

The Wrong Stuff
M T McGuire

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For
Mark Jackson and Linda Baxter.

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minute panic and all.

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understanding.

The Wrong Stuff, K'Barthan Trilogy: Part 2

*The Pan of Hamgee is not a natural knight in shining armour. Yet he has escaped from police
custody in K'Barth, switched realities and foiled Lord Vernon's attempt to kidnap Ruth, the
Chosen One from the Festival Hall. Pretty good, he thinks.*

*However, Ruth thinks otherwise. Being pursued by Lord Vernon is bad enough. Now,
thanks to The Pan, she's on the run. They are both alive, of course, but with Lord Vernon on
their tail neither of them can be sure how long for.*

*To save her life The Pan must introduce Ruth, the woman of his dreams, to the person
prophesied to be the man of hers. And he knows he must do it fast – before Lord Vernon finds
her. But, the gentleman in question is in hiding and no-one knows where. Only The Pan can
find him, if he can bring himself to unite them.*

[Who is M T McGuire](#)

M T McGuire grew up on a windy down, but now lives in Bury St Edmunds, in Suffolk, with a partner, a son and a large hairy cat.

At 43, this author still checks all unfamiliar wardrobes for a gateway to Narnia. None to report, yet. Boring, huh?

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THE WRONG STUFF

By M T McGUIRE

Chapter 1

There was a massive bang and the window exploded in a cloud of small, white British-Safety-Standard-sized pieces. A silver sports car flashed through the shower of glittering crystals and landed with a squeal of tyres on the polished wooden floor. Yeek, thought Ruth, the people running the Festival Hall weren't going to like that.

She was ahead of everyone because she'd been running to get to the sponsor's reception first, and she froze. If this was a bomb attack she was dead. The seconds lengthened. No explosion. She hadn't realised she'd stopped breathing until she breathed out.

The hole in the window was quite high up, suggesting that whatever had come through it was flying, but the thing in the foyer was definitely a car – Ruth's dream car, to be precise – a type of nineteen-sixties Lotus, a small and shiny convertible in two tone shades of light and dark metallic grey.

That was a conundrum in itself, since it had just smashed the front of the Festival Hall. Was that right? Shouldn't the Festival Hall have smashed the front of the Lotus – fibreglass versus tempered safety glass? Ruth would have put her money on the glass, every time.

When she turned round, she realised that the people around her were lying down. She was a lone figure standing in a sea of sensibly prone others, except for two men heading along the top of the stairs and picking their way through the prostrate forms around her. They were big, unusually pale, wearing grey uniforms, jackboots, sunglasses and swords and – yep that was definitely a gun one of them was holding. It had to be, didn't it? Now, at the worst possible time, they had to turn up; the strange pair of men who'd been following – or was that stalking her? – for three months.

“Why me?” she whispered. “What the hell do they want?” She was pretty sure they'd tried to kidnap her the previous time she'd seen them. They'd cornered her on the last tube home and only backed off when one of her neighbours turned up. He wasn't here tonight, though, and they were.

Where could she run? The car was barring her only escape route.

The driver stood up in his seat. Still no explosion. If it was a bomb it seemed it was a dud. Was he anything to do with them?

“Ruth!” he shouted, followed by something incomprehensible. He was wearing a cloak and a hat, but he didn't have a beard. In fact, he looked more like a student playing a prank than a bomber. Very strange. He shouted some more gibberish, which also contained the word ‘Ruth’ at regular intervals.

“Please God, let there be somebody else here called Ruth,” she thought, though some sixth sense knew, with cringing inevitability, that he was talking to her.

He finally managed some English: “Ruth! I'm a little teapot!” This was less than inspiring and in spite of her fear, she wanted to giggle. He had a lilting accent that she couldn't place.

She looked around for her boss, with whom she'd been sitting and Lucy, her flat mate, who was there somewhere because Ruth had given her a free ticket. However, the mass of bodies on the floor was beginning to stir. No chance of recognising anyone there. She could see the two scary sci-fi guys, though, and as they saw her looking at them they broke into a jog. There was no mistaking where they were heading. Towards her. She could see the Festival Hall's security people talking on their radios, and good, there were the blue lights on Blackfriars Bridge. The police would arrive soon, but not soon enough; the scary big men with the uniforms were going to get to her first.

Not that. Not them.

The driver of the car leapt out and ran up the stairs towards her.

“Ruth,” he said.

Who on earth was he? She'd never seen him before in her life. He smiled and despite her unease she noticed it was the kind of smile she liked.

“I’m a little teapot,” he said.

He stood on the step below her and patted his pockets as if looking for something – a gun? No. Not the type. A gun wouldn’t go with that smile. What then? He made writing motions with one hand. Ah yes, a pen. She didn’t have one, and presumably neither did he, because he gave up and started waving his hands in the universal sign language gesture for ‘no-no’ although he was clearly foreign so Ruth realised it could have meant ‘yes-yes’ for all she knew. He pointed at the sci-fi blokes and that was the moment she looked properly into his face and noticed his expression of pure panic. Hmm. The hand waving was probably ‘no-no’ then.

“I’m a little teapot,” he said and he grabbed her wrist.

No. Absolutely not. A step too far. She gave him what she hoped was a look of supreme disdain and yanked her arm forcefully from his grasp. She didn’t know what made her turn round again but the sci-fi men were much closer now and as she watched, one of them raised his gun. The world began to move at half speed, as slowly, deliberately he aimed it at her and fired. Not bullets, bolts of red light. A laser, for heaven’s sake! Where were these people from? The round hit the steps by her feet and the stone bubbled. Yikes. Ruth decided she wasn’t going to be there for the second shot. She turned her attention to the man with the hat. Could she knock him down? No.

In front of her, the slightly – but only slightly – more appealing of two unattractive choices held out his hand, smiled and raised one eyebrow as if to say, ‘Shall we?’ God in heaven. Oh well, on the up side – a big plus point – he didn’t seem to have a gun. Anyway, he’d arrived in a Lotus and he’d broken a plate glass window with it. It would go yards, if he was lucky, before it fell to bits; she’d be able to escape at the next red light. She took his outstretched hand and ran down the stairs with him. Together they jumped into the car, neither of them stopping to open the door.

“I don’t know who you are but you look safer than them. Of course, that’s not saying much.”

“I’m a little teapot,” said the stranger but with all the emphasis on the wrong syllable, as if he was saying something else.

“There’s me thinking you were a man. You’d better have an excellent explanation for this, later,” she warned him. He smiled at her.

“I’m a little teapot,” he said. She got that one, something along the lines of ‘don’t worry I have’ she reckoned but rather more expansively put.

He gunned the engine and, tyres giving off a plume of smoke, the Lotus squealed round in a doughnut. He pressed some kind of button on the dash and as it catapulted itself forward, it rose up, too, as if it was taking off. Oh brilliant. It was. She peered over the side, watching in alarm as wings morphed out of its sills and it flew straight back out of the hole in the window it had made coming in. So much for running away at the first red light. Now what? Ruth wondered if the big guys with the guns mightn’t have been a safer bet after all. She glanced over at her chauffeur and he smiled.

He gestured to her seat belt. “I’m a little teapot,” he said. Yes, that seemed like a good idea.

He turned left and headed along the river. Ruth was silent for a while. She needed time to think. She was wearing evening dress, shoes that were decorative rather than functional and all she had in her handbag was a mobile, a credit card and little cash – oh yes, and a small package which the old man who lived down her street, Sir Robin Get, had given to Lucy to take to the concert and give to her. Apparently she would know what it was for but so far, Ruth didn’t. Then again, she hadn’t actually opened it and she daren’t now she was a couple of hundred feet up in an open-top car, in case it blew away. Sir Robin, the neighbour who had saved her from the scary big dudes with the guns, the only person she had told about them other than Lucy. Sir Robin with his I-have-people-who-can-fix-this tone and his invitation to tea, to sort it out. He had told her not to be afraid, that everything was going to be alright and she’d believed him. Now look. She was sitting in a flying car, being pretty much kidnapped

by some bloke in a hat who she'd never met but who, from the way he was behaving, seemed to think they were old friends.

She leaned over the side of the car and below the shiny wing she could see the lights of London. In the dusk, they were beautiful. The warm wind ruffled her hair and she began to feel less scared. She risked another glance at the driver. Ruth would have called him attractive rather than handsome, but he definitely had something that piqued her interest. He was taller than her but not quite tall enough, she'd have put him at about 5 ft 9, reasonably fit by the looks of it – well proportioned, she supposed – broad shouldered but not out-and-out sporty. He had a massive black eye. Someone had clearly thumped him on the nose, too. She was wary but she didn't feel afraid of him the way she knew she should. Strange, if anything he seemed more afraid of her. Perhaps he was just afraid, full stop. He was looking around him for pursuers.

"There might be a police helicopter if it's not busy somewhere else," she said. "Otherwise, I expect we're set, we don't have too many flying cars here in Britain."

"It's not a little teapot," he began. "Ruth," he said excitedly, "I'm... not a little it's teapot... wearing off... I'm a..."

"Are you all there?" she asked.

"Little... nearly... teapot..."

"Hmm."

"It's not a little... car... teapot," he said, "I'm a... it's a little... snurd... teapot." His eyes rolled in exasperation.

"Are you on drugs?" she asked.

He turned in his seat, put one finger on his nose and pointed at her with the other hand, charades style.

"Yes!" he said, turning his attention back to the business of driving with a great deal of relief.

"And you want me to know that?"

"I'm a little... not... teapot... self administered."

"Somebody else drugged you?"

"Mmm hmm." A nod.

They were flying over the City now and below them, Ruth could see a large office block with a helipad on top. She pointed downwards.

"OK. I think it's time you landed this thing so we can have a chat. You have a great deal of explaining to do."

He managed to say, 'mmm' without any mention of teapots and landed the Lotus smoothly on the helipad. For a moment there was no sound but the ticking of the engine as it cooled and the muffled roar of the traffic rising up from the street below. Then he got out of the car and leapt over the bonnet, except she felt the car dip and, if it hadn't been an inanimate object, she would have sworn that he'd failed to leap high enough and had only cleared the bonnet in one piece because the car had ducked. He opened her door with a flourish and she undid her seatbelt and climbed out.

He put out his hand and without thinking properly about what she was doing, she took it and let him lead her over to the edge of the helipad. It was raised a few feet above the roof of the building and below it a couple of yards of concrete ran to the edge of the roof proper, where there was a safety fence. It was there to stop the unwary from falling off, Ruth supposed, but it wouldn't be enough to stop somebody who really wanted to from throwing her off – this man, for example. That said, she was pretty sure his intentions were friendly and that she wasn't in any danger. He seemed too pleased to see her for that, he could hardly stop smiling. He sat down with his legs dangling over the edge of the helipad and she followed suit making sure she kept a few feet's distance between them. He appeared utterly at ease with her which made her relax a little despite stern warnings from the sensible part of her brain about the dangers of running off in space cars with strange men.

He raised an eyebrow and waved a hand at the view in front of them.

"I'm a... nice city you... little tea... have here... pot."

“Thank you,” she said, “nice Zorro hat. Your wheels aren’t bad either.”

He chuckled and took a breath as if to speak but inclined his head in a sort of bow instead. Well, there are only so many ways you can tell somebody you are a little teapot, after all, Ruth thought and he’d probably run out of them. He took his hat off and ruffled his hair with one hand. It stood up. Naturally spiky. No sign of gel. Cool. No, not cool at all, get a grip Ruth. The two of them sat in silence for a moment while she tried to work out what to say and what was going to happen next. She felt disconnected from reality, as if her life was a film and she was sitting in the audience watching, a dangerous sensation because it was stopping her from taking it seriously. He cracked first.

“I’m a little... Arnold when is this... teapot... stuff going to... I’m a little... wear off... teapot?” He stopped. “I’m a... I should... little teapot... explain why I’m a... here little teapot.” He grimaced and shook his head.

“It would help,” said Ruth, “but I can see it’s going to be difficult.”

He was exasperated and angry with himself, too, by the looks of it.

“OK, I have lots of questions, so why don’t I ask the ones which only require ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers?”

A relieved sigh, “I’m a little... alright.”

“Good, and when I’ve asked my questions, you *will* be driving me home, won’t you?”

“I’m a... I will take you... little teapot... wherever you want to go.” Another smile. She looked into his eyes. They were dark blue, so dark they looked almost black, the way normally only brown eyed people’s can. He maintained eye contact for just that little bit too long before blushing and looking down at his hands. Hmm. Ruth wasn’t super-confident about her looks, but in this case the signs were obvious. He fancied her. Oh well, it could be worse. He wasn’t a giant and he hadn’t shot at her and she had to hand it to him, as smiles went, his was pretty engaging. And he had a kind face – those blue, blue eyes had the type of crow’s feet round them which suggested he smiled a lot. Perhaps it was time to try and discover what he wanted?

“You know, my life has become very weird of late,” she said, “Those guys, the no-no ones,” she waved her hands backwards and forwards the way he had done and he nodded, “They’ve been following me for months now.”

“I know,” he said.

“I don’t think you do, not unless you’ve been following me as well. Have you?” she asked him sternly.

He cleared his throat and couldn’t meet her eyes any more. Result! She’d got him bang to rights.

“You have, haven’t you? You’re another scary stalker! You’re just better at it than them!”

“No. I was... I’m a little... Arnold’s Y fronts!” Deep breath. “Sorry. I have to explain and this stupid... teapot... Truth Serum is making it difficult.”

“I’m sorry. When you say, ‘Truth Serum’ that makes me think Secret Police.”

“Then you’re a little... right ... teapot.”

“So. I’m guessing that means you’re in trouble where you’re from, does it?”

He nodded. She eyed him quizzically.

“With the police or someone else?”

“The... teapot... police.”

“And I suppose they’re not very nice because nice policemen don’t tend to use things called Truth Serum.”

Another nod.

“And I’d guess they gave you that black eye.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Are you a revolutionary?”

“No, that would make me an idiot.” Oh, a whole sentence in one! Sarky, too. She was impressed.

“OK then, are you some kind of criminal where you’re from?”

He shrugged and spread his hands when he nodded this time.

“Well, you’re obviously a really crap one. I’m not scared of you at all.”

“I’m a... little... teapot... getaway man,” He looked affronted, “I’m... not... a little... meant to be... teapot... scary. I’m meant to be... a little teapot... scared. Otherwise I’m a little... I won’t be any... teapot... good at running away... I’m a little... will I?”

Ruth giggled, the teapot thing clearly got worse when she wound him up. She shouldn’t be sitting here talking to him like this but amazingly, trapped as she was on the top of a London skyscraper, with no way off and no hope of help, she felt utterly unafraid.

“Is that how getaway men dress?” His outfit was intriguing; elastic sided boots, dark blue canvas jeans, loose paisley silk shirt, tucked in at the waist and unbuttoned at the top. He was wearing a greeny-blue velvet jacket and over the top, a thick dark cloak and the hat. How to sum that up? Mostly back-of-Revolver, a dash of front-of-Help, a modicum of pirate and a sprinkling of Zorro. An odd look, but one that was all his own and one Ruth liked.

“No, I’m a little... that’s how I dress.”

“I see. It’s not a bad look and you’re correct, it’s not scary. So, are you telling me that, right now, you’re meant to be frightened?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“And are you?”

A nod and a disarming smile.

“I’m the one with no clue what’s going on, I thought that was supposed to make me the frightened one.” He shrugged. “Are you scared of me?”

He laughed, put one hand out and wiggled it in a way that was clearly sign language for maybe.

“I don’t think you are.”

More smiling, he raised one eyebrow.

“Quite obviously, no.” Another shrug. “But you *are* a getaway man?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“That’s a criminal.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Then why do I trust you?”

He laughed.

“You are evidently a little—” a deep breath, “a rubbish judge of character... teapot.”

“Not usually,” she gave him her best don’t-mess-with-me stare. There was that smile again. A small part of Ruth wanted to go out of its way to make him smile as much as possible. That was not good. Time for a reality check. He had swept her off her feet, literally – if not figuratively – and driven her through the best bits of London in the soft dusk light, in a flying car, with the top down. There was more than a bit of glamour appeal to this experience and Ruth suspected that the fact the Lotus was the car of her dreams might be clouding her judgement about the man inside it.

“Right then. I know you are probably here illegally, that you have a way cool set of wheels which flies and that you have a very amusing speech impediment.” He chuckled and she was unaccountably pleased to have made him laugh. “Anything else you’d care to tell me?”

He took a deep breath.

“I’m,” Ruth watched with interest as he waited for the urge to declare himself teapot-shaped to subside. “...not from around here,” he finally said.

“Yes. I guessed that. OK, let’s start somewhere simple. What’s your name?”

“I’m The Pan of Hamgee,” he inclined his head to imply a bow, “and I am at your service.”

“I see.” Ruth frowned. The ‘I am at your service’ bit was quite charming, in an old-world way, “What’s your first name?”

“I don’t have one.”

“You mean that’s it?”

He nodded.

“That’s not a name, it’s a title. What do people call you? ‘The?’”

“No. Usually it’s ‘Oi you! Stop! Teapot! Thief!’” Another long pause, “‘Pan of Hamgee’ translates slightly differently, so I suppose in your language, you’d call me ‘The Hamgeean’.”

He was looking shifty again. She knew it! He was lying.

“That sounds like a wrestling hold and it still doesn’t give you a first name. I’m not an ‘oi you’ kind of girl. I can’t say ‘Hi, Hamgeean, how are you?’ It doesn’t go. I’m Ruth Cochrane – don’t you dare laugh at my surname or make one reference to Eddie – so when you want to get my attention calling me ‘Cochrane’ is plain weird. I’m fine with ‘Ruth’ and it follows that, barring cultural differences, there must be something I’d use to talk to you; which you are not fine with, presumably.” She waited but he wasn’t biting. She sighed. “OK, Mister Pan of Hamgee, we’ll have it your way, for now and keep it formal but don’t think you’ve got away with not telling me. I know you’re lying and that means you do have a normal name. Let’s try something else. Why are you here?”

“I’m a... the big guys with the... little... Arnold in the skies! ...teapot... guns are not your friends. I came here to find you before they did.”

“Well done, and thank you – I don’t think the people who run the Festival Hall will be very keen on you, though. In fact, I expect you’ll be had up by the police as soon as they see your car – I should imagine somebody took your number plate.”

He smiled, raised an eyebrow, put one finger up in a wait-a-moment gesture and stood up. She watched as he walked coolly over to the Lotus, leaned in and pressed a button on the dash. There was a gentle electronic whining sound in stereo from the front and back of the car and the number plates revolved. He strolled back and sat down again, closer to her this time, with the air of a man who knows he has done something fairly impressive.

“You just revolved your number plate.”

How annoying was that! She was trying to play it cool, trying very hard not to appear overawed, and to her irritation, it wasn’t working.

“Are you sure you’re not a spy? You have a spy’s car.”

He laughed and, again, she was glad; such a bad sign.

“Very and it’s a snurd. I admit it’s the deluxe model but where I come from most of this stuff is standard.”

Very few ‘teapots’ there, he must be relaxing a little. Bad in some ways but for the sake of coherent conversation, good.

“Stuff like?”

“The aviator and submariner options – everyone has those and all snurds are made of polymorphic metal.”

“Polly what?”

“Polymorphic, it changes shape when you change modes,” he must have noticed her look of incomprehension, “You know, from wings to,” he shrugged, “no wings. It has to, or it’d be full of hinges and rivets and stuff and it’d be too heavy. The metal is preset for each mode so it knows what to do and, of course, if you dent it, it remembers where it should be and goes back.”

“OK, I don’t know if that has been invented yet on Earth, where the hell are you from?”

“K’Barth.”

“That leaves me none the wiser. Are you a space man?”

“Of course not. I’m from Earth, too, the same as you; it’s a different version of reality, parallel but the same planet.”

“Wow!” said Ruth she cast another quick glance at the Lotus. “So, does money work there? Could you take me to your country so I can buy one of those?”

“I don’t know about the money but I think you’d be very unwise to come to my country,” He gave her a rueful smile, “It’s no place for a woman like you.”

Sexist prat, those lovely eyes and all that smiling undone in an instant.

“Meaning, Mister Pan?” she asked acidly.

A long pause.

“Meaning that it’s full of the wrong sort of people and quite a lot of them are after you.”

“Thank you for your reassurance. I assume you mean the scary sci-fi dudes do you?” He looked quizzical. “The no-no blokes, with the uniforms and the laser guns.”

“Amongst others.”

Amongst others? Oh marvellous, who else then? No, beyond one, the ‘who’ wasn’t relevant the big question was, “Why?” she asked him, “Why are all these people after me?”

“Arnold in heaven. Where do I start?”

“Well, you could try the beginning.”

“What if I freak you out?”

“What if? Are you scared I’ll run away? In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m stuck on the top of a skyscraper with you, it’s not like I can go anywhere.”

He shrugged, “You might jump off.”

“I might but I’d die. Why would I want that? I’m not going to kill myself, Mister Pan; this is life, not opera.”

He smiled and there was a hint of something else in his expression – admiration, perhaps?

“You’re not going to like this.” He stopped as if he’d just remembered something and looked at his watch, “Arnold!”

Who?

“Ruth, there’s no time. Later, I promise, but now I have to go.” He scrambled to his feet and so did she. “Stay here, you’ll be quite safe. I’ll be back in,” another look at the watch, “five minutes.”

“Oh no you don’t! You’re not leaving me marooned on the top of a building.”

“I have to. I won’t be a moment, I promise.”

“Well, why don’t I come too?”

“No, it’s too dangerous.”

“And now we come to it, ‘too dangerous’. What if it’s so dangerous that you don’t come back?”

“I will.”

“How do I know?”

“Because I’ve promised you.”

She stared at him, and he didn’t look away.

“You know, amazingly, Mister Pan, I believe you when you say you’ll come back, but I find, in life, that there is often a big gap between people’s intentions and delivery. What if you can’t come back, what if you get yourself killed?”

He ran his hands through his hair and put his hat on.

“I’m rather hoping not to. Nothing will happen, you are safe here and I’ll be five minutes, tops.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you? You’re actually going to leave me here, like a sitting duck.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I am,” He stood, regarding her thoughtfully, “Ruth,” he took her gently by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. “It’s a big ask, I know, but please trust me.” He was searching for some form of reassurance. Yes, there was no doubt he meant what he was saying. He believed he was going to come back for her, it was just that Ruth didn’t. Never mind, if it was only supposed to be five minutes, best to get it over with. Ten minutes and she’d call the police and they could come and get her.

“I don’t have much option, do I?”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her lightly on the cheek. Blimey! She hadn’t been prepared for that.

“Thank you!” he said, “I think you might possibly be an angel.” And he turned and ran. He leapt straight onto the boot lid of his snurd, gathering the cloak as he went, threw himself into the driving seat and started the engine. She watched as he took off, circled the building once and then he and his ritzy car disappeared in a flash of light. Ah. He hadn’t told her he was going to do that. Without thinking what she was doing, she put her hand up to her cheek.

“Five minutes, Mister No-Name Hamgeean, that’s all.” And she didn’t care how safe he thought it was, she was going to spend those five minutes looking for somewhere to hide.

Chapter 2

In a different version of the same universe, Lord Vernon, the Lord Protector of K'Barth was glaring at the hole The Pan of Hamgee's snurd had blown in his office wall, where the window used to be. This was a set-back and he was angry. Nobody ever escaped Lord Vernon and now this upstart was making a regular habit of it. He turned his attention to the two guards who were standing to attention in front of him. What he was about to do was at odds with his usual management philosophy but he was too angry not to take it out on something.

"You there."

"Yessir," croaked one of the guards. They were frightened. Good.

"Remind me, what is the penalty for striking a superior officer?"

"Death, sir," said the other one smartly. Lord Vernon clicked his knuckles.

"Death. Excellent. Gentlemen, hold on to that thought."

Just as he was pulling his arm back to punch the one nearest him, he was interrupted by the sound of the door opening. Lord Vernon saw the relief in the eyes of the guard and it irritated him. He lowered his arm and rounded angrily upon the person who had dared walk into his rooms without knocking.

"Your Most Gracious Exaltedness I must apologise for this intrusion." General Moteurs; a Grongle of impeccable honour and the only one to enjoy the same security clearance as his master. Even so, his reason for barging in had better be good.

"What do you want, General?"

"I bring news about the bronze portal, sir. As you suggested, it is a piece of simple, if elegant, quantum mechanics."

"Naturally, General. And...?"

"The labs have reverse engineered it, with partial success. We have a prototype pre-tested and ready for use."

"Then where is it?"

"I took the liberty of having it fitted to the Interceptor, sir."

"Did you, General?"

"Sir. It is effective, but where the K'Barthan portals are driven by the imagination of the user, ours functions solely on input map coordinates."

"That may give us an advantage. Find a way to combine the two and we can move freely, without limitation."

"Yes, sir," the General hesitated. "On another matter, my surveillance team have detected your portal in use here. Our systems are still in their infancy so I came here to verify."

"Your systems are functioning perfectly, General, the Hamgeean has escaped and taken the platinum portal with him. That is why I ordered that the Chosen One be brought here." Lord Vernon hid the rage which burned inside him from his voice but he knew, from the General's guarded expression that he had not kept it from his eyes. He stopped to collect his thoughts. "The Hamgeean's departure is..." The habitual pause while he sought the right word, "irritating. But he is easy enough to follow, if difficult to catch. I suggest we wait and see what he does."

"Yes, sir, I will have the bronze portal returned to you forthwith."

"No need." Lord Vernon held up the copper thimble which had been as simple to reactivate as its bronze and platinum counterparts. "This will suffice."

"As you wish, sir," General Moteurs' mobile phone beeped discreetly and he glanced at the display. "May I?" Lord Vernon nodded. "Moteurs," a pause. Lord Vernon was intrigued, 'Moteurs' – not 'General Moteurs' – false modesty? No. Not from this one. He waited. "What?" said the General. "I see." His voice was strained. There was a long, long pause. "No, I will tell him, myself," a quick glance in Lord Vernon's direction. "No, Colonel, that will not be necessary. Yes, thank you. Good night." He pressed the red button.

"Well, General, not bad news, I hope."

General Moteurs swallowed. He was pale.

“A temporary set-back, Your Most Gracious Exaltedness, the Chosen One has evaded my team.”

“General, I ordered that you apprehend her specifically to avoid this situation, so she would not fall into the hands of the Underground. Explain, if you would, why your squad was unable to carry out my simple request.” Lord Vernon’s rage was all but consuming him, he needed to smash something, or someone, but no-one as useful as General Moteurs. Later Lord Vernon would go down to the cells and break some rebel heads. Yes, that would make him feel better. The silence seemed endless before General Moteurs spoke. The tension was evident in his voice but he remained calm and maintained unwavering eye contact.

“It seems the Hamgeean came to her rescue. He broke through the glass at the front of the building and—”

“Took her from under the noses of your troops.” Lord Vernon waited. He wanted to give General Moteurs time to appreciate the ramifications of failure, he may be too useful to kill but there was no need for him to know that. “And what do you suggest we do now?” he asked. He did not bother to keep the anger from his voice.

“All is not lost, sir. The Underground will not have her yet and the Hamgeean fled with her in aviator mode.”

“And that is relevant because...?”

“Because there are no snurds in the Chosen One’s reality. My troops are monitoring the emergency services there. The snurd will be reported soon enough and then we will have their location. It will be a simple matter for my team to pick them up.”

“I am sure it will. However since your team has already failed in the ‘simple matter’ of capturing the Chosen One, I will take them. Your team will play no further part in this.”

“As you wish, sir,” The General’s air of business like serenity did not falter. Lord Vernon was impressed, for all his anger. The General’s phone beeped again and if it was possible he turned a shade paler.

“Answer it, Underling,” snarled Lord Vernon. ‘Underling’ a monstrous insult, reserved specifically for non-Grongles. Lord Vernon had not dismissed the guards and now heard a sharp intake of breath from one of them. Good; doubtless the General also realised the depth of his displeasure. Moteurs looked him in the eye a fraction longer than necessary, as if to check he had heard correctly but all he said was a calm, “thank you, sir.”

After a few moments’ listening General Moteurs ended the call.

“Well?” demanded Lord Vernon.

“Sir. My surveillance team has detected another instance of portal use. I believe we may have them.”

“May?”

“The detection equipment is still temperamental and unreliable. I cannot guarantee a result. Indeed, I believe it would wise to approach any action as little more than an experiment rather than an attempt at capture.”

“Is that so, General?” said Lord Vernon slowly. “And yet you are confident enough in your technology to bring this to my attention.”

“Perhaps, Your Gracious Exaltedness.”

“Give me the coordinates,” said Lord Vernon.

“Sir.” He took a pen and paper from his pocket and scribbled down some figures. “My troops will continue to monitor the emergency services in case the equipment...” An awkward pause. Lord Vernon raised his eyebrows quizzically.

“Fails me, General? Fails me like its master and his sorry excuse for a team?”

“Sir,” said General Moteurs. Still he maintained his composure. In Lord Vernon’s usual experience, Moteurs should be on his knees by this point, begging forgiveness. The General had courage; Lord Vernon would give him that. And he was loyal, truly loyal in a way others were not. It doubled the pleasure of upbraiding and disrespecting him, of course. Especially in front of his own troops. Lord Vernon cast a glance at the guards, two very large Grongles who were trying, and failing spectacularly, to make themselves invisible.

“Your Gracious Exaltedness—” began the General.

“Sir is sufficient, Moteurs,” growled Lord Vernon.

“Sir. With your permission, I would be honoured to take care of this matter, myself, and I know my troops would relish a chance to redeem themselves.”

“Doubtless, they would,” Lord Vernon cut in, “I am glad that they, and you, understand what it means to fail me. However, there will be no more blunders this evening. I shall see to this personally.” He snatched the piece of paper from the General’s hand and strode out of the room. The door slammed and all was silent. General Moteurs was locked in his own thoughts and the guards carried on standing to attention, waiting for orders. Eventually he spoke.

“Back to your duties lads,” he said.

“Permission to speak, sir,” said one of the guards.

“Denied,” said General Moteurs. His voice was stern and his face still impassive but his eyes held the tiniest hint of a smile. “I advise you to be out on patrol when he comes back. The worst is over. He may be volatile, but with time to reflect he is fair. I will be forgiven and you forgotten by morning.” He held the door open. At just over six foot tall, General Moteurs was short, for a Grongle. Both the guards were taller than he was.

“You knew, sir, didn’t you?” said the bigger of the two. The General said nothing.

“Thank you, sir,” said the other and General Moteurs fixed him with a steely glare.

“What for, exactly?”

“Saving us a beating, sir.”

“Did I give either of you permission to speak?”

“No, sir.”

“Then I suggest you don’t. I mean it, lads. Leave, now, or I shall have to put you on a charge.” They went.

Chapter 3

Gingerly, Ruth climbed down from the helipad onto the roof proper. It was only raised up a few feet but there was an alcove underneath. She walked, bent double, under the jutting edge. A full circuit revealed that there was a doorway – locked, naturally – with some stairs up which sensible people could climb from roof-top to helipad level. How embarrassing, she hadn't thought of looking for those.

“Spanner woman,” she said to no-one in particular.

She wondered how The Pan was getting on and her hand went to her cheek again, yes, OK, he'd kissed her and it was quite nice but she needed to forget about it because she was supposed to be hiding and... Wait a minute? What was that? It sounded like a light aircraft engine. Yes! Hoorah, he was coming back. She had hoped he would but she had braced herself for disappointment.

Yet some instinct stronger than her pride stopped Ruth from running onto the helipad, waving. This was lucky because on closer examination it turned out to be a different flying car which was approaching the building. It looked like a 1950s Mercedes, the Uhlenhaut. It was sleek, black and menacing with glassed in headlights and the exhaust pipes stuck out of the air vents at the side. But it also had wings, which made it a snurd and most importantly, it was not The Pan of Hamgee's.

Ruth retreated from the steps, into the shadows under the helipad. Whoever this was might be friendly but she decided she'd wait and see before introducing herself. She heard rather than saw the Mercedes land. Someone got out and she listened to their footsteps walking across the helipad. Were they coming down the stairs? She strained to hear as something unfeasibly loud-engined drove along the street below, and under cover of the noise she backed further into the shadows. Then she saw him; tall and immaculately dressed in a uniform. No sunglasses, but that black hair, those chiselled good-looks and the unmistakable, tangible sense of malevolence emanating from him like some dark perfume.

It was *him*. The one who had followed her all those months ago, when her normal life ended and the stalking began – the man who had been looking for his Chosen One. Please let him be searching for somebody else. She wasn't chosen. If she was she would know for heaven's sake! Or it would be more obvious.

He put his hands on the railings and looked out over the city. Ruth's heart was racing and she started shaking. He would find her, for sure. No, he wasn't going to, but she had to stay silent and out of sight. Very slowly, to avoid making the smallest noise, she lay down on her stomach and slid further into the shadows.

He flipped open a mobile phone, dialled and waited for an answer. When he spoke, Ruth shuddered. If evil could be expressed as sound it would be this man's voice and somehow, though she thought she'd remembered, she realised she'd actually forgotten just how frightening he was. Who was he?

“General,” he said, “I must congratulate you on the modifications you have made to the Interceptor. However, it seems that you are correct on the matter of your detection systems. There is nobody in evidence and pleasing though it is, I did not come here to admire the view.” A pause while he listened to whoever was at the other end of the phone. He turned round and leaned on the railings with his back to the city, a vivid, unreal outline against the familiar backdrop of the London night sky. He looked straight at Ruth. Had he seen her? There was no way of knowing; his expression gave nothing away; she guessed not. He continued with his conversation. “It is unfortunate but there is no sign of activity,” and in that soft menacing voice he continued, “I hope your standards are not slipping, General.” He chuckled, as if to indicate he was joking. But it wasn't funny. This bloke didn't do chummy. “Yes. Your systems are evidently flawed, since, whether or not portal use has occurred in this area there is clearly no-one here now.” Another silence while he listened. He was still looking straight at the spot where Ruth was hiding only now, he smiled. It was a horrible predatory smile. Could it be aimed at her? No. It couldn't be or he'd act rather than stare. Ruth listened as he continued his conversation. “Perhaps... Do not mention it. It was a pleasure to assist you in your experiment. And now, I regret, I must leave you to your work. I am master of a nation

and my time is at a premium. Oh and General, I will leave it to you to discipline those who failed to capture the Chosen One.”

Another long pause while he listened and, in spite of her fear, Ruth had time to feel sorry for whoever he was talking to.

“I appreciate that, and since your team has maintained such an impeccable record, until today, I can understand your desire to protect them. However, I hope you will not be so...” Ruth watched him wave one hand casually, as if to pluck the word he sought from the air, “lenient if it happens again.” Another pause. “Excellent, I am glad we understand one another. I will return directly. Good evening to you.” He snapped his phone shut and ran up the stairs. Ruth listened as the engine receded into the distance. A huge sob of relief escaped her. He had gone and he hadn’t found her.

That she had escaped him again was lucky, but what she had heard of his conversation was alarming. It suggested that he owned the scary sci-fi men who had been following her all this time, that he thought she was chosen and that even if she realised she wasn’t, he didn’t, or wouldn’t, and that was a problem. She took a deep breath and crept out of her hiding place. Moments later, she heard a noise a little like a light aircraft engine again. Another flying car? Yes, coming in to land by the sounds of it. Phew. She was going to give The Pan a piece of her mind now he was back, and some. It wasn’t until she reached the top of the steps that she realised her mistake. The vehicle that had landed was shaped like a black Mercedes.

He’d hidden so she’d come out into the open. Classic cat and mouse and Ruth knew the rules of that game – the cat always won. And right now, Ruth was the mouse – the dumbest mouse imaginable.

Chapter 4

As The Pan circled the building he watched the lone figure on the roof below. She seemed so small and vulnerable from up here and he was torn. Was he doing the right thing? Not sure. But after going to so much trouble to save her from the Grongles, he couldn't take her with him. Not where he was going – because he was going home to the Parrot and Screwdriver, the pub where he rented a room. His landladies, Gladys Parker and Ada Maddox along with Gladys' son, Trev, were the closest thing The Pan had to a family. But they were also members of the Underground, the more moderate of K'Barth's two resistance organisations – and Lord Vernon knew.

Gladys, Ada and Trev didn't realise their clandestine activities had been discovered and as the only non-Grongle who did, The Pan had to warn them. However, it was nearly an hour since he had escaped from police custody – plenty of time for the Grongles to reach the pub first. Worse, they must realise that The Pan would try to save his surrogate family. Ruth wasn't the only one wondering if he would return, The Pan, himself, didn't give much for his chances. That was why he couldn't take her with him – because the Grongles might be waiting for him and if they were, he risked handing her straight to Lord Vernon. She was frightened, and it wasn't kind or chivalrous to leave her alone, but he had to. Warning the others was the right thing to do. Ruth would be safe enough on the roof and hopefully, if he returned in one piece, he'd have time to explain and she'd understand.

He pressed the portal button and the snurd materialised a few feet above Turnadot Street, travelling at speed. He slowed, landed and parked in front of the pub. It was too quiet. At this time of night it should be closing, regulars spilling out onto the street shouting rowdy beery good byes – or just shouting. No sign of any Grongles, though and from outside, no sign of a struggle. He tried the door. Locked.

“Mmm,” said The Pan to himself. Then he caught sight of a notice in the window.

‘Staff Holidays’ it ran. *‘The staff of this establishment has never had a holiday. So now we are going to see what it's like. Therefore, this public house will be closed for a short time on account of that we are having one now.’*

The Pan imagined Gladys, Ada and Their Trev on the beach and it made him chuckle. Good.

He would have to be vigilant but he suspected that if the Grongles had come here, they had been and gone. He wondered if Gladys, Ada and Trev had expected him home.

He went round to the side alley. Yes, it seemed they had, because although it was almost impossible to tell from the ground, they had left the landing window open the smallest crack. He climbed up the drain pipe his usual way, opened it and slipped into the hall. All was quiet. Definitely away and not hiding then and no signs of a search by the Grongles, either. He went into the kitchen. Yes, the fridge was switched off, the door open to keep it fresh. Something smelled though. He raised his arm and sniffed an arm pit. Arnold. It was him.

It's a little known fact that for the escape man, cleanliness really is next to godliness. After all, there's no point in being a master of evasion and concealment if the people chasing you can smell where you're hidden. He checked his watch. No time for a proper wash but he ran into his bedroom, taking his shirt off as he went and grabbed a clean one from the chest of drawers. Back to the bathroom, where he splashed some water over himself, quick dab with a towel, shirt on. Oops, don't forget the deodorant. He undid a couple of buttons so he could get the can in and applied some. Not too much, or at close quarters, they'd still be able to track him down by smell – only it would be more pleasant for them. There, that would be better than nothing. Now what?

His eyes scanned the room, saying goodbye to the familiar, comfortable detritus of his life. Ah yes, that was a point.

He ran downstairs to the cellar and collected a red freezer bag containing a small stash of loot, gathered from his days as getaway driver for the Mervinettes, K'Barth's most famous gang of bank robbers, from behind the barrels. He wished he could help himself to one of Ada's cheeses but he had nothing to leave in payment except a piece of loot, which was too precious to waste on such a trifle. He could borrow one, he supposed, but it wasn't his to take

and Gladys and Ada weren't there to ask for an IOU. It would be sensible, and they'd probably understand, but unfortunately it would also be wrong. He sighed. This principles thing was exhausting. He checked his watch; he'd promised he'd be five minutes and he'd used four of them. Time to go.

He ran back upstairs to the kitchen, took a pen from the pot by the phone and wrote Gladys and Ada a note on the pad they used for messages. '*Lord Vernon thinks you are rebels, STAY ON HOLIDAY,*' it said. He read it through and added, '*Thank you for everything and good luck*' along with his name at the bottom. Another glance at his watch. Five minutes were up. He was going to be late. He bundled out of the landing window, not forgetting to close it behind him, and half climbed-half fell in his haste to reach the ground below. Another running jump into the snurd and he was off, leaving Turnadot Street behind, and rising above the houses. He shoved the bag of loot under the seat and imagined the building where he'd left the Chosen One stranded. Mmm, she would be pretty mad with him when he came back, he expected – and he'd deserve it – but at least this time, he'd done the right thing, in so far as he could, and it felt, yeh, good. He checked his watch again. Seven minutes, not bad. Composing himself for an ear-bashing he pressed the portal button.

The Pan arrived to find the roof was no longer empty. No sign of Ruth, but parked at one side was the unmistakable shape of a black snurd. A lone figure in a long dark coat was walking across the concrete, towards a flight of stairs at one side and as The Pan watched, Ruth ran up them and stopped abruptly. His stomach lurched as Lord Vernon looked up at him, laughing and waved.

“This is not going to happen. Not to her.”