

The professor stepped quietly into the galley with Margaret trotting behind. The steward had his head deep inside the fridge, rooting around for any previously overlooked greens. He jumped with surprise as the professor spoke.

‘Rudi, I have some unfortunate news for you.’

‘What? Me?’ he replied extracting his head from the ice box. His questioning wrinkly brown face with his somehow sad looking eyes gave him the appearance at that moment of one of those old old giant tortoises from the Galapagos Islands.

‘Yes you steward. From today we will no longer be needing your services. We have our own staff arriving very shortly.’

‘But you no able to sack me sir, only Captain sack me.’

‘No steward, I guess I am not, but I am able to kill you’ said the professor driving one of missing forks deep into Rudi’s jugular.

‘But Professor!’ exclaimed the flabbergasted Margaret ‘you’ve killed the steward’

‘My dear, how unusually astute of you,’ said the professor wiping his bloody hand on a tea towel with distaste, ‘and no, now is not the time for a sweetie, sweetie.’

Margaret clenched her hands by her sides, taking little indignant gulps of air, quite unable to fathom why this nice American was being so suddenly being so unkind to her.

‘I have to be going now, my dear, but,’ as the Professor paused his forehead pulsed and a smile spread across his blistered lips, ‘perhaps if you would like to accompany me, I would be delighted to give you a little tour of what we have been up to.’

‘Oh, well, I don’t have much else on this morning, I guess I could finish that Reader’s Digest this afternoon, well, go on,’ said Margaret, delighted to be once more the centre of someone’s attention. Taking the Professor’s outstretched, and not too bloody, hand she stepped nonchalantly over the corpse of the steward and followed him up to the bridge.

As Margaret mindlessly twiddled the various knobs on one of the bridge’s control panels, the Professor talked to Oddbjorn Ballengrud. ‘Still on course and on schedule?’

‘Absolutely,’ replied Oddbjorn.

‘Then begin the removal of the containers from the deck, we will need to get into the hold,’ ordered the Professor. ‘Mrs McKlusky, no, I wouldn’t touch that button if I were you, would you care to join me out on the flying bridge? Perhaps the time has come to get a few things off my chest.’

‘Okey dokey, George,’ said Margaret somewhat coquishly. Stepping outside behind the Professor she asked, ‘What’s happened to that poor man’s face?’ She pointing unsubtly back towards Oddbjorn, ‘He looks positively disgusting.’

In this instance Margaret’s observation had been quite accurate. The large swelling on Oddbjorn’s neck from last night had continued to grow, and now distorted the left side of his face blowing out his cheek and pushing out his eyeball so that it bulged from its socket. The scabbing that had begun on his stomach had spread overnight to cover his torso and limbs, coming up his neck and around the backs of his ears. Cigarette paper sized flakes of skin fell away from his arms, and the dry skin underneath cracked and bled. If Oddbjorn were to be honest he would have said that he felt terrible, barely able to function, but the glorious moment was so close that there was nothing that would prevent him from playing his part.

‘Yes, you are again correct,’ replied the Professor, ‘and it is indeed unfortunate, but the time is so close my dear that it is of no consequence.’ The Professor turned

and rested his hands on the rail. Looking down the length of the ship towards it's bow he could see that the crane operators, a Russian prostitute and a Korean dog walker, were already carry out his order to clear the deck and had begun to lift the containers one at a time and drop they into the passing smooth ocean.

'George, what are they doing? I'm not altogether sure those two ladies should be doing that,' said Margaret, and the Professor scowled at the familiar use of his first name, even though it wasn't actually his name, but then neither was Professor Morrello.

'Hot isn't it?' said the Professor, choosing to ignore Margaret's latest observation for the time being. 'It's really hot down here near the equator. Wouldn't it be nice if one could just get a bit of air to one's brain? It's certainly not a day to be sitting all cramped up inside some fusty little space. I mean one would at least open the windows, wouldn't one?'

'Well I guess so,' replied Margaret, somewhat confused at quite what this man was driving at.

'Well I'm sure you wouldn't mind if I did just that,' said the professor, and before Margaret even had a chance to give her permission, he reached around the back of his neck, lifted the concealed flap and depressed the release button. The catches smoothly slid open somewhere beneath the skin and, accompanied by a hissing noise, a crack appeared around the circumference of his skull. The bald top half of his head smoothly rose about one inch and hinged backwards. As the cloud of smoke that had been emitted from the inside of the professor's head cleared Margaret saw for the first time the sizeable rabbit that inhabited his hollowed out cranium. The rabbit unrolled its ears and smoothed its sweaty brown and white fur. Using a paw it wiped away some mucous that had built up around its tired looking eyes. The rabbit peered down at Margaret and then, by twiddling his joystick and working the peddles, made the professor say, 'Well that's so much better, there is nothing like a bit of fresh air to help the brain function. Perhaps you have a question?'

'Well, George, you might have told me sooner,'

said Margaret matter of factly. 'I had always wondered what caused your big forehead. Still I see no reason why we can't be friends, your delightful bunny included. Now you said something about getting something off your chest, I do think it would be good if we got to know each other better, I'm such a good listener. You know I used to tell the last captain...'

'Yes there is one little matter I would like to tell you about,' interrupted the professor. 'I don't know why I am about to explain myself, to you of all people, but in my experience great leaders, visionaries, like myself, need to know they have an audience, that their genius has a witness. I suppose one could just say it is just my ego, but then one might say that's a prerequisite of the job. But this doesn't matter. What does is that through circumstance or chance, intention or otherwise you are the last survivor aboard the Divine Vessel, and as such you are my witness. I am afraid I can't promise that your life will be spared, rather the reverse, as soon as you have seen everything and witnessed the completion of our plan I will not hesitate to give to command to have you murdered. But until that point you are my guest aboard my ship. And please, if you have any questions, please save them for when I finish speaking. I hate to be interrupted.'

'Well you are a dark horse George,' said Margaret. The professor let this interruption pass as a beginners error. 'It all sounds very exciting though, fire away, you or your rabbit, whoever's in control, it all looks awfully...'

'Thank you dear lady,' said the Professor, and the rabbit began to dextrously play his mouth organ. 'You ask whether it is the rabbit or the human that is in control of what stands before you, and I must answer you that neither are. That is correct, the brain behind this operation is neither human nor bunny. I in fact consist manly of a glutinous jelly, very similar to what jellyfish are made from here on Earth. However, unlike jellyfish I have a polymorphous membrane that enables me to move and change my shape. This means I have no need for bones or muscles to help me move as I can form limbs of whatever shape whenever they are required.'

At my centre is a circular sack of brain matter so powerful that all you miserable earthlings put together could not match it, within it resides the cumulative knowledge of all my kind, past and future.

‘How is this possible? It is because my brain and my body are composed of elements not found here on Earth. I am alien to your world, yes I have journeyed across the solar system from the great red planet Mars to be here today. Yes Mars, there is no need to look so amazed, so astonished.’

Margaret wasn’t looking either of those things. Her interest was waning in this funny man’s story and her attention had been diverted by the containers that continued to float past the ship before filling with water and sinking into the ocean. He continued.

‘The reason why I do not show you my true form now, is not because I am ashamed, but because our Martian bodies are unable to survive within your noxious atmosphere for more than a couple of minutes. Your air is too rich in certain gases that our membranous coverings are not used to. Left to the ravishes of your atmosphere our bodies would dry out and crust over, and within very soon we would be quite dead. Not only that, but our bodies, though perfectly suited to the climate and gravity of Mars, where we move across its surface with great agility, are not able to function with any real effect under Earth’s cursed greater gravitational attraction. Our liquid based bodies, whilst supple and agile on Mars, are reduced to near useless dollops of blamange under Earth’s greater pull. Here we are humiliated to pulling our way around on our bellies, in an atmosphere that kills us in an instant. So, you may have guessed by now, or maybe not,’ continued the Professor looking at Margaret’s glazed expression, ‘that we have learnt to use the rabbits as protective suits. They both protect us from the ravages of your bad air, and give us a means of greater locomotion. But how was my great race able to make the discovery that such a thing might be possible you ask? Well to answer that I will have to go back to the very beginnings of Martian exploration on Earth.’ And so the professor, powered by the rabbit, controlled by the Martian did just that.

‘As a race us Martians are not a peace loving group of creatures. On our own planet Mars we hunted all the other species to extinction many millennia ago, and we have long studied your planet Earth as an outlet for our lust for destruction and domination. Our race has for some time now had the technology to transport themselves through space by means of highly technically advanced intergalactic catapult. Its name fairly amply describes its function, only the use of the word intergalactic is stretching the truth a little too far. We have not the raw materials on Mars that would enable us to manufacture an elastic material springy enough to propel ourselves over intergalactic distances. A more appropriate name would be an inter-planetary catapult, and even this is stretching the truth slightly. Our ‘intergalactic’ catapult only has the range sufficient to reach Earth when it is at its very closest to Mars. The last time the planets were in sufficiently close orbits was in the Earth year nineteen twenty two, when we sent our first brave soldiers to Earth. Though these courageous Martians reached the Earth safely, the rest of the mission was an unqualified disaster. Having not been prepared for your heavy gravity and poisonous air these fearless explorers were left to suffer an agonising death on the pavements of city where they had landed. However, in the brief moments that they had they used the last of their strength to broadcast back their observations. From these observations it was clear to us back on the great planet Mars that the human being was the dominant creature on Earth and would therefore naturally be the one we would need to exterminate first.

‘For many years after this our scientists struggled to find a way of successfully landing on Earth but they remained unable to find a way that our specialised bodies might survive on your planet. Our leaders had all but given up on their dreams of the domination of Earth and all its indigenous species. Then a stroke of luck befell our great race, and it was the Chinese we have to thank for it. About fifteen years ago, the Chinese, unknown to the rest of the human world, began tests in space with unmanned spacecraft. The leaders of this

forward thinking nation of people were looking towards space to find new planets that their exploding population could stretch their legs on. One of these early unmanned space ships contained twelve quite ordinary white laboratory rabbits. This craft was intended to simply orbit the Earth, but something went wrong and the ship span out of orbit and disappeared from their radars. The ship drifted out through space for many years, during which time the rabbits entered a form of suspended animation brought on by the intense cold of space, until, luckily for us, it came to rest on my planets red and fertile land. These twelve creatures gave our leaders aspiration of the conquest of Earth new hope. After extensive experiments and tireless testing a team of leading Martian scientists devised the method by which a Martian would be able to use a rabbit as a protective vessel whilst on Earth. A kind of spacesuit if you will. It turned out that the rabbits were particularly suited to this simple procedure which involved the brain of the rabbit being syringed out through one ear and one of our brave Martians getting in the other ear. The brain of the rabbit is so basic and its nervous processes so simple that there was no need to install any mechanical control equipment inside their heads, unlike what you see here inside the head of the professor.' At which point the flop eared rabbit pulled a lever that bent the professor's head forward for Margaret's inspection. 'With our polymorphous bodies we were able to almost take on the form of the rabbits' brains, creating parts to our bodies that would plug straight into the natural control sockets inside the empty rabbits' heads. Unfortunately, one rabbit was lost in the early stages of testing, a simple mistake of setting a syringe to blow rather than suck. Anyhow, the scientists converted the remaining eleven rabbits into bunny suits, and the Martian council sat down to renew their plans for Earth's invasion. All the rabbits that had landed on Mars had been male, and our experts estimated that they each had approximately two more years before they reached their life expectancy, and this added an urgency to the plans.

‘Fortune however was shining on the great crimson orb once more, as the next conference of the two planets was to occur the very next year, two thousand and three in the Earth’s calendar. Our astronomers calculated that there would be two windows of opportunity during that year, one at the beginning of the year, and the other in less than half an hour from now, where the planets would be close enough to be in range of the intergalactic catapult. The council’s plan was to first catapult to Earth eleven of Mars’ very best scientists and soldiers, lead by yours truly, each wearing one of the new protective bunny suits, at the beginning of the year. We all landed safely in a village pond in the south of England. We knew before arriving on Earth that our bunny suits, small and weak as they were, would not be sufficient for us to exterminate the entire human race. That is why our first task on Earth was to devise a way to control human vessels in a similar that that we were able to do so with rabbits. We could then turn our human bodies against their human bodies, but the advantage would be with us as our human bodies would each be controlled by a superior and ruthless Martian brain. Our early testing on humans quickly revealed that we would be unable to drive the humans ourselves without the added assistance of our bunny suits, in much the same way that a human can operate a mechanical digger, but a rabbit cannot. Using the rabbits as the drivers also required that we fit a set of mechanical controls inside the heads of the humans. But it didn’t take us long before we had developed the necessary control systems. So, having achieved this, we set about devising a plan that would enable us to have sufficient rabbits and sufficient human vessels at the correct point on the globe at the correct time to coincide with the next opportunity when the intergalactic catapult would be in range. What you see before you,’ said the Martian professor, taking in the ship before him with a sweep of his arm, ‘is the culmination of that plan.’

‘Oh yes, how lovely,’ managed Margaret. She really wasn’t following what the professor was saying, and what little she had caught all seemed a little far fetched

to her. Her attention had been caught by the contents of one of the containers. As it had been dropped into the passing sea from the crane operated by the Russian where it had struck the edge of another passing container and its doors had bust open. As the container had filled with water and quickly sunk its contents had floated out and shot up to the surface. It had been filled with thousands and thousands of small plastic animal bath toys, destined for the kiddies of the New World. Peering over the side of the ship Margaret could make out groups of green frogs bobbing by, accompanied by red beavers, blue turtles and spinning yellow ducks. As the ship continued onwards towards the equator, the blue, red, green and yellow toys quickly became dots and then pinpricks of colour before finally escaping Margaret's sight. The little toys were slowly caught by the winds and taken by the currents to be eventually disturbed around the oceans of the world.

'Mrs McKlusky, Mrs McKlusky, are you listening to me?' The flop eared rabbit turned a small dial and the index finger of the Professor's right hand extended and tapped Margaret on her shoulder. 'I would hate to think that I had chosen to unburden myself to the wrong person.'

'Oh no,' replied Margaret dragging herself back from her little imaginings. 'It's a very nice story. Do go on.'

'Well thank you, dear lady, back to the plan,' the Professor continued. 'After deciding that a large ocean going cargo ship would be the ideal place to carry out the next faze of our plan. We settled on the Divine Vessel as the most suitable ship as she regularly takes this route and would therefore cause less suspicion. We set about taking possession of the brains of the crew whilst they were on leave before they each returned to the ship. Out of the eleven original Martian interplanetary explorers ten of us managed to secure a place in the head of a crew member. We lost contact with the eleventh, dear Graham, somewhere in Finland and we haven't heard from him since. For some time after you boarded the Divine Vessel we suspected that you were our eleventh man, such were your peculiarities and lack of ability at

social interaction. But there is no need to worry yourself dear lady, we have now realised that there is nothing in you head, rabbit or otherwise. Ha ha.’ The flop eared rabbit’s smile revealed that its Martian driver had amused himself with his little joke.

‘George, I don’t think that was a very nice thing to say to a lady,’ said Margaret indignantly.

‘Please stop referring to me as George. I have been kind enough to tell you my story, and you now know that I am neither George, nor this rabbit. I am the leader of the mighty invading Martian armies, and as such, you should address me as Commander,’ said the Martian, getting the rabbit to raise the professor up to his full, not very impressive, height. ‘Well, it looks as though the clearing of the containers is complete. Perhaps you would like to accompany me down onto the main deck and we can continue our tour.’

‘Well ok, but I do hope this isn’t going to go on too much longer, I really must be getting back to my knitting,’ said Margaret following the commander from the flying bridge and down the stairs. ‘You know, you’re not looking so good yourself George, perhaps you need a lie down.’