked.

“Through our bottoms.” The incense cones replied.

### Chapter Eight

The first anyone in the Museum of Future Technology knew of any disruption to the norm was when a bunch a mag-lift rail users discovered that the train hadn’t arrived...



“This is unheard of.” One of them bellowed, as more would-be passengers poured in through the entrances. “I’ve a good mind to write to the morning TV show that specialises in uncovering shoddy services and corporate corruption.”

“What possible reason could there be for the train to fail to arrive?” Another said more reasonably.

“Could have been gobbled up by a time storm.” Another passenger suggested.

“There was a volcano in the foyer once.” Yet another offered. “I was there: we all had to evacuate to Mars!”

Ideas abounded, but not one of them came close to the truth...



“I haven’t done this since my coming out party.” The blue-eyed incense cone informed the others in the caravan of burning incense cones. “I love the way the smoke swirls up to the ceiling and makes it all filthy.”

Oiger, one of the few earplugs to have seen the incense cones in action, rushed along one of the museum’s many thoroughfares...



He called out a warning, but (of course) it was so ridiculous that people either scoffed; laughed in his face; or told him to shove something somewhere.



However they stopped scoffing, laughing, or making rude suggestions very abruptly when the incense cones arrived...



For them time simply ceased.

Meanwhile, aboard the *Zephyr*, Gideon and Flaxwell urged the Oracle to ever-greater stretching of cyber-sinews in its effort to calculate a means by which the Scrotonite ship might travel back in time to the era in which the documentary purportedly originated...



“You can do it.” Gideon assured the third element of their exploratory triumvirate. “I’d suggest trying a slingshot around a star, then applying one

hundred and fifty percent energy flux to the interstellar drive unit: but that's silly: I bet you can come up with something much better."

An hour later the *Zephyr* approached (what in Fractured Space constituted) a star...



"How the heck are we gonna slingshot around that mass of turbulent star-muck?" Flaxwell complained.

"There are gaps in the 'star-muck'," Oracle replied – still smarting from his total and undignified intellectual defeat by the green earplug, "I can calculate a route through it that will supply our vessel great momentum. At the precise moment that only a cyber-being can calculate, I will activate the main drive at one hundred and sixty-five percent normal out-put. This should give us sufficient velocity to overcome space/time adhesion. Simply put, we will travel back through time."

Putting his money where his mouth was, Oracle did as he had promised. Very quickly reality was stretched wretchedly...



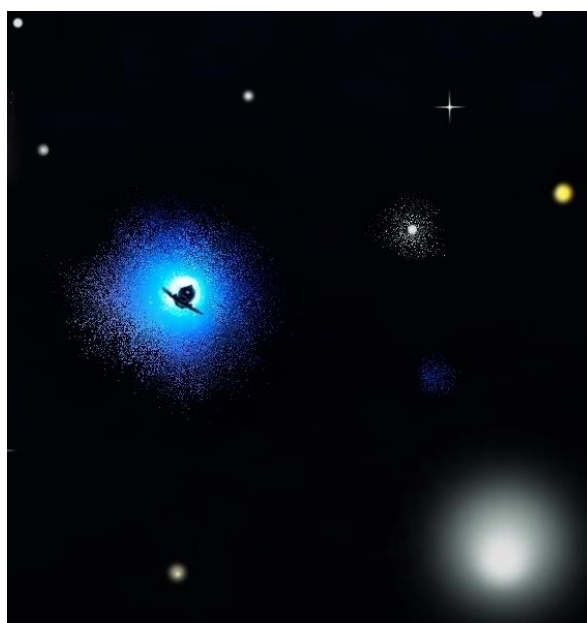
Inside the ship conditions weren't quite so bad...



“How did you know which ship was us, Oracle?” Gideon inquired with more than air of the deeply impressed.

“Ours was the only vessel showing navigation lights.” Oracle replied – thankfully feeling that he’d managed to even the score.

So, with the reduced Fractured Space of an earlier era behind them...



...the crew of the *Zephyr* made best speed for Earth.

Talking of Earth, or at least the Museum of Future Technology, many earplugs were learning of some terrible threat to the vast emporium. They ran around in a state of agitation that would have made water molecules in a microwave oven appear somnolent...



Some even left their midday lunch for complete strangers to pick up.

And all the while the smouldering incense cones wandered through every nook and cranny of the immense building...



"Big, isn't it?" They would often observe.



The reply became commonplace: “I don’t know how we’re going to furnish this. One could get lost just going to the toilet.”

But soldier on they did – covering vast distances and petrifying untold numbers of inhabitants too stupid to get away. They even entered Skanki Kaffe outlets and turned numerous loyal baristas into living fossils...



Of course the curators called out the troops. However Cushions Smethwyke couldn’t believe her ears when the Seventh Cavalry reported that they had been locked into their stockade by, none other, than Magnuss Earplug...



Worse news was to come. Apparently the other four Earplug Brothers had persuaded the entire TWIT force to enter their Head Quarters. Having

complied, they quickly discovered that a force-field had been erected across the only door...



Cushions had no choice: she activated Crimson Alert...



Whilst this hullabaloo was taking place, the *Zephyr* arrived in the Solar System...



Both earplugs sighed when they recognised the Earth/Luna system...

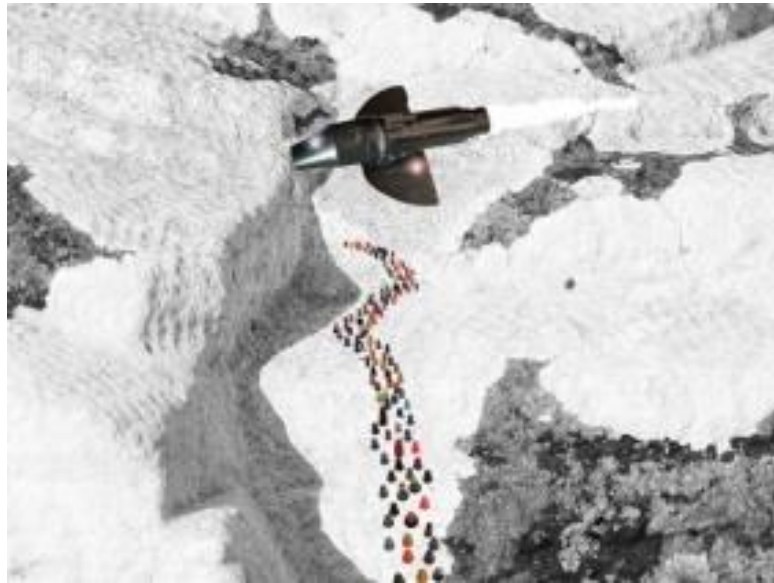


Of course no one in the museum knew anything of their arrival, and wouldn't have given two hoots if they had: they just kept running around in a panic...





Quickly entering the atmosphere, the *Zephyr* came in low and cut across the mountains that separated the museum from Lemon Stone...



Below its curvaceous wings earplugs of every hue could be seen struggling through the springtime snow as they tried to gain the sanctuary of the mountaintop citadel.

Gideon stared at the view screen. "We're too late." He whispered. "It's a rout."  
"I can't stand to look." Flaxwell responded. "I'm taking us back up into space."



Whilst doing so he cancelled the Oregano Alert...





“Oracle?” Flaxwell turned and asked hopefully.

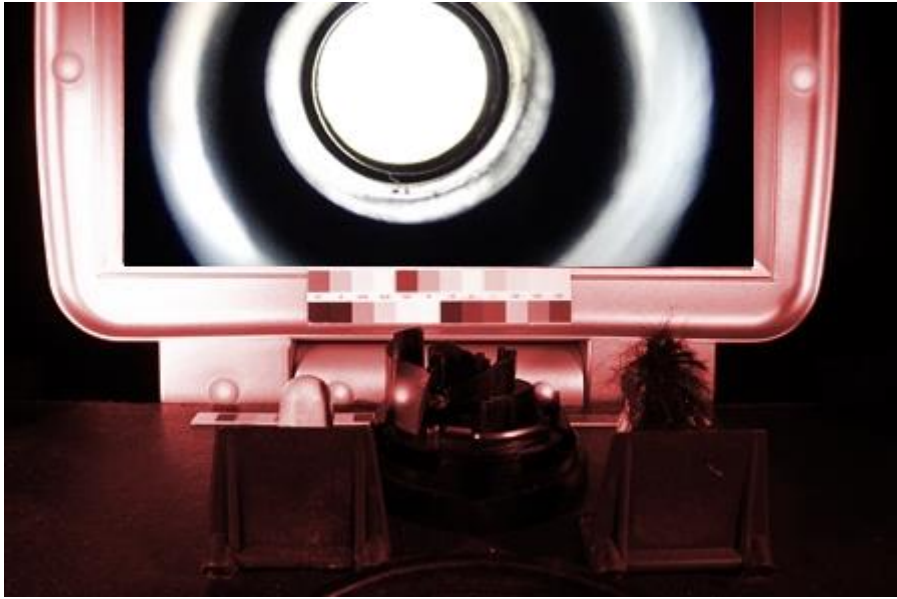
“I’ll just check the up-chuck manifold for abrasions.” The machine intelligence replied. “I think we’ll need to run these engines above design limits one more time.”

Time, for once, wasn’t of the essence; they had plenty of it in which to spend fixing up the battered ship of Scroton for another push through time. No one was counting, but it must have been five days before Vermillion Alert was put into effect and the main drive of the *Zephyr* burst into incandescent life...



...its target; the Sun.

“Look,” Gideon squealed as he pointed at the main viewer a half-minute later, “That must be how the original Tunnel Temporale must have looked. Gosh, how historic!”



However Gideon didn't get to enjoy the view for long...



Flaxwell wasn't overly impressed either: "Why does time travel have to be so darned unpleasant?" He yelled as both earplugs became super-buoyant and floated around the command deck.

Gideon, ever the practical earplug, shouted over the din caused by Flaxwell's nervous farting: "Watch your knees when gravity returns: try to land on your feet or some well-upholstered fleshy parts."

It was a wise and timely suggestion, because just a few seconds later the ordeal was over...



“Hey, would you look at that.” Flaxwell said, “The coffee machine didn’t spill a drop!”

Naturally Oracle cancelled the Vermillion Alert whilst they considered their next action...



“So we’ve travelled back to before the Medusa Compound was completed, right?” Flaxwell inquired.

Oracle confirmed this. It then added: “Not all of the ingredients have arrived yet. They are waiting on the sesame seeds and that stuff from hyperspace.”

Gideon, in the great cause of accuracy and efficiency required clarity: “Hoalnite Healiweelium?” He inquired.

“Correct.” Oracle answered.

“Then why don’t you say Hoalnite Healiweelium?”

“I can’t.” The Oracle replied shame-faced.

“But surely,” Gideon pressed, “those few simple syllables can’t be beyond your linguistic talents. Even Flaxwell can say Hoalnite Healiweelium!”

“Yeah,” Flaxwell said from his pilot’s seat, “Hoalnite Wheelibinnium.”



Oracle decided to confess: “They are a rude word on Scroton.” He explained. “It goes against everything that I stand – or recline – for. It mocks Nigel, the Golden One’s buttocks. Oh, just thinking about it blows out my redundant diodes!”

“We had no idea,” Gideon said in mild surprise as he tested the coffee he’d just poured. “Oh, from now on we’ll call it...um... *veg oil*, okay?”

This was gratefully accepted and the proper conversation continued:

“We’re from the future.” Flaxwell stated. “Our weapons could slice through the defensive screens of current ships like a fish through water or a finger through a moist toilet tissue. I vote we take out the catheter cap ship as it enters orbit.”

Gideon appeared to consider this. He then presented an idea of his own:



Captain of the Guard, Luke Blister,” he said, “is not a particularly enthusiastic participant in this devious scheme. He is the weak link in their chain of command.”

“He volunteered to bring the...veg oil...back alone in a tiny attack saucer.” Flaxwell countered.

“He said he did.” Gideon replied. “But he was only after Brownie Points. He was just ingratiating himself with the red sentinel robots. The mothership captain ordered him to complete the mission. I think it will take very little to turn the little blue end cap. Perhaps the promise of...oh, I don’t know...a job in the MOFT? End caps make natural engineers. I wouldn’t mind one to keep this little baby purring like a feline predator.”

It was time for Flaxwell to feign consideration. He gave it three seconds:

“Yeah, it would be kind of nice not to blow him into a million atoms: let’s give it a go.”

Shortly Luke’s attack saucer emerged from the hyperspace portal. The *Zephyr* awaited it...



“Lower your screens, de-activate your weapons, and prepare to be abducted.” Gideon said into his communication panel. “Or face certain destruction. Oh, and while you’re at it, bring that bottle of...Hoalnite Healiweelium...with you”

Shortly...



Whilst Luke stared in wonderment at his sudden change in circumstances, Flaxwell studied the bottle of incongruous liquid before him.

“Veg oil,” he said.

“I’ll get some from the galley.” Gideon said as he backed out of the door.

“Make Captain Blister welcome while I’m gone.”

Naturally Luke was intrigued by the pocket history bestowed upon him by Flaxwell. “You really think you can defeat the combined forces of the red sentinel robots from the future; that cork thing; those horrible catheter caps; and the silver guy?”

“You forgot the incense cones.” Flaxwell reminded the end cap.

“They don’t do anything.” Luke replied. “Lazy so-and-sos; I don’t know why they’re here.”

“We’ve already seen what they can do...*tomorrow*.” Oracle replied. “Believe me; they have a role to play.”

Gideon returned long enough to deposit a mug of soy sauce beside Flaxwell, before heading straight for the toilet...



“That, I assume, is my Hoalnite Healiweelium.” Luke said with a smile so conspiratorial that anyone who didn’t know him would swear he was born to live a life of espionage.

“Correct.” Oracle replied. “Now all you have to do is return with it to your craft and present it to the red sentinel robots as...er...the real thing.”

“Then make myself scarce.” Luke added.

“Then make yourself scarce.” Gideon confirmed from the bridge lavatory.

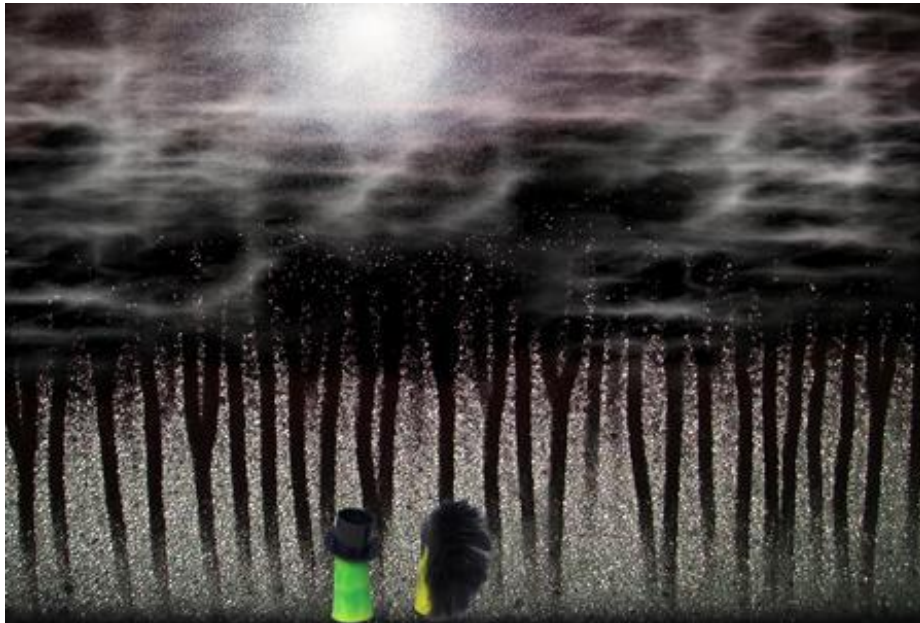
That evening the *Zephyr* slipped silently into the frosty region of countryside that separated Ciudad de Droxford from the Museum of Future Technology...



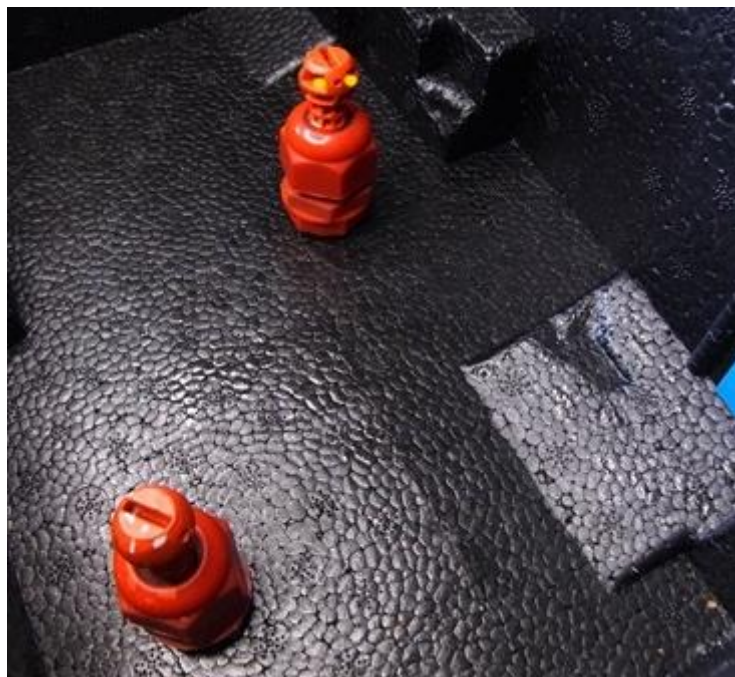
...where it settled, unseen, in a thicket.

### Chapter Nine

Shortly Flaxwell and Gideon disembarked and began pushing their way out of the thicket, hopefully in the direction of the museum...

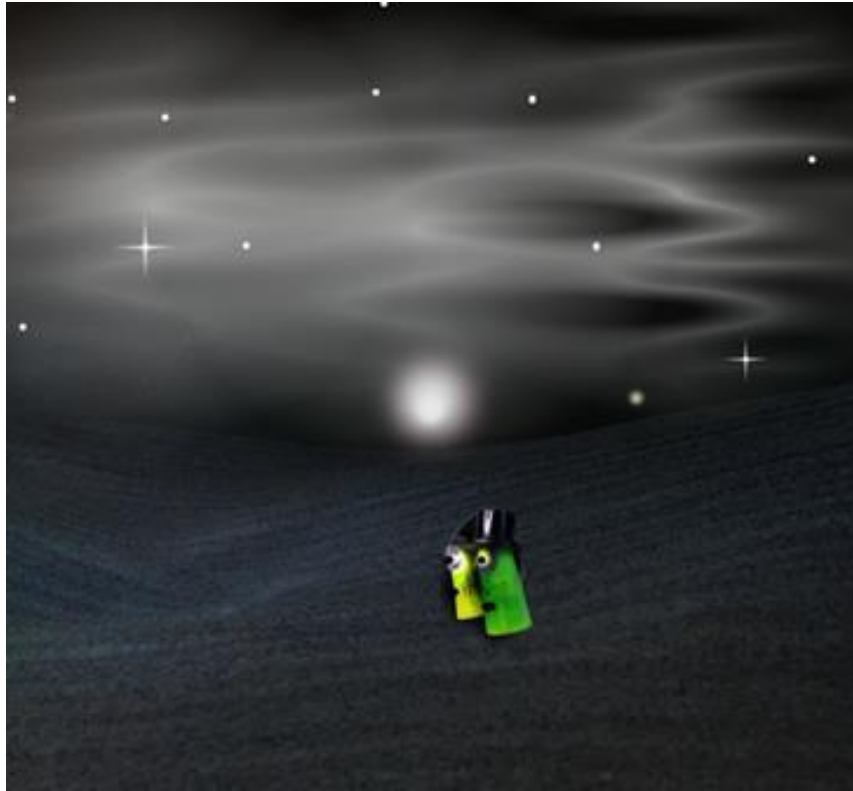


Meanwhile, in their rented offices, the red sentinel robots went about their boring cyber-business...

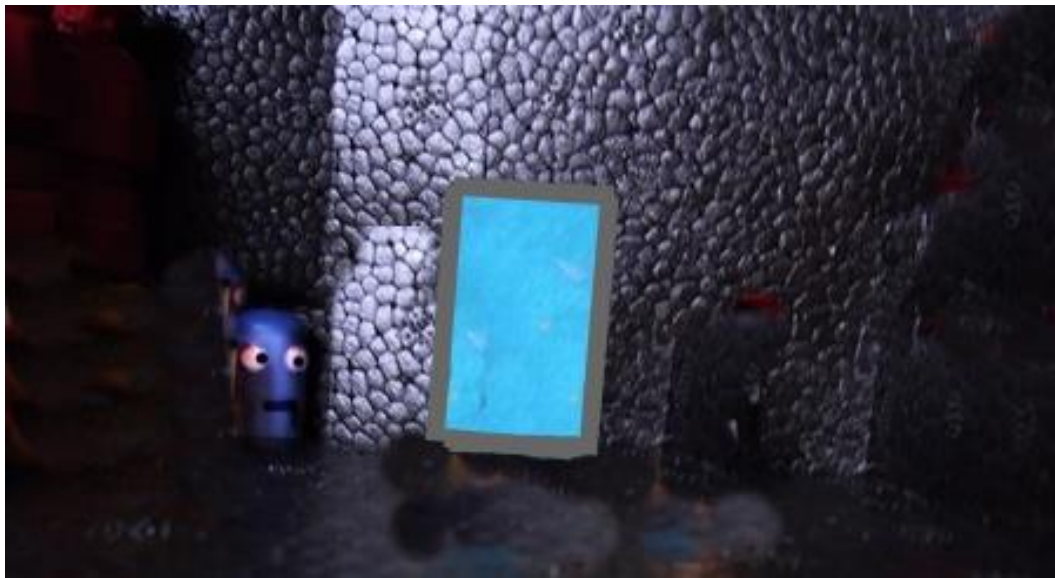


And what seemed like hours later, when Flaxwell and Gideon were dragging themselves across some gently rolling chalk downland...

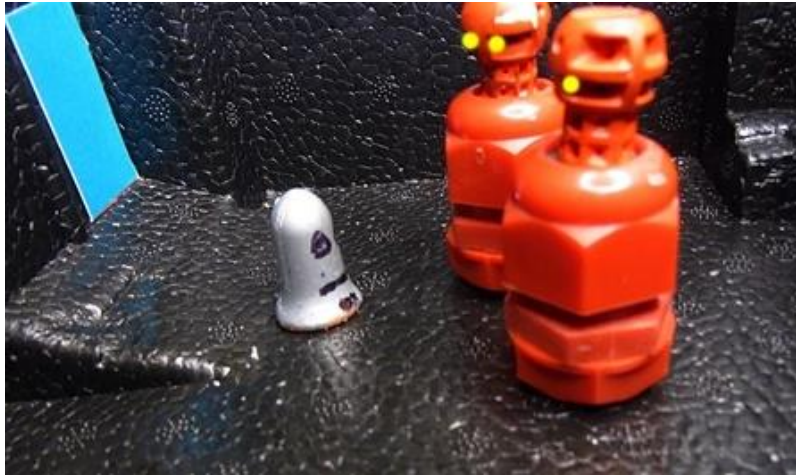




...Captain of the Guard – or more properly *Former* Captain of the Guard - Luke Blister, remained safely tucked up in a shadowy hiding place...

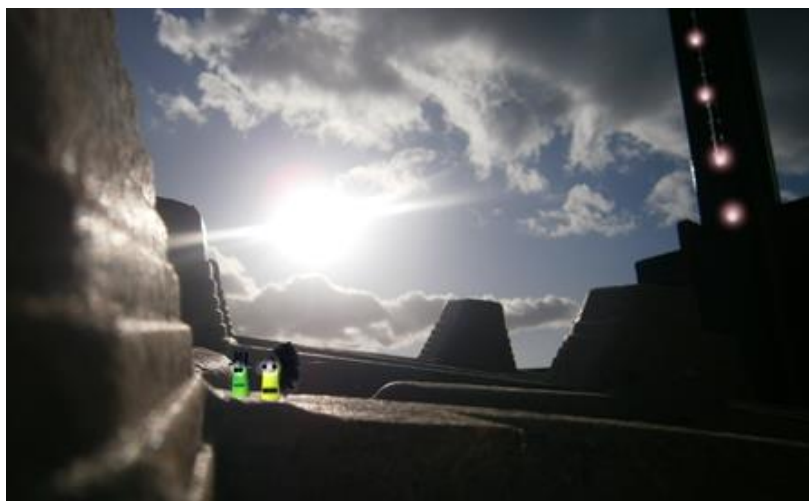


...whilst watching the locked door and waiting for the inevitable discovery of his treachery. He didn't know it, of course, but that wouldn't happen until the morning. Mister Zinc had only just informed the two red sentinel robots that habitually stood guard at the office door...



...that he was baffled by the lack of progress with the Medusa Compound, and that he would 'sleep on the problem', and hopefully be inspired by a new day.

Safe in the knowledge that the Axis of Evil could not possibly create a working example of the Medusa Compound any time soon, Flaxwell and Gideon now need only wrestle the minds and bodies of those brainwashed by the aforementioned Axis of Evil from their control. Dawn was on the horizon, and if the master plan was to be followed to the letter, in just a short while – that is just after reveille, when the trooper's brains were still addled by the fog of sleep – Magnuss would lock the Seventh Cavalry inside their stockade. This, they realised, must be allowed to happen: how else would they prove to an adoring public that their greatest hero now worked against them – for their greatest foes? Before entering through a maintenance door, Flaxwell made sure that his recording device was operating and safely drawing broadcast power from the nul-space generator that supplied the energy needs of the entire edifice...



Although, strictly speaking, the Museum of Future Technology didn't really sleep, the daylight hours were undeniably its busiest time. As workers began to arrive for their shifts, none of them noticed Flaxwell and Gideon accessing a communication panel that linked them with the museum's A.I...



The A.I was its usual self: "Yeah, whadda ya want, ya big bouffant?"

Flaxwell explained that he and Gideon had most important information that concerned an attempted coup within the museum. He included names and species, but no mention of the Earplug Brothers. He then paused and awaited a response.

"So?" The A.I prompted.

"We know this will happen because we are time travellers and have already seen it." Flaxwell continued. "Now scan us for temporal abnormalities."

"I don't know about temporal abnormalities," the A.I responded, "but your pal's hat sure is one heck of a sartorial abnormality. Okay, scanning."

A few seconds passed. It was Flaxwell's turn to prompt: "Well?"

The A.I's demeanour changed: "Yeah, I see what ya mean: you two have sure been through the wringer recently. So what is it you want from me?"

"Are you in awe of Magnuss Earplug?" Gideon asked.

“I’m a machine-intelligence, modelled on the Supreme Being: I aint in awe of nothing. Proceed with the bombshell you’re about to drop.”

Flaxwell did as he had been instructed: “Magnuss Earplug, his wife, and his brothers are all working for your enemies.”

“Now that’s pushing it, pal.” The A.I replied. “Those guys are A1 rated: they wouldn’t work for no one who threatened the good old MOFT.”

Flaxwell kept his explanation brief: “They’ve been brainwashed by mesmeric waves.”

“Yeah, except them.” The A.I responded instantly. “Mesmeric waves: I remember them from years ago: they made the RoboSecGua poop itself – and it aint even got no bowels! So, going back to my original inquiry: whatta ya want?”

“Keep tabs on us and be ready to raise the alarm and send in the troops, so-to-speak. Right now, we need free access to everywhere – before the museum opens to the public. But first of all, we’d like to know how we can break the mesmeric wave conditioning.” Gideon replied.

“You got it.” The A.I replied.

Thereafter, following a brief medical lecture, the daring duo proceeded to the Fort Balderdash exhibit...



...where they anticipated finding Magnuss going about his dirty work.



They weren't disappointed...



“Look,” Gideon whispered to Flaxwell as they witnessed him sealing the Seventh Cavalry inside their stockade, “he’s got Hair-Trigger with him.”

“That complicates the situation.” Flaxwell said ruefully. “We really needed to catch Magnuss alone, by himself, with no one else there. But let’s not allow that setback to deter us: we have a task to perform.”

However, as the two futurians progressed in their chosen direction, they chanced to enter the George Dumper Hall. There, to their surprise, alone in the exit, stood Luke Blister...

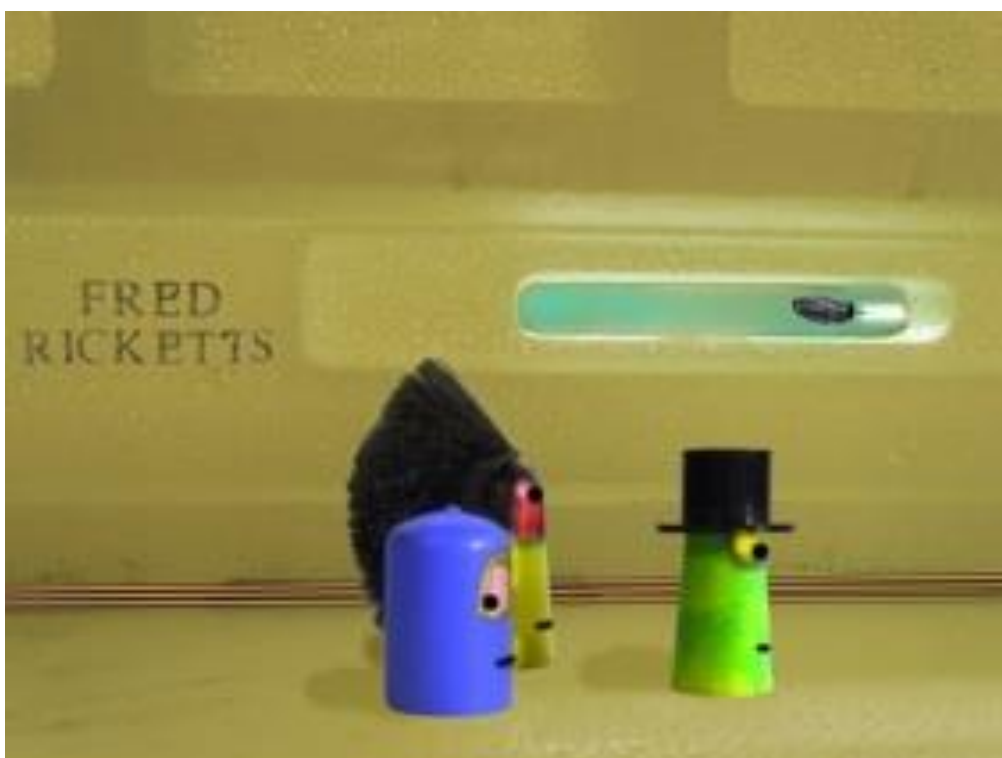


“Captain Blister!” Gideon exclaimed, “What the flipping heck are you doing here?”

“I thought it best I found you.” The blue end cap replied. “I heard Ballington Cork’s voice from way down in the basement where I was hiding. He’d finally figured the Hoalnite Healiweelium was soy sauce. I heard him roar, ‘bring the pathetic wretch to me: I will personally eviscerate it.’ So I snuck out through an admirably large sewer outlet, which of course was pristine because no one has used the loos yet. Using my innate tracking skills I followed you to the museum. It was easy after that: big hair and stupid hats are so next century!”

Remembering what Gideon had said about having an end cap aboard ship, Flaxwell felt unfeasibly pleased to see the dopey former military operative’s face grinning at him hopefully. ‘*How did he ever make Captain?*’ He asked himself. “Welcome to the club.” He said to Luke.

So it was a rather pleased alien that joined the out-of-era earplugs as they traversed the Fred Ricketts Tunnel of Joy...



He did, however, worry about what the copper tubing at the base of the walls was conveying. He hoped it wasn’t gas: he hated gas; particularly interstellar gas and intestinal gas.

A short while later Sergeant Wetpatch Wilton stood beside his friend and colleague Jo Frayzer and four other non-commissioned officers and wondered who was unsealing the stockade gate...



"Hey maybe Magnuss was having a joke with us." Jo offered, though with little enthusiasm. "Now he's back to let us out."

Wetpatch didn't think so. He said as much. He favoured the idea that it had been the act of some prankster who looked remarkably like Magnuss, who had been responsible for effectively eradicating the museum's first line of ground defence. He just prayed that it wasn't Cushions Smethwyke punching the code on the other side of the wall. The Seventh weren't popular with the curator elite: this debacle he would rather keep to himself. So, when two complete strangers and an end cap waltzed in, he was utterly gobsmacked...



“Captain Wilton, is it?” Gideon said.

“Sergeant.” Wetpatch corrected him. He thought that Gideon appeared surprised at this.

“Sergeant?” The wearer of the world’s silliest hat responded. “Oh well, you’ll make Captain eventually. Perhaps as a reward for what you are about to do today.”

Wetpatch peered at all three strangers. He had a good eye for faces; he knew he’d never seen either of them before. “Is that right?” He said. “And what would that be?”

“Nothing huge.” Luke answered the Sergeant’s question. “Just help save the museum from an insidious threat that has already ensnared the legendary Earplug Brothers.”

“Explain,” Wetpatch responded as he felt his shoulder muscles begin to relax, “about this insidious threat and me making Captain.”

So they did, as they led the troopers out from their temporary and illegal incarceration, but not before stopping off to question why the Sergeant didn’t use his armoured personnel carrier to smash down the gate...



“Oh that.” Wetpatch replied as they breached the portal to the outer parts of Fort Balderdash...





..."that's just for show. We used up all the fuel and ammunition fighting off hyperspace pirate attack craft a while back: there's nothing in the budget to replace it."

Sergeant Frayzer summarised: "It don't work." He said.

Stopping off at the Kitty Adams round-ish room of meditation, Flaxwell explained who he and Gideon were, why they were there, all about the Medusa Compound, and showed him the footage he'd shot of Magnuss and Hair-Trigger locking the soldiery in. He also told them that the A.I was likely tracking Magnuss, so it could guide them to him...



He also mentioned the simplest way that the A.I believed they could de-brainwash Magnuss and Company.

Once the military had made off upon their mission, the trio of out-of-towners proceeded to the Dan Power building, which Gideon had/would visited/visit during his tenure at the university that had yet to be built or inaugurated...



“Hmmm, yeah,” Flaxwell said appreciatively, “it’s...er...very yellow. Was it always this yellow? Or should I say, will it always be this yellow?”

Truth be told, Gideon was somewhat disappointed: in his era the Dan Power had been coloured a delightful lilac and swathed in Wisteria: this yellow reminded him of bile. However any further thoughts upon the insignificant subject were interrupted by Luke nudging his elbow and saying:

“Hang on, what’s this then? Two weirdos off the starboard bow.”

All three turned to regard the apparition...



“Hello.” They said as one.

“I’m Quentin Hearthrob.” The uglier earplug of the pair announced.

“And I’m Atcherly Speekin.” The other introduced himself.

Once more in unison, they added, as though they were applying for a job, “we’re ace fighter aircraft pilots, whom, unlike many ace fighter pilots, have actually seen real combat and shot our enemies down in flames, whilst surviving ourselves – intact and ready for another aerial punch-up.”

They then produced flying helmets from behind their backs and donned them.

Flaxwell was slightly amused. “I didn’t know we were recruiting.” He said gently to the pair that he thought were clearly fruitcakes standing before him.





However Gideon was less dismissive. “Wait a minute, I know these guys.” He said. “I’ve read documented evidence of their battle in the sky above Worstworld – when it was still a doomed planet. They did some bombing stuff too on Earth, I seem to recall. They’d make very useful allies – assuming they have access to an attack craft of some variety.”

“We still have the old Ship Number Fifteen Scout Craft.” Quentin and Atcherly spoke as one. “It’s ready to fly at a moment’s notice.”

Flaxwell was now interested. “Keep your helmets handy, boys,” he said. “Don’t be surprised if the museum’s A.I puts out a call for your services.”

This pleased the two pilots immeasurably...





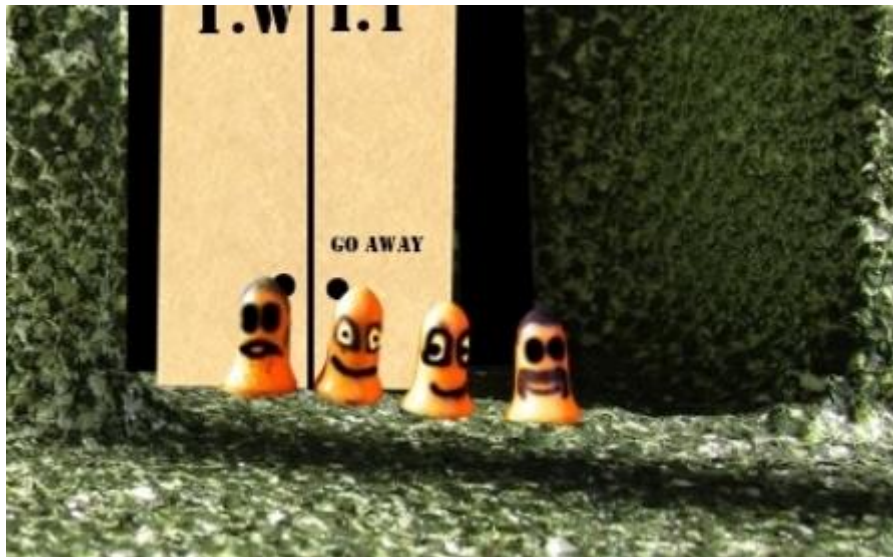
“Yes Sir!” They said as the heels of their flying boots snapped together like castanets. “We’ll be there, don’t you fret. No worries pal. We’re on the case.”

Meanwhile the A.I was ‘keeping tabs’ as instructed...



Its sensors soon detected abnormal behaviour from some normally law-abiding citizens. Someone was trying to pick the lock of Swottan Hetty. Further, upon

closer inspection of those sensor read-outs, the A.I was able to determine that those responsible were none other than those Flaxwell, Gideon, and Luke were pursuing: the remaining four Earplug Brothers!



Instantaneously a message was forwarded to the Seventh Cavalry patrol. Almost as instantaneously, two members of the patrol spotted their quarry...



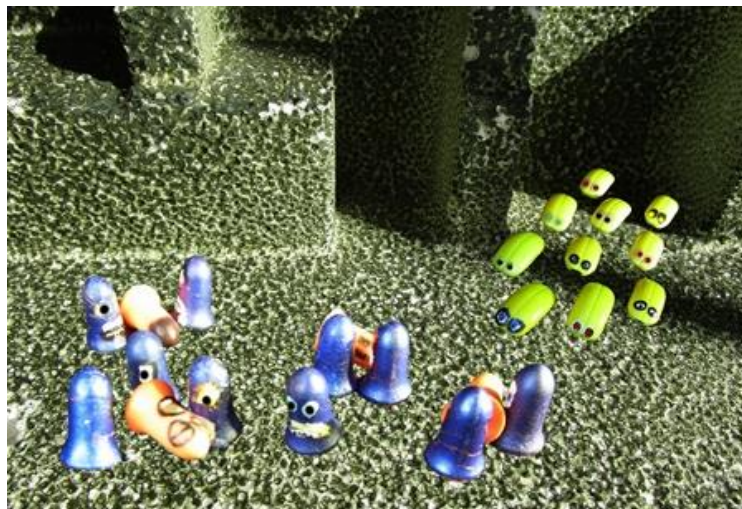
“Oi, you lot,” Private Fluster bellowed, “Get over here.”

“Hey, man,” the laconic Valentine replied, “aint nothing going down here. We’re just doing the funky hero guy strut, know what I mean? We’s just out strolling.”

“That’s right.” Chester said through a cheerful smile, “I mean, if you can’t trust the Earplug Brothers, who *can* you trust?”

It was clear, even to someone with the limited intellect of Private Fluster and his comrade, that the Earplug Brothers were manoeuvring the two cavalry-plugs into a position where they would be unable to defend themselves from a totally unexpected attack from four of the most famous heroes that the museum had ever produced. Of course what Rudi, Valentine, Chester, and Miles didn’t know was that other cavalry-plugs awaited their arrival around the corner. That there would be no fight today: there would be a darned good, old-fashioned, beating up.

Using their plugmutts to fill a hole in the Earplug Brother’s flank, Sergeant Wetpatch Wilton led his troop into a very one-sided battle...



“Sorry, Chester,” he said as he karate-chopped one of the twins in the throat. “Sorry, Miles,” he added as he poked the other twin in the eye...





“It’s for your own benefit, long-term,” he assured Valentine as he knocked his ‘shades’ from his eyes and punched him in the nose.

“You’ll thank me, when this is all over.” He informed Rudi as he kicked him right up the arse. “It’s just that the only way to break the mesmeric wave conditioning is by beating it out of you – even if that means beating you senseless.



Inside the control room of TWIT headquarters, Swottan Hetty, Major Flaccid heard the commotion outside...



“What’s all that biffing and whacking I can hear?” He asked of his associates in the quasi-military organisation.



“That was definitely an ‘aaargh’ I heard then.” One of them replied.

“Sound like,” Nature Beast said in usual simplistic speech pattern, “big scrap. Nature Beast like big scrap: we go join big scrap?”

Already Flaccid’s tendency to cowardice surfaced. “Not so sure about that, Nature Beast,” he replied, “but I think we’re duty-bound to investigate. Okay boys; follow me.”

Chester hadn’t enjoyed a single moment of the fight so far. Now the situation worsened when a grizzled sergeant tried to squash him into a crack betwixt the ground and the bottom of the gnarly wall...



Valentine and Miles had also been dragged into a convenient corner and given a good kicking...



It was while the same grizzled sergeant was attempting a drop-kick to Chester's head that the members of TWIT arrived on scene. Wetpatch went to intercept...



As he did so, one of the cavalry-plugs thought he spotted the spark of returning individuality on the swollen countenance of Rudi...





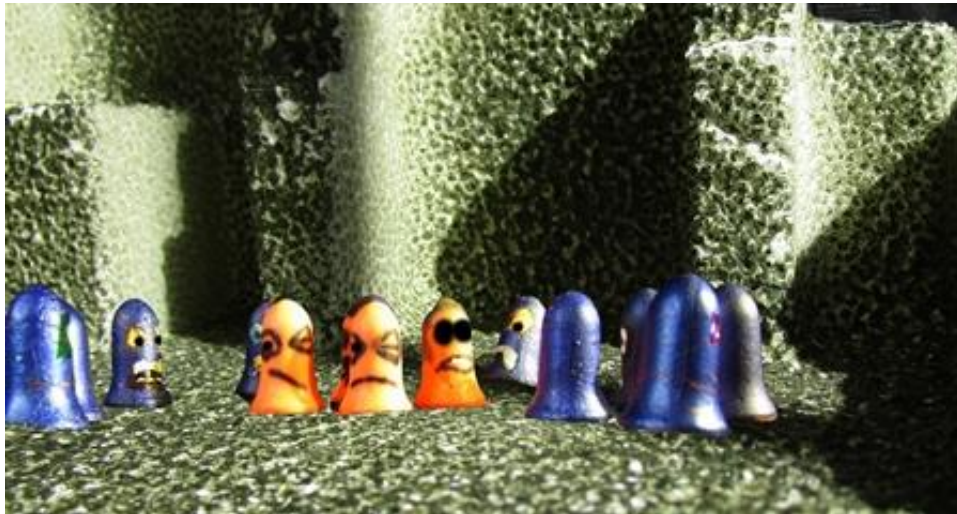
“Rudi?” He said whilst holding back a right cross to the jaw. “Rudi, is that you?”

Rudi peered through the slightly better of his eyes. “Right now, sergeant,” he groaned, “I’ll be whoever you darned well want: just stop hitting me.”

Flaccid wasn’t fooled for a second by Wetpatch’s resulting utter nonsense to his inquiry – claiming that the Seventh Cavalry had been supplied with animated crash test dummies, which they were testing to destruction for the manufacturer. However, and despite Nature Beast’s presence, he didn’t feel inclined to get into a fight with a bunch of immigrant troopers from Worstworld. He’d been there: he knew how tough that planet could make its natives. So it was a relieved Sergeant who watched the TWIT group turn sharply about and re-enter Swottan Hetty...



He was even more relieved when he discovered that the treatment had proved successful. Rudi had even managed to regain his sunglasses...



All four Earplug Brothers were sore, but basically undamaged, and very glad to be silicon-based life-forms. They even managed some smiles as the cavalry escorted them from the scene, to the infirmary...



“So you just saved us from being a bunch of saboteurs, huh?” Rudi said to Wetpatch. “I guess we owe you one. But, hey, what about our middle bro, Magnuss: aint he one of the bad guys too?”

“Someone else is taking care of Magnuss and Hair-Trigger.” Wetpatch replied. “Well at least I hope they are.”

### Chapter Ten

In the rented offices deep within the Civic Centre, the leading catheter cap rushed in from the corridor. To the guard robots he said:



“Something really weird has happened: I’m getting reports that a gang of ruffians have beaten up the Earplug Brothers. Four of them are on their way to the hospital...”



Red sentinel robots are not the sort to show surprise: these were no exception.

“That leaves two operatives still...er...operative.” One of them said, but wished it had said it better. “Do not concern yourself.”

Meanwhile, on one of the main thoroughfares, Flaxwell and Gideon were gaining more attention than they would have liked...



Even sewage workers on their way to a spill in a Café Puke gave them some distance and a sidelong look.

Also meanwhile, one of the subjects of the off-worlder's search had partaken of a coffee...



...and now made her way to the catacombs in which she visited the more unfortunate citizens who lived down there in various forms of misery.

The earplug responsible for the gate into the catacombs warned Hair-Trigger off...



Normally his warning would have had no effect whatsoever. After all she visited the unfortunates once a week on a regular basis; but today she found herself feeling at odds with her character. It felt as if she were merely going

through the motions; that she should be doing something far more important. Of course she kept this to herself. But she didn't want to disturb her husband, whom she assumed was entertaining the Pong Sisters by breaking wind in the pool...



...so she proceeded on her self-appointed mission...



But when she came across the mad female, Slippi Banister, seated as she always was on an intersection of stone-built corridors, singing at the top of her voice, "Golly, gee, what's become of me, I've fallen down the rhubarb tree!", which was then followed by the arrival, from behind a pile of cardboard boxes

of the former champion archer, Horace Bangle, who had, many years past, shot himself in the head, and who subsequently had refused hospital treatment because he believed that the arrow would eventually work its way loose, Hair-Trigger decided to leave.

Something similar must have occurred to Magnuss, because by the time Hair-Tigger had returned to the surface, Magnuss was waiting for her. Together they made a phone call to someone neither of them knew...



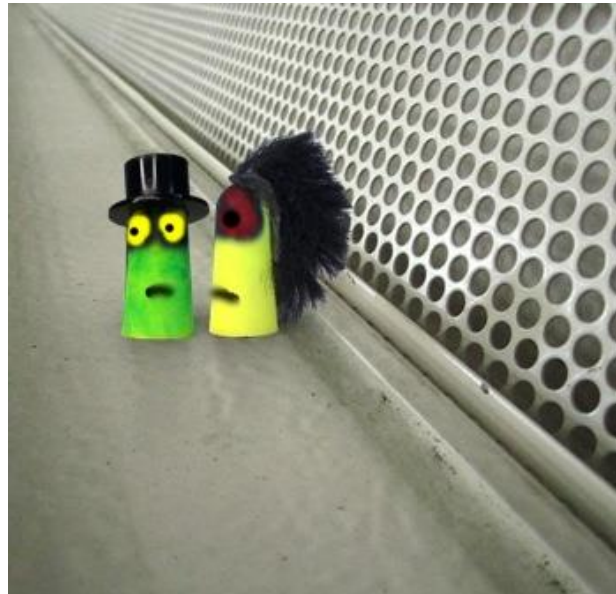
But they didn't question this, because they had no idea they'd been brainwashed.

Of course the A.I had been monitoring all communications. When it heard the instructions that the married couple had received, it nearly blew a gasket...





Flaxwell and Gideon had taken to the quieter corridors, when they received the news...



“There’re two of them.” Flaxwell pointed out needlessly. “There’re two of us. Even if we catch them, how are we gonna beat them senseless?”

Gideon didn’t know what to say: so he said nothing and stared off into the distance and hoped it would all go away.

Meanwhile (again) Magnuss and Hair-Trigger had arrived at the gate that led to the Nul-space power generator. They were met with passive resistance...



The A.I experienced two negative revelations. One: it doesn't matter how high-tech the lock upon a door, a former bounty hunter will have encountered something similar in his/her career and will circumvent it. Two: that the A.I itself had overplayed its hand by anticipating the red sentinel's secondary target and despatched a team of RoboSecGuas to defend the dormant Tunnel Temporale...



Already they had captured a graffiti artist, but in doing so had alerted the enemy that the security forces were aware that the museum was under attack. Had the A.I access to the internal CCTV cameras of the Civic Centre, this hypothesis would have been confirmed by the arrival of the Chancellor...



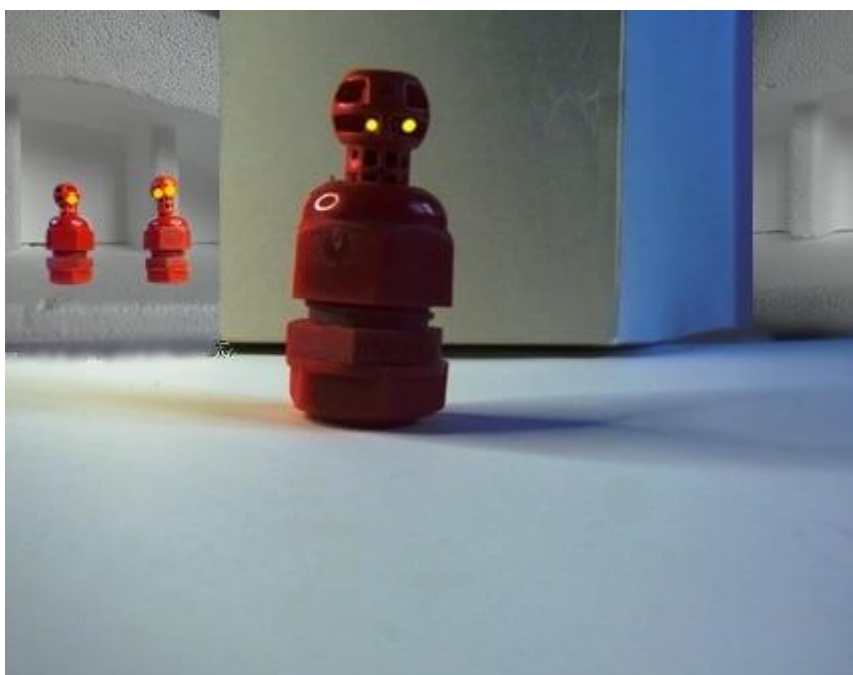
“I thank you for your updates – even the minutia,” it said to the two robots that greeted it, “however I feel it appropriate that I visit, in person at this difficult juncture.”

“Quite so,” one underling replied, “I think they’re on to us.”

It was at this particular moment that the A.I finally convinced its opposite number in the Ciudad de Droxford to allow access to the Civic Centre CCTV...



..what it saw was the Chancellor (though of course it wasn't recognised as such) exploring the perimeter of the robot-controlled city, which wasn't much...



“This is it?” It growled electronically. “The total sum of our effort so far? And we still don’t know the identity of those who oppose us! This is very disappointing. Where did we go wrong? Surely the plan is flawless! I’m going to look like a total twonk for this. Ah-ha, but we still have Magnuss Earplug and his supposedly lovely wife at our command.”

With that the Chancellor returned to the office and instructed the robots to continue with (what it termed) their vengeance weapon.

Magnuss and Hair-Trigger were now deep inside the facility that housed the Nul-space generator...



But it wasn’t that wondrous device they sought: no, it was something much smaller and infinitely more dangerous.

Flaxwell, Gideon, and Luke had no idea what the former heroes’ plans were for the Nul-space generator; but it was a fair guess it wasn’t a fancy dress picnic. Having been given special access to the facility they now raced on (what they hoped) was a collision course with Magnuss and Hair-Trigger...





Meanwhile the incense cones, swiftly judging which way the winds of war were blowing, decided to act like rats in a sinking ship...



The same thought had occurred to the catheter caps. The difference in the two species being decency: the catheter caps had the *decency* to tell the red sentinel robots they were leaving...

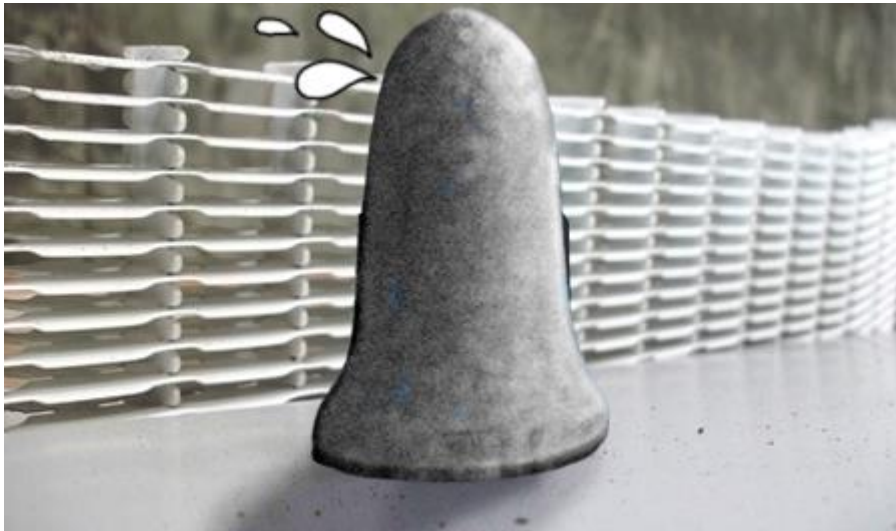


“This is our last report, okay?” Their representative said as he backed towards the door. “You don’t need us anymore; so we’re...you know...out of here. Good luck.”

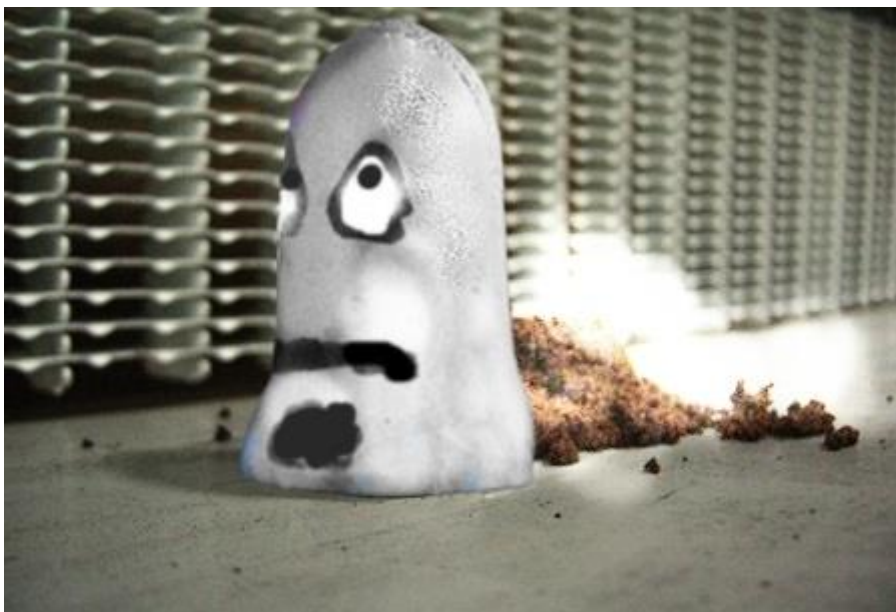
Then they too were gone...



Mister Zinc was more akin to the incense cones. In fact he'd already made his break and could now be seen racing across a pedestrian walkway...



He might have made it all the way to the other side, but (because of the blandness of the food supplied to him in the watchtower) he'd been stuffing himself all night with chocolate bars that he'd stolen from the vending machine in the corridor outside the rented office. The inevitable result presented itself about mid-distance across the bridge...

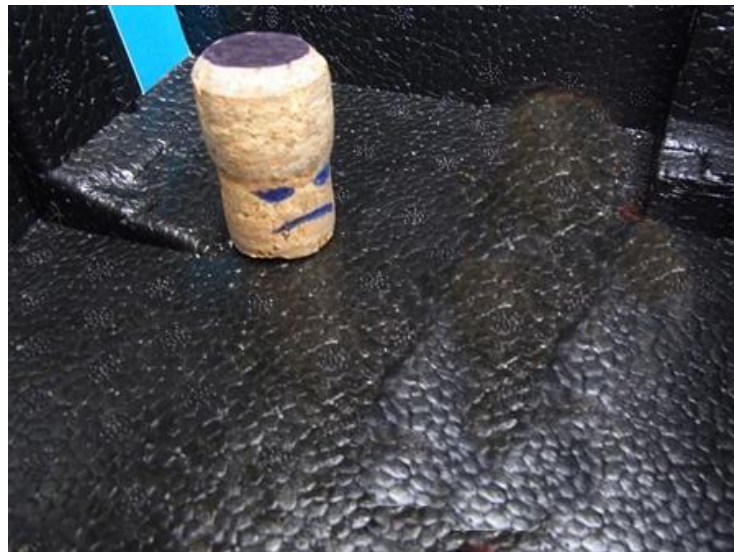


He sighed: most people required a robotic mesmeric wave in order to poop themselves: he could do it all alone.

"A rare talent," he said to himself, "that I could do quite nicely without."



Ballington Cork could also read the metaphorical runes. Unlike the others, he wasn't content to merely flee. He took all the data pertinent to the Medusa Compound first...



This was unwise: the museum's A.I had witnessed the sleight of hand; it would make sure the act would come back to haunt the devious fellow.

Those who lived in the bowels of the museum were being treated to the result of Zinc's bothersome interior organs. Not for no reason was Zinc known at school as Mister Poophispants. Everyone thought he would grow out of it, but, even as an adult, when the pressures of life threatened his secretly fragile psyche, it was always the same result...





“Yuk, you’re disgusting, man: real distasteful and a discredit to your species.” One annoyed individual snarled, “I’m a former professor who has fallen on hard times: I know all about people like you. You were probably the subject of one of my experiments. Get the heck outta here!”

Meanwhile Flaxwell, Gideon, and Luke had arrived upon the viewing platform of the Nul-space generator...



Straining his eyes, a gasping Flaxwell said, “Do you see them?”

Luke’s keen eyesight spotted them first. “Over there,” he whispered, lest he give their presence away to the zombie-like earplugs, “reaching for something that’s labelled ‘Auto-Destruct’.”

Despite being programmed by the mesmeric wave and only half-aware of her surroundings, Hair-Trigger was horrified to discover where she now stood. The pit below the shaft upon which they perched precariously appeared bottomless. She said as much...



“No worries.” Magnuss replied as he reached across to throw the auto destruct lever, “this shaft will only begin turning if someone needs more power. It’s nowhere near coffee break right now: there’s absolutely no reason for anyone to need more power. Calm yourself and allow me to concentrate. Just one more centimetre...”

At that precise moment Flaxwell said, “A.I: more power required – and fast!”

The following moment saw the shaft turn suddenly and the married couple thrown to an almost certain death...



...their bodies to become battered and biffed by the pipes that criss-crossed the machine's huge interior air well.

The watching trio looked away in horror and reproach. Flaxwell felt Gideon's accusing gaze turn upon him...



"I don't believe it." He said to himself. "I killed Magnuss and Hair-Trigger Earplug!"

"How will history judge you?" Gideon added – rather meanly, or so thought Luke.

### Chapter Eleven

Ballington appeared to have made good his escape with all the data concerning the Medusa Compound. Already his RD125 landing craft had powered its way to the outer marker buoy...

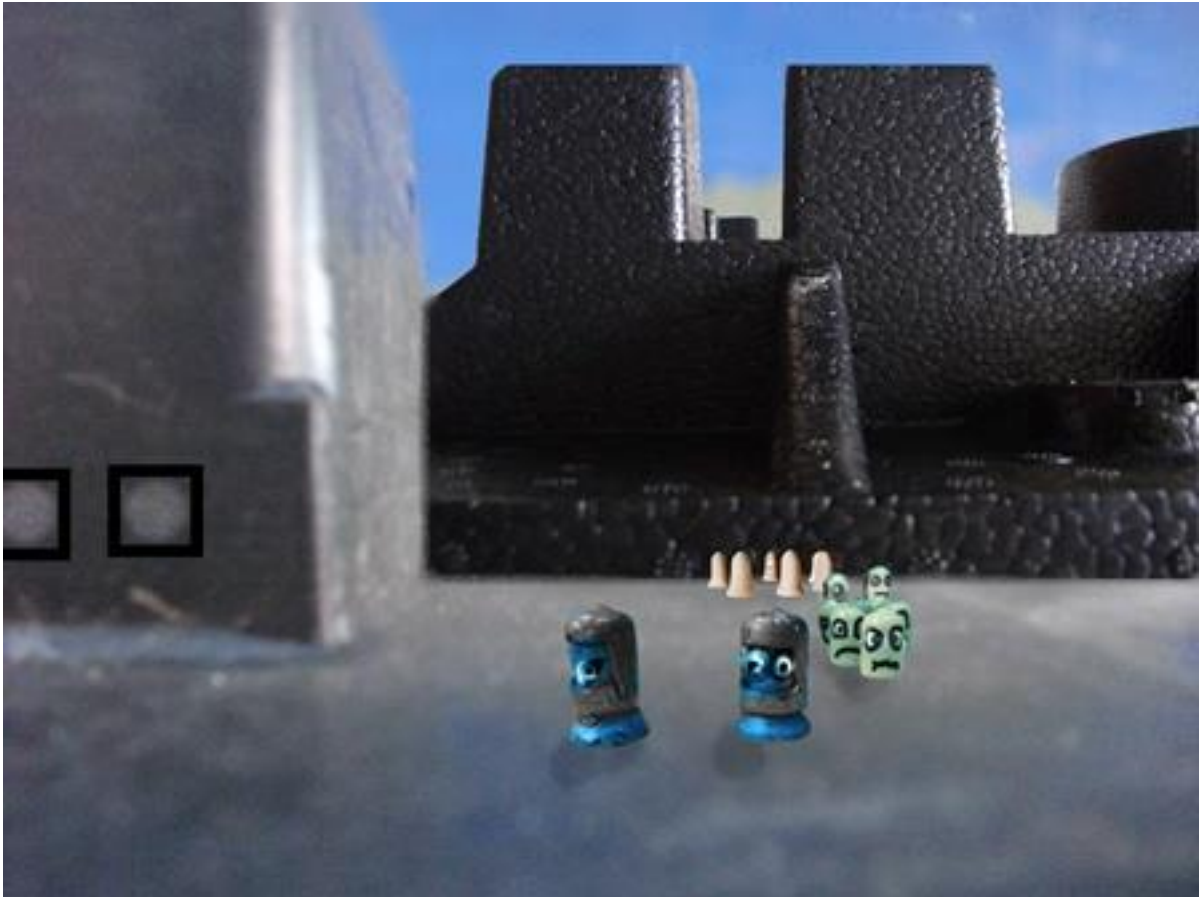


The A.I recognised that the situation was less than optimal. Immediately the call was put through to Quentin Hearthrob and Atcherly Speekin, who responded with utmost alacrity...



...dashing from their underground bunker - their flying helmets already donned and ready for action. Without a break in their stride they allowed their end cap engineers to join them as they charged across the school playground...





...thence into the rented lock-up garage, where the engineers kick-started the twin motors and the pilots began their abbreviated pre-flight check...



Meanwhile, at the bottom of the air well that helped cool the Nul-space generator, first Hair-Trigger, then Magnuss, discovered what lay beyond the dark square to which they had spent so long falling...

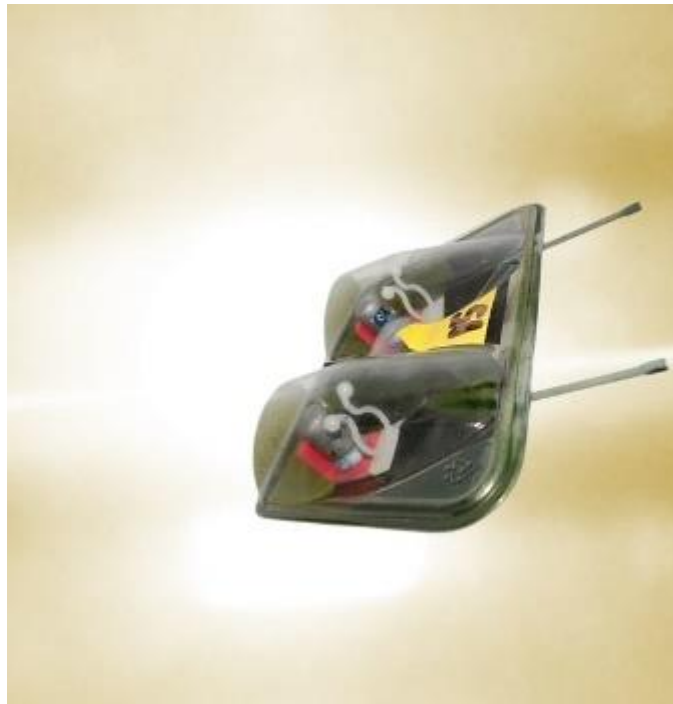


Battered and bloodied by the multitude of impacts that thankfully slowed their fall, the swollen Magnuss and the bloated Hair-Trigger helped each other to find a way out of their predicament...



“Help,” Magnuss bellowed loudly into Hair-Trigger’s ear, “this is Magnuss and his formerly lovely wife: we’re stuck in the Nul-space generator: send help – preferably with bandages and some paracetamol.”

Above ground, Hearthrob and Atcherly had launched their ageing vessel...



With the A.I guiding them, they quickly overhauled the much slower landing craft...



Atcherly made a report: "The cork's made it to Henhouse Island." He yelled into his microphone. "He's about to enter the harbour."

While the A.I considered this information, the RD125 rounded the harbour wall and proceeded to dock...



Ballington couldn't wait to climb the rickety ladder to the quayside. Once there it would require a mere dash across the intervening veldt...





...to the sanctuary of his suspended animation chamber, in which he was immune to prosecution, because (obviously) he no longer posed a threat to society.

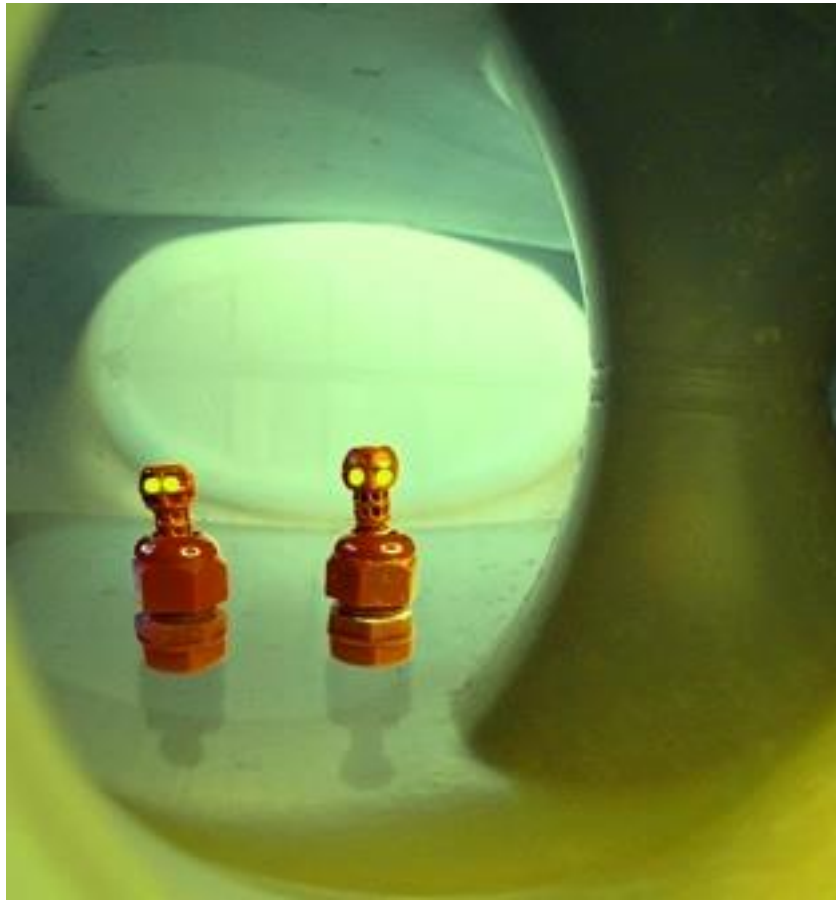
Zinc had similar ideas as his stolen Flying Bathtub carried him across the mountains away from the Museum of Future Technology...



Inside the rented office, the relentlessly watchful guards reported events to their superiors in the future...



The Chancellor, having got the heck out of the Civic Centre as quickly as its drive units would propel it, received the news...



“Blast and damnation,” It said to its associate in a most un-cyber manner, “if this campaign against the earplugs were likened to a turtle, the aforementioned turtle would be laying upon its back with all four flippers flaying the air ineffectually.”

“How insightful of you, Chancellor,” the associate replied. “And imaginative. If I ever write your Existence Story, I will include that almost poetic line of dialogue.”

“Thank you,” The Chancellor responded gracefully. To the operatives in the past it issued this order: “The special military operation is concluded: you may return to this era.”

Meanwhile in the era that the final two red sentinel robots still existed, Quentin Hearthrob had received an order. He banked the scout craft and began a run towards Henhouse Island...



“Hah,” Ballington scoffed from within the presumed safety of his suspended animation chamber, “you’re bluffing: you can’t touch me – not whilst I’m in suspended animation.”



Then a thought so horrible it made his hands begin sweating and his bowels to quivering struck. The light above him still shone green. Only when he was

bathed in a red light could he be deemed comatose and therefore unassailable. He fumbled for the controls. *He must sleep!* However, before the circuit could be closed, Atcherly released the scout craft's single piece of ordnance. He didn't know what it was exactly; they all looked the same to him. However, when it exploded it was with a lovely shade of blue...



Then, moments later, both pilots realised that the large finned object that had been residing in the scout craft's meagre bomb bay all these years, was a thermonuclear device...





“Whee!” They shouted as the craft shook with the onrush of the inevitable shockwave. “Didn’t know we had one of those: what a careless pair of twaddles we are!”

In the Café Puke closest to the blast, a slight tremor went largely unnoticed...



However, in the nearby Skanki Kaffe, the more intellectual customers that frequented a bar that served almost half-decent coffee recognised the fantastic explosion for what it was...



“Radioactive fallout.” One of them said. “It’s going to put up the cost of home insurance.”

“Won’t do a lot for my runner beans either.” Another grumbled.

Of course those watching events unfold upon a huge live TV screen cheered uproariously at Ballington Cork’s spectacular demise...



“That Rupert Piles really is good at his job.” Gobby said as he stood near the front. “Him and his camera don’t miss a thing.”

Of course Mister Zinc knew nothing of this. He was too busy guiding his vessel on an approach flightpath to Lemon Stone...



So, ten minutes later, having stowed the flying bathtub behind a pile of logs in a lean-to on the rear of the stone-built construction the would-be conqueror retook his place beside Blue in the watchtower window...



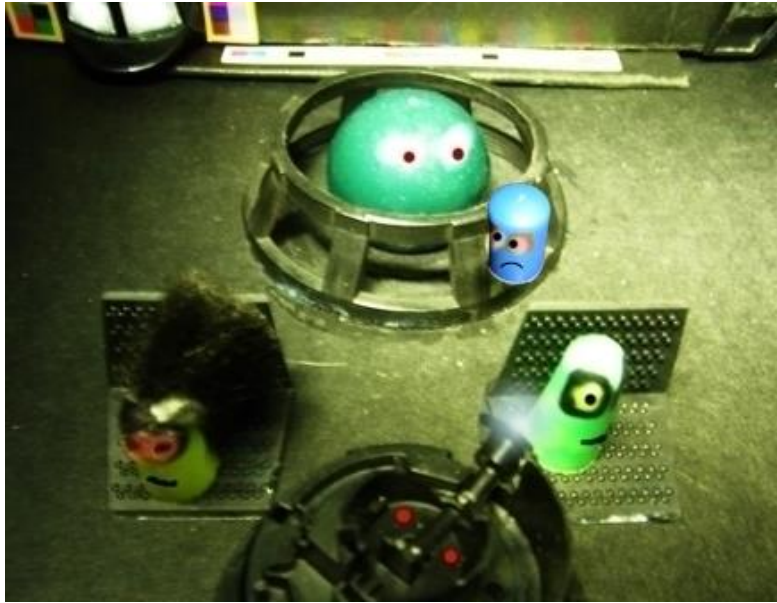
“It wasn’t my fault.” He said to Blue’s unspoken question. “Yeah, okay I was a little slow in recognising the Hoalnite Healiweelium for what it really was: but other than that my performance was flawless. I just played for a bad team.”

“Do you fancy a stir fry tonight?” Blue inquired. “Not sure what the meat is: might be mammoth.”

“Lovely,” Zinc replied, “but go easy on the soy sauce, eh?”

### Epilogue

Unwilling to pollute the time line any further, Flaxwell and Gideon slipped away and re-boarded the *Zephyr*. Cast adrift from his military life, the former Captain of the Guard joined them. But it was a sombre mood that entered the command deck with them...



Naturally the Oracle inquired after their downcast expressions and lethargic body language. Flaxwell explained that they had been directly responsible for badly injuring four of the Earplug Brothers and killing Magnuss and Hair-Trigger.

“Is that what you think you’ve done?” The green ball said with a smile in its tone. “You presumptive bunch of twerps. Look at this.”

Oracle then tuned into a Rupert Piles broadcast that clearly showed five Earplug Brothers, plus Hair-Trigger mounting a stage...





They all looked puffy and slightly mal-treated. All but Hair-Trigger sported sun glasses, presumably to hide black or swollen eyes. But they all stood on their own feet and appeared to be breathing.

Flaxwell and Gideon couldn't have been more pleased; relieved; joyous, even. It was palpable. Luke took the opportunity to discover the galley...



“I’ll see if I can find something suitable with which we might celebrate.” Flaxwell and Gideon couldn’t tear their gaze from the screen as Rudi made a stentorian speech about ridding the museum of its enemies and making sure they never came back. He also took a moment to praise the unknown trio of strangers who had been predominantly responsible for saving himself; his brothers; Hair-Trigger; and the whole darned Museum of Future Technology.

Eventually Flaxwell responded to Luke: “Yeah, go for it,” he said as he cast an eye over his shoulder, “Just make sure it doesn’t include Hoalnite Healiweelium.”

So it was a far more cheerful Scroton Five that lifted off unnoticed; then shook off the bonds of Earth’s gravity...



“Where to, guys?” The pilot inquired.

“Well,” Gideon replied thoughtfully, “we have no idea how that video that brought us here ever came into existence. What was it about? Was it specifically designed to get us in the here and now to do what we did? Are we mere pawns perhaps?”

“That’s a lot of questions.” Oracle observed. “Unfortunately I can’t answer any of them.”

“If I knew what you were talking about,” Luke said into the reflective silence, “I’d probably agree.”

“Okay,” Flaxwell responded cheerfully, “better strap your selves down: we’re going on a little trip through time. First stop: the Sun!”



The End

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