

# THE HAND

by

**P.Gordon Walker**

The hand fell on Tuesday, just before noon, spoiling more than a few lives and lunches.

A casual observer might have thought it was made of concrete, but the hand was somehow harder, smoother—even warmer—than mere concrete. It could have been veinless rose marble, or unspeckled salmon granite, but it wasn't. It was a peculiar livid shade that seemed to absorb the flashing red and blue light of the police cars and ambulances which had streaked up in the hope of rescuing the dozen or so casual shoppers crushed under the stretched palm.

Of course the traffic in High Street had to be diverted; the immediate vicinity was cordoned off with high nylon screens; and a line of tangibly nervous policemen moved the rubbernecks along, blandly fobbing off queries with a quickly invented traffic accident.

Detective Inspector White kneeled down in front of a pair of disowned, trainer-clad feet which lay in a tidy pool of blood just below the point where the hand had been neatly severed, at the point where you might expect a watch.

"Holy Mother of God," said White, an atheist, as he shifted his eyes to the gurgling flow of blood that was still seeping out from under the hand, like so much juice from grapes under the wine press.

The blood-splashed hand lay with its palm down and its thumb splayed, bridging the road at the traffic lights, at the crossing where Marks & Spencer's and Woolworth's had been facing off for decades. Two newly painted filter-lane arrows pointed directly at it, as though chalked there by a cosmic giant CID mapping out the scene of a crime.

The hand had not been visibly damaged by the fall; there was not the tiniest crack or scratch or dent on its surface. From the tip of the middle finger to the clean cut at the wrist, the hand was about twenty metres long; from the tip of the fat thumb to the jutting outer bone of the pinky, it was about twelve metres wide, practically kerb to kerb. Every detail was perfect: the pores, the veins, the wrinkles, the small tufts of rigid hairs, a chewed wart, a freckle, the less-than-neat fingernails, the nubby knuckles with their crowns of whirling skin, the thick roll of flesh that folded itself towards the thumb. It was a left hand, with four fingers and a thumb, nothing particularly unusual, no abnormalities worthy of pity.

Looking around, White felt as though he had been spirited into the foreground of one of Dalí's more lurid, demented tableaux.

Detective Sergeant Black pushed past a gaggle of shuffling, whispering bobbies and approached his boss. Though not particularly squeamish, he was trying his hardest not to look at the blood as it flowed across the road towards the gutter, carrying small, darkening globs of flesh, bone and sinew.

"The man from the MoD'll be here in about twenty minutes," he told White, who had turned his face away from the hand—and the feet—to greet his Sergeant with an enquiring stare.

"Yes," said White, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. He stood up, put a finger and thumb to the bridge of his nose, and massaged the corners of his eyes.

"Weird," said Black as he surveyed the scene, his head shaking slowly. He took two steps along the side of the hand, then reached out and stroked it, running his fingers along the outstretched thumb.

"Yes," said White again, dreamily.

"You all right, Colin?" asked Black, now examining his fingers for dirt or dust or any other traces the hand might have left: they were cleaner than a pauper's plate.

"Yes," said White unconvincingly. Then, straightening his back and looking up at the puffy clouds on the skyline, he went on: "It's not the blood and guts getting to me. Don't worry about that, Alan." He sighed and ran his fingers through his greying hair. "It's, well, as you said, the weirdness. There must be a dozen shoppers under this thing and God only knows where it came from, how it came to land in the middle of our High Street. Jesus Christ. God only knows."

This unsettled Black, who was more than aware of his older colleague's intransigent aversion to any form of organized religion whatsoever. They'd been working together for about eight years, and they made a highly successful team. Over the years, they had become as close as any two heterosexual policemen can become without eliciting contempt from their peers and colleagues, who referred to them jokily, but respectfully, as Zebra Squad.

In all the years of on-duty sleuth and slog, and off-duty booze and men-talk, Black had never once heard White refer to God or Jesus Christ—except when heatedly disputing their existence.

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"Well," said Mrs Hollingsworth, scouring her memory to find the sounds, "it was just a kind of zzzish!—the falling part, you know, only a second—and then a sudden whomp!"

"Did anyone scream or shout or anything like that?" asked Detective Inspector White. "Any kind of warning?"

"No, not a peep," said Mrs Hollingsworth eagerly, her eyes wide and bright, "not from the vict ... Hmm. It was all so fast. But there were some screams afterwards, from people on the pavement, and from those the, er, thing missed."

"And you didn't see or hear any kind of aircraft – helicopters and so on?" said Black.

"No. Nothing like that. If there'd been a plane, I'm sure I would've seen it."

"Well, thanks, Mrs Hollingsworth," said White. "You can go now. We'll be in touch if we need you again."

Mrs Hollingsworth looked around the room, then at the tartan handbag her wrinkly hands were pressing tightly into her lap, then back at White, who smiled politely.

"Do you know what it is?" she said, emboldened by White's nice smile. "I mean, do you know where it came from?"

"Sorry, madam," said Black as he reached for the doorhandle. "The Ministry boys are working on it right now. I'm sure the press'll be informed soon enough. But remember, until then, Top Secret, OK?"

"Right you are, Sergeant," said Mrs Hollingsworth, winking as she got up to leave. "Just like the war. I know how to keep mum."

Black closed the door behind her and sighed for possibly the thousandth time since he'd first seen the hand.

"Not much to go on, eh?" he said.

"Precious little," said White, yawning. It was nearly 10 p.m.; they had been interviewing eye-witnesses since about two. "Maybe the MoD eggheads have come up with something."

"I'll get the car," said Black, mind-reading.

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The Pranksters were worried now. If this one didn't backfire on them it would be a miracle truly worthy of John Brown himself – though neither of them actually believed in John Brown or any of his 'miracles'.

"Look," said Gag, "I tied the towing cable myself. How in Brown's name was I supposed to know it would break loose?"

"It didn't break," said Quip, not quite disguising the gloating malice in his voice, "the fucking knot came undone. Wisecrack'll have your balls for pendants. All of them."

"If he catches me," said Gag.

"Don't doubt it," said Quip. "And don't count on my help. My hand may be as clumsy as anyone else's, but it's clean." He held it up to his lower nostril, made a childish face, and waggled six stubby fingers and two thumbs at his partner before turning back to the array of large switches in front of him—the console of the ship.

"So you just let me take the blame?"

"Yes yes yes," said Quip, cackling.

"And what if I say you helped me tie the knot?"

"I'll kill you."

"You'll try," said Gag, flexing the mass of muscles on his own scaly arm, even though Quip was staring straight ahead, concentrating on guiding the ship past a dangerous-looking asteroid.

"I'll kill you," repeated Quip calmly, "slowly, painfully, and with more pleasure than screwing a twelve-breasted, six-cunted Spacemaid."

"They don't exist," said Gag.

"Oh yes they do," said Quip.

"Oh no they don't."

"Oh yes they do."

"Oh no they don't."

"Oh yes they do."

"Oh ..."

... and this went on for quite a while, until the Pranksters had more or less forgotten their worries about the hand, the botched Grade III Prank, and the inevitable wrath of their leader, Wisecrack, which would come down on them as soon as they returned to their secret base on the darker side of the planet Morosia.

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Suspended a metre or so above the scrubbed floor of the hangar, the hand appeared much smaller than it had in the middle of High Street. It was spotlit as if on the studio set of a snazzy TV commercial, surrounded by cranes

and other lifting gear, and now hung with its palm facing upwards. A platoon of bespectacled MoD eggheads, armed with clipboards and measuring instruments, swarmed around the hand, mapping and logging its vital statistics, scanning it for everything from radiation to retroviruses.

"Long life-line," was the first thing Detective Sergeant Black said when he and White peered over the edge of the thumb, seeing the expansive palm for the first time.

White ignored this, though he realised that a healthy dose of humour might help Black—and himself—to cope with the whole incident. There was still the grisly matter of God knows how many unidentifiable corpses, which weren't really like corpses at all, more like bucketfuls of raggedy sausage meat. The Task Force back at the station were still waiting for the local population to call in with more reports of missing relatives and neighbours.

"Excuse me," said White to one of the busy white-coated boffins, "er, what's it made of?"

"No idea," came the reply. "We haven't got a tool that can cut a sample from it, nothing that'll even scratch its surface."

"Diamond drill bits?" said White.

"Break up like glass," said the boffin, smiling incongruously, like a little boy secretly pleased at the chance to solve the mystery of his parents' murder. "We're waiting for a special drill to come in from Amsterdam, but, personally, I'm not very optimistic. I reckon we'll need some kind of laser. Maybe the Yanks or the Jap ..."

"What about all the ... blood?" asked White.

"We washed it off earlier. Not a trace now. Not the tiniest stain. Zero absorbtion. Fascinating."

"Yes," said White as the boffin moved on and mingled seamlessly with others of his ilk, like a sheep rejoining the flock. "Fascinating."

"The Hand That Came From Outer Space," said Black, grinning rather foolishly.

White turned to look at him, shook his head slowly, then nodded once and said, "Yes."

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White felt terrible on Wednesday morning. He had stayed up until about three o'clock, mercilessly cross-examining his brains; but his brains had decided to keep what they knew to themselves. He had slept fitfully on the sagging camp-bed in his office, his dreams plagued by blood-drenched hands and stomach-churning sensations of falling. His eyes were desperately bloodshot when he examined them in the mirror; his face was pale, bloodless, and twitching; he felt as if a pair of randy hedgehogs had made their bed in his brain—and taken to rutting with unashamed prickly abandon.

It must have been the nightcap, he thought, examining his tongue, which was fluffier than a teddy bear's bum. Yes, it must have been that fourth nightcap. He gave his teeth a cursory inspection, frowned at what he saw, and rubbed the plaque from his gums with his forefinger.

"Got them!" said Black briskly, all too loudly, as he swung the door of the office open and shut. He was holding a large white envelope high in one hand, looking rather like Chamberlain at Munich.

"Got what?" said White as he turned away from the mirror.

"The pics from the MoD, of course," said Black. "All the angles, all the details. In full colour close-up."

"And the lab report?" said White as he sank into the swivel chair behind his desk, rubbing at his eyes.

"Still waiting. I think they've hit a few hitches."

"Well, they would, wouldn't they?"

"S'pose so," said Black. "Anyway, let's have a look at these."

"Before breakfast?"

"Before breakfast."

\* \* \*

Gag and Quip were on the carpet, heads hung, listening to Wisecrack's ridiculously choppy voice bubble on about the potential consequences of their little mishap with the hand.

"... and to think it was only a bloody Grade III Prank!" he was saying. "You slime! You've set a whole planet of innocent beings in panic over a poxy Grade III! What if you'd been on a Grade I?"

Quip wanted to speak, to protest his innocence (i.e. shop his partner), but he couldn't raise his head and co-ordinate his lip movements quickly enough. Wisecrack's pauses were taut and exact – and ants' farts lasted longer.

"And what are you going to do about it?" Another pause, barely there, skintight rhetoric. "I'll tell you: you're going to get the hand back and put it where it was supposed to go in the first place, that's what you're going to do. Do you realise that this piffing Grade III Prank was only a lead-in? Part of the build-up to a whole volley of king-pin top-notch Grade I's? Part of a totally unique never-ever-done-before masterplan of ultimate genius Prankism? Possibly—YES!—very possibly the Return to Joy? No, of course you don't realise it, you scum, you witless badger-fellators, you piss-drinking farheads, you water-brained bags of stinking pus, you ... ach! GET OUT OF HERE AND GET THAT HAND BACK BEFORE I HAVE YOU MADE INTO GLUMBURGERS!"

"What's a badger?" said Quip on the way out of the Pranksters' HQ. They were both rolling their heads around, surveying the barren, moonlit Morosian landscape and trying to remember where they'd parked their ship.

"Dunno," said Gag as he tripped over a small rock. "What's a fellator?"

\* \* \*

Wisecrack, Honourable Grand Prankster for longer than anyone could remember, stood in the middle of Sulk Square and looked up at the giant statue of John Brown which towered over the winding, Paisley-curl streets of Saturnine City.

The lanky, bearded figure on the black plinth stretched his arms 180 metres up towards the heavens, like a man threatened with a gun; one hand was missing, and, as if in severe pain at the loss, the statue was screaming. Wisecrack chuckled behind his fingers when he saw the stump of the missing hand, then remembered Gag and Quip's foul-up, and the austere frown that perfectly matched all the others around him became genuine.

Pun and Punchline, his musclebound bodyguards, heard the muffled chuckle from their prescribed interpersonal distance, glanced around to check that no one else had heard it, and looked at each other. Pun nodded. It was his turn.

"Wisecrack," he whispered tentatively, funnelling his hand in front of his mouth to force the sound across the three-metre minimum, "please be careful."

"Yesyesyes. Yes," said Wisecrack somewhat manically, but still maintaining his grim expression.

He stared hard at the shiny pedestal, and deepened his frown as he read the New Morosian Motto: Alone We Are Strong, Content We Are Wrong. One of his infrequent moments of depression seemed to be threatening a visit. The Honourable Grand Prankster was not always able to mask his underlying despair at the decline of his own race, an inability which at least helped towards hiding good humour in public. And who would not despair of a race so highly intelligent, so fiercely independent, yet so hopelessly clumsy? A race whose misguided elders proscribed laughter and voluntary sex? A race which placed the deliberate mocking of another's ineptitude under penalty of death?

"I know, I know," Wisecrack mumbled on. "Glum guards everywhere. Danger of arrest. Ho-hum-ho. OK, as the amoeba said to its mate, let's split."

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The stern, cheerless face of Maxi Grump VIII filled the whole of the triangular screen. He, the Emperor of Morosia, was addressing his loyally solemn subjects, though, to an uninitiated observer, it appeared as if his gaze were directed over the heads and to the left of any viewers who had chanced to zap onto that particular channel. Television manners on Morosia were street manners: no one's eyes were threatened, no one's privacy intruded upon. The fine art of communication had become the art of appearing not to communicate at all, though, unlike deliberate humour, communication was not actually forbidden, merely looked down upon. Farts, burps and genital squelches, when clearly accidental, were considered more polite than "Hi. How are you?"

Of course, as every Prankster or other vaguely rebellious citizen knew, it was all a cheap cover-up, a pervasive over-compensation for the Morosian affliction: no, it simply would not do if Morosians, or—JB forbid—lesser species, were to make jokes and laugh about Morosian sensory-motor deficiency. As the vox populi had it, You laugh at me, you laugh at JB.

"... the reward," Maxi Grump was saying, "for the citizen who secures the safe return of Our Saviour John Brown's hand shall be a permanent seat on the Morosian Inner Council, a house at the foot of Mount Glum, and a lifelong supply of Glumbo-Düster Turbo-depressants."

The Emperor Maxi Grump VIII then waved his hand at his audience, and, duly unbalanced, proceeded to fall off his throne.

No one, except for a few well-hidden Pranksters, uttered even the tiniest titter.

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Detective Inspector White wiped the gingery vomit from the edge of the sink, rinsed his hands under the gushing tap, and buried his pasty face in a towel.

"You OK, Colin?" said Black.

"Sure, Alan," said White, his voice muffled by terry-cloth. "It's just a bit of a hangover."

"Pics of blood and guts didn't help, I'm sure," said Black.

White looked down at his hands among the folds of the towel and rubbed the rough pads of his fingertips against the cloth. Suddenly, his head cleared—cloudy thoughts disappearing like scummy bathwater swirling down a plughole. "Alan," he said, "what would be the first thing you would do if you found a normal human hand—severed—in the street?"

"Er, is this a joke, Colin?"

Though he was sure his partner wasn't in the mood for it, Black had nonetheless been thinking of hand it in, or put it in a hand-bag, or I'd have to look in the handbook, or ...

"No," said White emphatically. "No joke. Go on. What would you do?"

"Call the cops."

"You are the cops."

"Call an ambulance."

"For a hand?"

"Try to identify it."

"How?"

"Fingerpri ..."

"Exactly."

The younger man gasped, then snatched up a pile of photographs he'd been sifting through when White had so suddenly rushed to the sink. He began to leaf through them again, eagerly this time, carelessly dropping the rejects on the floor.

"Here it is!" he said. "This one. And this one. And maybe this one."

"Get them down to the lab," said White, "then fax them through to the capital. It's a long shot but ..."

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"Er, how do we get there?" said Gag as he stared blankly at the navigation console of the ship.

"Same way as last time," said Quip.

"Well?"

"If you remember, my dearest corny Gag," said Quip, "you spilled half a bottle of Glum Star brandy on the controls, then wheeech! Looks like we need another bottle."

"Isn't that a bit random?" said Gag. "I mean, we could end up anywhere in the galaxy."

Quip turned from the controls, nearly fell off his stool, then said,

"And how else do you propose to do it?"

"I'll get the bottle."

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While the ship was speeding towards the nice little blue-green planet, Gag stuck his nose far down the neck of the Glum Star brandy bottle and tried to suck up the remaining half of the green liquid. He'd given up the attempt to slurp the puddles from the console, feeling rather peeved about his inability to co-ordinate himself. Despite months of underground Prankster training, he was still just about as clumsy as any other Morosian, and he knew he'd only been allowed to remain on the training course because of his father—and his father's legend.

Gag drew his nose out slowly, licked glistening green droplets from his thin, hairy lips, and promptly dropped the bottle. Though the lightweight container didn't break, the better half of the 345° proof, hallucino-booster Glum Star brandy—Morosian Megastar Mindbender Mild—sloshed around the bottle, some dribbling out onto the floor and heading off in search of circuits it could foul up.

Quip was steering the ship, so Gag, slightly drunk now, hobbled off towards the sleeping area and eventually fell clumsily onto his bunk and began to think about the prank.

That bloody hand, he thought, the bloody left hand of John bloody Brown's statue, which was supposed to have ended up suspended from the main city centre bridge over the River Sullen, was going to mean his end as

Prankster. Regardless of the dozens of classic Grade I's and II's he and Quip had pulled off, regardless of his late father's hero-status in the underground organisation, the bloody hand was going to cost him his membership and, automatically, his monthly ration of illicit mega-uppers.

Suddenly smitten by Prankster nostalgia, as if taking stock of his soon-to-be-terminated career, he fondly remembered his favourites: for one, the enormous grotesque caricature of John Brown, contorted to represent the throes of self-induced orgasm, that he and Quip had laser-burned onto the flat side of Mount Glum, overlooking Saturnine City—a handsomely rewarded Grade I; how he and Quip, in separate ships, had spray-painted the Morosian Inner Council Pyramid their favourite (forbidden) shade of puke green—a Grade II; the virus they had fed into the news transmission mainframe, which, for a few hours, had substituted obsolete and prohibited Joyous words for the state-prescribed depressing ones—another Grade II; the countless laughing gases and aphrodisiacs they had pumped into the air-conditioning of numerous government buildings—all, sadly, warranting no more than Grade III classification.

He wondered about the series of top-notch pranks Wisecrack had referred to—what could they possibly be? Were they, as he had hinted, really part of a final push for Joy? Were they to be the flurried barrage of Ultimate Pranks that would produce such a powerful, prolonged state of mirth among the Morosians that their chains would shatter? Was this to be the long dreamed-of return to a society, a society still within living memory, where malice-free laughter and casual, mutual mocking were the order of the day?

Finally, and not for the first time, he wished that he, Gag, could assassinate that dour, humourless alien, John Brown. That, however, had been taken care of long ago—by Gag's own father, the immortal Epigram. Unfortunately, it had not been taken care of quickly enough, with the result that John Brown's Principles had revolutionised Joyous values and plunged the former planet of Joy into its present Morosian Age.

Gag shifted on his bunk and fell onto the floor of the sleeping area, badly hurting his arm—the only one he had. He cursed for a while, muttering a string of singularly unkind things about John Brown, and rubbed his multi-jointed elbow.

\* \* \*

Black was pacing around the office, reading from an open Central Criminal Records docket,

"... Arresting Officer: Detective Sergeant Colin White ... Hey! That's you!"

"Yes," said White.

"You arrested this John Brown?"

"Yes, I did," said White tiredly. "Twelve years ago. Er, and then they promoted me."

"... fifteen convictions for murder," Black continued, "suspected of at least ten others with the same MO. All victims were raped post mortem and ... Jesus, this guy was really out to lunch ... decapitated and dismembered."

"He was a psychopath," said White as if ascribing the most benign profession to an observed suspect, "and, interestingly enough, the shrinks said he was quite literally a lunatic."

"Eh?"

"It means that every time there was a full moon he had the uncontrollable urge to destroy, which in his case meant kill women, rape them, and cut their heads, arms and legs off."

"Sounds dodgy to me," said Black, though he masked his sneer well. "Werewolfish. Zombie-oid. Video Nasty material."

"Check the dates," said White. "We did."

Black shrugged and read more from the docket:

"... escaped Highmoor Top Security Prison in ... What! Escaped! ... never recaptured ... You mean – Christ! – this guy's on the loose somewhere?"

"I doubt it," said White.

"Well?"

"He was a compulsive killer," said White calmly, "with a totally unmistakable trademark. If he was still around, he'd have killed again by now—and we'd know about it for sure."

"S'pose you're right," conceded Black. "Er, what was he like?"

"Oh, just your usual loony type. Babbled a lot of guff about UFOs and direct contact from other planets, insisted his victims were aliens who had come to invade Earth by rendering the whole of the human race helpless, limbless ..." White found himself slowing down as he said this; he felt a slight rebellious rumble in his stomach. "... hmmm. S'funny. You know what he said when I asked him why he had chosen to kill those particular women?"

"What?"

"He said, 'They laughed at me'."

\* \* \*

Years previously, Wisecrack had kidnapped a mate for himself and locked her up on one of the lower floors of Prankster HQ. He was on his way to visit her for the fourth time that day, probably a result of his slight depression, though possibly not.

The population of the planet Morosia, formerly Joy, was approximately 250,000. A mere ten thousand of these were females, which was probably just as well for the male Morosians, since Morosian women were incredibly beautiful: apart from flowing strips of exquisitely slimy, mucous-drenched flesh that stretched from their chests to their delta crotches and up their backs again, their short, squat five-legged bodies were covered with dainty, black thorn-like spikes, spikes so delicate that Morosian male hearts rushed at a single touch; their winsome heads were starkly bald, scaly, and tufted with mushroom-like warts; their single arms, spike-free, sprouting from beneath their three spiked breasts, were substantially longer than male Morosians' arms, containing no bones, so that, like snakes, they could curl around anything and squeeze it. Their gorgeous faces were fetchingly flat and sandy-brown, dominated by long, brittle noses—which again were tufted with pretty warts; the nostrils, most

sensitive erogenous zones, were arranged over-and-under, just above a perfect oval mouthful of jagged teeth; their svelte tongues were split four ways—for very practical reasons; their two ravishing, fluff-framed eyes, with their permanent lascivious stare, jutted out on stubby stems, and could swivel to flirt within a range of 220°.

The dizzying body odour of a Morosian female would have made even the toughest human being faint, though not without that privileged individual first asking himself how the burned fat and horseradish sauce had fallen into the chocolate mousse. Their seldom-heard voices were as sweet and silky as scorched toast, and their graceful, elegant gait begged a comparison with severely lobotomized anteaters.

The latest in a long line of mutations, only two generations old, had meant that both males and females of the species were endowed with four primary sexual organs, a perfect union of which was required before reproduction could take place, that is, quads or nothing. For a race so clumsy, this was no minor feat—hence the sad decline in population. The many mutations were inevitable in an environment rendered so dynamic by the planet's numerous moons: almost all of the few lusciously fertile females available were affected by the rapidly changing, often radioactive, environment, thus ensuring a widespread gene pool as unpredictable as a twelve-star Glumbo-Düster psychedelic depressant trip or a Charlie Parker sax solo.

The Honourable Grand Prankster and his mate, the willowy Spirituelle, had successfully produced seven sets of quads over the years. Only four of these offspring, one delightful set of male quads, had been allowed to live: miraculously, they had all been born with short noses, side-by-side nostrils, set-back eyes, two legs, two arms with five fingers at each end, and one set of reproductive organs apiece. Wisecrack was waiting for a vaguely similar quartet of female children, and getting impatient, which, on Morosia, meant horny.

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Morosian technological achievements belonged to the past. The spaceships, computer and communications systems, and other modern toys and conveniences stemmed from a slick Diamond Age when Morosians were considerably more in command of their sensory-motor capabilities, if not exactly nimble. Now, one-armed, with legs of five different lengths, they bumbled around gawkishly and tended to fall over as soon as they stopped moving.

Thus did Gag gracelessly flop onto his stool beside Quip, just as the ship was slowing to hover above one of the smaller green land masses on the nice little blue-green planet.

"Epigram told me about this place," said Gag as he stared down at a thin blue arm of water that separated one small shapely chunk of land from another larger one. "He was on the ship that brought back John Brown."

"Yeah?" said Quip, uninterested.

"Yeah, " said Gag. "They're all the same as John Brown, you know. All of them. Billions of them. They have terrifying capabilities, even the young ones. Especially the young ones. And they're so ugly, most of them are even uglier than JB. My father's Universal Study Group ..."

"I'm not interested in your father's Study Group," snapped Quip. "Sure, he got rid of Brown, your Epigram did, but, as you've just said, he brought the silly bugger down on us in the first place."

"As a specimen! An exhibit!" said Gag insistently. "How was Epigram to know that Maxi Grump VIII would listen to every word the guy said? Epigram and his Group weren't the ones who allowed him to become the planet's bloody guru."

"Yeah, yeah," conceded Quip. "Well, at least your old one did the right thing."

"If he hadn't, I would've," said Gag, verbalising his earlier daydream.

"Yeah, yeah," said Quip, making no effort at all to disguise his condescending tone. "Now. Strap yourself in like a good little Moroslet. We're entering the atmosphere in about fifteen seconds."

\* \* \*

"Right, Colin," said Detective Sergeant Black as the Panda car approached the MoD Research Centre, "tell me this: how did a gigantic model of an escaped mass murderer's hand, made of a material unknown to modern science, just happen to fall from the sky and land in the middle of our local High Street?"

"Er, got an easier one?" said White as he dropped a gear to turn into the Research Centre driveway. "That sounds like a starter-for-ten-thousand."

"Weird," said Black.

"Your word of the week, eh?" White nodded to the armed guard as they were waved into the enclosure.

"Look, I know this sounds crazy," said Black, "but doesn't it seem likely that this thing really is from outer space?"

"Yes, Alan." White parked the car beside the entrance to the hangar, cut the headlights, and reached for the doorhandle. "It does seem likely. Very likely indeed."

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"No," said the grey suit from the Ministry, "we still don't know what it's made of. And we've no idea where it came from."

"Any guesses?" said Black.

"Er, I'd rather not go into that," said the suit.

"Too weird, huh?" said Black.

"Well ... yes."

Around the suspended hand lay all manner of broken tools: bent chisels, shattered drill bits, warped hammers, toothless saws. Boffins were currently trying to dissolve the edge of the thumbnail in super-concentrated nitric acid, which merely dribbled irritably onto the floor and burned fist-wide holes in the dusty tarmac.

"And," inquired Detective Inspector White, "the fact that this is a model of an actual escaped mass murderer's hand doesn't help?"

"How could it help?"

"Erm ..."

They all stared hard at the hand, as if hoping it would take pity on them and reveal its meaning, pass on its message; but the hand was silent. White shrugged his shoulders, and Black shrugged back. The grey suit from the Ministry was about to speak when the silence was suddenly broken.

The sound was like the brakes of a hundred juggernauts all screeching to a feverish halt for the same voluptuous hitchhiker. Then there was a low buzz, almost a sizzle. Then there was a short, sad mechanical whine, followed by the ear-splitting skirl of tearing metal as the ill-fitting door of the spaceship slid open and the exit ramp slid out.

The forty or so people in the hangar could only gawp with glazed-over eyes through the wide-open entrance at the steaming green and orange spaceship, which was shaped rather like a factory reject chocolate chip cookie.

\* \* \*

"Ignore them," said Quip. "Just pretend they're not there. Morosian manners for a change. Focus on the hand. We go straight for it, tie the cable, and go straight back out. OK?"

"Sure," said Gag, taking the coiled towing cable in his hand. "Whatever you say."

They shuffled towards the ramp. Quip looked out at the open entrance to the hangar, gasped when he saw the small crowd of JB-lookalike aliens, and promptly tripped over the bottle of Glum Star brandy, which then bumped over the low ledge at the doorway and rolled down the ramp towards the hangar. Quip let out a short, effete scream and tumbled down after the bottle, a blurred rotating flurry of gangly legs and olive-green scales.

The brandy bottle landed first, spilling its contents, forming a wide, steaming lake across the floor. Quip looked up and saw the horror-struck faces of the aliens begin to slowly change as the Morosian Megastar Mindbender Mild Glum Star brandy vapour spread quickly through the atmosphere of the hangar.

Gag, still at the spaceship doorway, saw the crowd begin to laugh at his partner, was surprised at first, then began chuckling himself. He remembered the quad-M brandy and immediately thought that maybe this was going to be a much jollier little foray than he had imagined. John Brown, in six whole years of highly exposed public life on Morosia, had never laughed once. But then, no one had ever dared to put him in the vicinity of a bottle of Glum Star pilsener, never mind quad-M brandy.

Quip picked himself up off the ground, steadied himself on three of his legs, turned, and signalled frantically with his arm for Gag to follow. The signal again caused him to lose his balance, and he fell over.

The overture of fresh, drunken laughter annoyed him, though he was too puzzled at the unexpected reaction for his annoyance to last long. He signalled again from the ground, and Gag descended the ramp towards him as gracefully as anyone with legs of five different lengths can.

"Give me the cable!" said Quip.

"Why?" said Gag.

"Because I want it!"

"But I want it too!"

"Who's in charge here?"

"Good question."

"No question," said Quip. "I'm in charge."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, ..."

The staff of the MoD Research Centre, and Detectives Black and White, were by now rolling around in uncontrollable laughter. The slapstick entrance had been funny enough to their rapidly addled brains, but the dialogue, in

broadest melodic Morosian, sounded, to their ears, like a speeded-up recording of a rusty pop-up toaster and a team of horny tomcats arguing with an out-of-tune trombone and a hectic flock of penguins.

Eventually Quip simply grabbed the towing cable from his partner, and the two waddled hilariously towards the hangar, Gag hanging back, sulking slightly.

They approached the edge of the giggling crowd, which parted to allow them to make straight for the hand.

"S'looking good," said Quip, frowning as the crowd again burst into peals of laughter at the sound of his voice. "Just hanging there for us. Tying it up should be a walkover."

Gag wasn't paying attention. He was thinking about the horrible tortures the assembled zonked-out aliens would be subjected to if they were to dare such open displays of mirth on Morosia. He stepped on the tail of the towing cable, and fell over onto his nose. His cry of pain would have wakened the deadest of the dead on Morosia; on Earth, it elicited yet more belly-laughs from the assembled inebriate Ministry staff and police personnel.

A light flashed, causing Gag to stagger again, then another, then another: slapstick stills, snapped by a surprisingly alert egghead.

"Will that harm us?" asked Gag as he swivelled his head around dementedly.

"You tell me," said Quip, gripping the cable tighter and straightening his body in an attempt to thrust more determination into his waddling gait. They stopped in front of the hand.

"Here it is," said Quip with a soft sigh. "Get that cable over it."

"Yes, Boss," said Gag sarcastically. "You get round the other side."

Stumbling over the discarded tools, Quip edged his way around the giant fingertips. When he reached the other side of the hand, he signalled to Gag to throw the end of the cable over, then slipped on a loose drill bit and landed on his bruised behind.

The crowd, now surrounding them, but keeping their distance (as if aware of Morosian law), erupted with more orgiastic laughter; some applauded,

though with as much sense of rhythm as a rabid hyena with a tambourine. The looped end of the towing cable slapped down onto Quip's protruding eye. The beleaguered Morosian emitted a long staccato squeal, which caused the crowd to look around in search of the flock of crows—and the maniac who seemed to be machine-gunning them.

\* \* \*

"Ho ho ho! They're going to tow it away," said Black, his eyes streaming as he turned to his smiling partner.

"Looks that way," said White, then cackled like a ticklish old wizard.

"Aren't we going to stop them?"

"How?" said White, then guffawed when he saw the end of the cable slap onto Quip's eye as the Morosian floundered among the strewn tools.

"Well ... we could at least ask them about this guy Brown, couldn't we?"

"Don't speak the lingo," said White, coughing now between giggles.

The Morosian Pranksters were now both up on the palm of the hand, bossing each other, arguing about the type of knot necessary, their long scaly arms waving about frenetically.

"These guys should be in Hollywood," said Black. "They're almost cute."

\* \* \*

Gag and Quip slid off the palm of the hand, tumbled to the floor of the hangar, and rolled head-over-many-heels a few metres towards their ship. Quip sat up, glared at the assembled goggle-eyed onlookers, and felt around for the end of the cable. He found it between his outer and fourth legs.

"As the stripper said to the satirist ..." he began.

"Ready for take-off," said Gag, who knew all the "as the ... said" jokes in the book, even the weak ones.

Rubbing their various bruises as they hobbled along, they eventually reached the outstretched ramp, climbed it slowly, and entered the ship. They

turned, like royalty boarding a plane, to look back at the crowd in the hangar doorway. Gag found himself unable to resist a slight bow and a fluttering wave as he stood at the threshold. He was sure he saw one or two of the tittering aliens begin to wave back—just before he stumbled, lost his balance, and lurched backwards into the ship, as if pulled by an invisible string.

The door screeched closed, and the ramp slid slowly and awkwardly into the ship's base.

Quip was already at the navigation console, pushing the large user-friendly buttons, getting the ship's engines ready.

"I thought I told you to ignore them," he said to his partner.

"Couldn't resist it," said Gag. "They all looked so cute. I'd love to take a few of them along. They'd sure cheer up Morosia."

\* \* \*

The man from the MoD was shouting through a loud-hailer, a broad grin across his face:

"Everybody outside! They're—he he he!—going to pull the hand out of here! Qu-quick!"

Men in white coats began to scurry and scramble around in all directions, even though the door was directly in front of them. The two policemen stood silently, dazed, staring drunkenly at the spaceship.

"One thing," said White as he heard the whine of strange engines.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what's that?" said Black, who was standing over the empty Glum Star brandy bottle, breathing deeply.

"Either we don't know anything about aerodynamics, or they don't."

The two detectives slowly made their way towards the hangar entrance, stumbling occasionally, reaching it just as the spaceship rose and began to hover a metre above the ground. The towing cable tightened. Then the whine rose to a cranium-cracking squeal and the ship shot off upwards and away, whisking the giant hand behind it. The front of the hangar was practically

demolished as the thumb caught the side of the entrance and caused the roof to cave in.

Within no more than a second, the ship and the hand had disappeared.

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