

THE LEAGUE OF
EXTRATERRESTRIAL GENTLEMEN

Blackpool, Central Pier, 1899.

It was cold and grey, and very hard to tell whether the moisture slowly soaking him to the bone was the sea-spray or a light drizzle. To Henry Gordon Jago, it was the perfect weather for finding a music hall and scouting the local talent – in a strictly non-professional capacity of course, since his enforced retirement. And yet, here he was instead clambering around the underside of a pier looking for a troll. Litefoot told him it would be good for his health, but frankly he thought a cigar and a nip of brandy would be much more efficacious.

‘My word,’ breathed Litefoot.

At least the good Professor wasn’t one for ignoring his own advice.

‘Well, George,’ Jago breathed. ‘There’s your troll.’

There it was indeed. Grey skinned and squat, it was splashing around in the water under the pier. Paddling? Looking for fish? Jago couldn’t guess. Instead of a head as a normal man would know it, it had a large grey dome

with two slit-eyes cut in it and a sharp tongue flicking out of a small mouth.

And it was looking up at them.

No, it was *charging* up at them.

‘Henry,’ said Litefoot nervously. ‘I think perhaps –’

And then the creature had him by the throat, throttling the very life out of him. It gurgled and hissed as it attacked, flecks of its spittle peppering the Professor’s face. George Litefoot himself was starting to turn an alarming shade of purple.

‘I say!’

‘Henry!’ choked Litefoot.

‘Mr Troll,’ Henry babbled. ‘My good friend and myself are here on the express wishes of Her Majesty the Queen and we are empowered to offer certain assistance in the recovery of your vessel – goodness me – if you will use your skills in the service of –’

The creature stopped throttling Litefoot, and glared at Henry.

‘What kind of assistance?’ it hissed sibilantly.

Henry had to wait for his heart to settle before answering.

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899.

The Palace had been reopened fifteen years previously, following its death by fire and eventual reconstruction, but very few people knew about the new rooms tucked away at the rear of the building. Possibly the only people who did were the six strange souls standing there now, each of them dimly lit

by the new electric lamps. Ever the showman, it was Jago who took the opportunity to be centre stage.

‘My fellow adventurers,’ he announced grandly. ‘My companions in calamity. My attendants in adversity. Allow me to introduce our newest (and possibly our greatest) recruit, persuaded here at great personal risk to myself –’

‘Please, Henry,’ Litefoot sighed.

‘May I present . . .’

‘Scout Schtek,’ the grey troll barked, ‘of the glorious Sontaran Empire. I pledge an alliance with this world and its matriarch, Viktor-ia.’

At that, Schtek clicked his heels together and saluted. There was a moment’s silence.

‘Yes, well,’ said the Professor. ‘Myself and Mr Jago you know already. This is Major Andrews . . .’

Andrews nodded, but didn’t offer a hand: perhaps his experiences had led him to be wary of an alien handshake. Instead he straightened his already pristine uniform and nodded to the troll.

‘With InTUIT,’ he said briskly. ‘International Telegraph Union Intelligence Taskforce. We’re running this show.’

Thankfully, no-one contradicted the Major.

‘You represent this world’s military force?’

‘Not all of them, not yet,’ Andrews said, with a small smile that suggested he thought it was all the ones that counted. ‘This world is still divided into nations, with each having their own ruler. They didn’t necessarily talk to each other, you understand. But then the telegraph came, and there

had to be some kind of agreement about where the lines would run: nation began to speak unto nation. Engineers talked to engineers, but then the military had to get involved to ensure they didn't go wandering off where they shouldn't. And while we talked, we realised we had a lot of the same fears. About your kind. InTUIT was the obvious solution.'

'You are a military alliance between nations?' Schtek asked. 'To combat alien invaders?'

'Indeed,' Andrews agreed proudly. 'Plus the telegraph bods can advise on any alien telecommunications they pick up: we get the odd message, here and there.'

'It is an inefficient system,' the troll proclaimed.

Andrews bristled.

'This is Albert,' Litefoot swiftly carried on, motioning to the massive frame of a man apparently carved from thick, black tar. 'He's not really called Albert, you understand, but we do have to call him something. He's a refugee, like yourself.'

'I do not seek asylum,' Schtek barked coarsely. 'I need assistance to depart your world. That is all.'

Schtek looked Albert up and down.

'You are a Nestene foot soldier,' Schtek said.

It sounded like an accusation. The giant, bless him, just smiled down at the troll.

'I was left behind,' he said.

'By the Nestene,' Schtek pushed.

Albert looked to Litefoot, nervously.

'I was left behind,' Albert repeated, a little less certainly.

Jago leaned in conspiratorially.

'Best not push him, old chap. Not the brightest spark in the box and all that. Smashing fellow, though.'

'I see,' Schtek nodded. He tapped Albert's dark chest with a finger – of which Jago was surprised to note he only had three. 'The plastic he inhabits is primitive.'

'It's called celluloid,' Andrews bristled.

'It is interfering with his signals. You are fortunate. He would have killed you otherwise.'

'Yes,' Litefoot murmured. 'Well.'

'And I,' said their female guest, 'am Teresa Hart, and I would appreciate it if we could begin. Gentlemen?'

Of course no-one dare argue, not even Schtek.

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899.

Mrs Hart removed the sheet from the workbench, and revealed the corpse. Jago went a little pale, but didn't avert his eyes: Schtek on the other hand leaned forwards eagerly. Jago could *hear* him smiling, a trait that the troll shared with imbeciles and children. Mrs Hart motioned impatiently, and Litefoot stepped in: it took him only the briefest of examinations to confirm that the corpse was indeed dead. From the dress, he surmised that the poor unfortunate was destitute. From that, he suggested opium as the cause of death.

‘Is this really something that InTUIT should be concerning itself with, Mrs Hart?’ Major Andrews asked, rather curtly in Jago’s humble opinion. Chivalry was a dying art.

‘It is,’ Mrs Hart confirmed. Her eyes began to glow in a most disturbing manner. ‘Rise.’

The corpse sat up, to a chorus of gasps.

‘Do not trouble yourselves, please,’ Mrs Hart said coldly. Her eyes slowly ceased their unearthly glowing: no matter how often he saw it, Jago would never feel at ease with it. ‘The man is quite dead.’

‘My dear Mrs Hart,’ Jago blustered. ‘If I could pull a trick like that on the London stage . . .’

‘It is no trick,’ Mrs Hart said.

Although he knew her for London born and bred, and she dressed like the most respectable lady of Whitehall there ever was, there were times when Mrs Hart spoke that Jago could swear she was a Johnny Foreigner. As if she could read his mind, Mrs Hart coughed and let her natural accent start to reassert itself.

‘I’ve certain skills, but this wasn’t my doing. This is the opium. It doesn’t kill them, although it looks near enough, Professor, to fool even one as practiced as yourself. It drains their minds, leaves them a blank slate, ready to be commanded by anyone with even a little mental ability. It’s like no opium the Crown has ever seen before. You understand what I am telling you?’

Jago did: he’d seen enough rum pickings in his life to know when something was up. Something so far outside the purview of the normal

agencies that they wouldn't be able to see it with a pair of opera glasses and a clear day.

'There is a man named Wu, once a soldier of the Tong of the Black Scorpion,' Mrs Hart said, her eyes clouding over. 'He supplies the opium.'

She didn't have to say: they knew they had to find him.

London, Isle of Dogs, 1899.

They'd taken a cab down to the West India Docks, after the Major had reasonably surmised that where there were sailors, there would be opium. Litefoot and Albert had elected to begin their investigations elsewhere, and Mrs Hart was required to return the mindless soul on their mortuary table to the care of her superiors. So it was that only Andrews, Jago and Schtek had stepped out into the cold December air to watch the sailors bustle this way and that making sure that London had the sugar to make its Christmas sweet. Schtek had been heavily wrapped in a travelling cloak to disguise his misshapen head, but to Jago it only made matters worse: plenty of people still remembered Joseph Merrick well enough to be on the look-out for another crowd-pleasing freak.

Now they huddled in the shadows, waiting. Watching.

'And do all your females have such developed mental powers?' Schtek was asking.

'Ah, Mrs Hart,' said Jago, clapping his hands to warm himself. And perhaps because there was no audience here to do it for him. 'A sad, sad tale. She was once a victim of the dreaded Li H'sen Chang himself – the final

victim, as it happens, thanks in no small part to myself I might add. But the despicable Chang's influence extended even beyond his own death: once he'd put her under his mesmeric spell, she found herself in command of all the powers he'd had. And less in command of her own self. She's a cold one, my good Mr Troll – but not without good reasons.'

'I do not know a Chang,' Schtek said.

Major Andrews hissed at them.

'There,' he said.

They looked: a greasy haired lad of no more than twenty had made contact with a small knot of sailors who had finished their labours for the evening. All of them had the dead-eyed shakes that Jago had come to associate with opium use. His path was clear: as the sailors moved away, Henry Gordon Jago approached the lad to give what would doubtless be the performance of his life.

'Lad,' Jago croaked, letting his hand shake a little as he touched the boy's shoulder. 'I've got a terrible ache in me bones. I need me medicine, you understand? I need to dream that special dream.'

The lad pulled a knife and held it to Jago's throat.

'Who're you? Peeler?' the lad growled. 'Didn't think they bred 'em so thick. You want me to –'

The knife suddenly disappeared from Jago's throat. He took a second to regain his composure – and let his heart sink back into a semblance of its normal rhythm. When he dared look, he saw Schtek holding the lad up by his neck, all pretence at disguise abandoned.

'You will tell me where we will find Wu,' Schtek growled.

Jago had to admit it was effective.

London, Strand, 1899.

As Professor Litefoot rapped on the silvered knocker, he took the opportunity to look back over his shoulder. Albert was stood demurely trying to hide himself in the shadow of the trees, grinning like a child. No matter what Schtek had said, Litefoot didn't think the gentle creature could ever mean anyone any harm.

The door to the club swung open.

'What d'you want?' growled a man with tufty orange eyebrows and a skin complaint so bizarre that the professor was tempted to offer his services as a physician.

'I'd like to apply for membership,' he said instead. 'My name is Professor George Litefoot: I lecture in pathology at the Royal London Hospital?'

The doorman sniffed at Litefoot.

'Bad meat,' he said with a sneer. 'We're full.'

The door slammed shut, and Litefoot found himself forced to traipse back over to Albert. The giant figure looked at him sympathetically.

'It seems we'll have to try some other means,' Litefoot said.

Albert nodded.

London, Strand, 1899.

A few minutes later, and Professor George Litefoot of the Royal London Hospital Pathology Department found himself in the much less distinguished position of being pushed through a small window by an alien called Albert. He landed in a small heap on the floor of what was evidently the club's billiard room, and turned back to the window to discourage Albert from trying to follow him.

'I will be fine,' Litefoot reassured gently.

Albert paused for a moment.

'I was left behind,' he said sadly. 'Our home died and we came here to . . . to . . . do something. But it didn't work, and I was left behind. I can hear their voice sometimes – the other me, the rest of me – but it's so weak, so . . . I was left behind. I don't like to be left behind, Professor. I . . . need to be part of something bigger. Something more than me.'

'And so you are,' Litefoot hissed through the window.

The door to the billiard room opened.

'Why, if it isn't Professor Litefoot!'

Litefoot turned from the window as quickly as he could, and did his best to present a respectable façade to his new companion. He had to admit that he couldn't place the face . . . and yet . . . there was something familiar about him. It took a few moments, possibly because he was dressed in an expensive suit and not his uniform, but eventually Litefoot had him.

'Sergeant Kyle!'

‘Chief Inspector now, Professor,’ Kyle preened himself. ‘Thanks to this institution, I have no doubt. I didn’t know you were a member. I would’ve seconded you, if I’d known.’

‘Ah,’ Litefoot said. Lying had never really been his speciality. ‘I’m not exactly a member, as such. Not yet, certainly. I was . . . I was looking for a Mr Wu: I have some friends who assured me he was a member of this club.’

‘Wu?’ Kyle looked like he’d tasted something foul. ‘Are you close? I mean, I don’t wish to be indiscreet –’

‘I assure you I’ve never met the gentleman.’

Kyle plumped himself up to his full width.

‘Then I would suggest you keep it that way. Jumped up little coolie. He only got in because Dr Smith nominated him.’

‘Dr Smith?’

Kyle looked shocked.

‘You must have heard of Dr Smith!’

‘I . . . may have,’ Litefoot replied.

Kyle leant in conspiratorially.

‘Then you’ll have heard the stories,’ Litefoot didn’t think he’d seen anyone so excited by gossip since he’d told his housekeeper why he wouldn’t use the Chinese laundry. ‘Nobody I’ve spoken to has ever seen him, although they say he has rooms at Alexandra Palace –’

‘I’m sorry, did you say Alexandra Palace?’

‘Indeed. They say he’s a Scotsman. Or a cripple. Or a millionaire who dresses as a navy. Or possibly all that and more: if you ask me –’

‘Inspector Kyle,’ growled a thick voice. ‘Might I interrupt?’

Litefoot turned and saw a thickset man with tufty ginger eyebrows and a pronounced skin complaint standing in the doorway. A familiar man: the doorman smiled graciously, revealing sharp little teeth.

'I think Chief Inspector Barlow would like a word,' the doorman licked his lips. 'And I need a small word in private with Professor Litefoot here.'

'Barlow? Of course,' Kyle flashed Litefoot a quick smile. 'I'll see you around, no doubt.'

And then he was gone.

The doorman smiled, and pulled a carving knife from his jacket.

'Oh, I doubt that,' he said.

London, Shoreditch, 1899.

Teresa Hart stood in front of her master in silence.

'It progresses,' he said, softly. 'We shall have Wu presently. I only hope we shall have the time left to us that we so desperately require.'

Mrs Hart said nothing.

London, Isle of Dogs, 1899.

Schtek had held the opium dealer by the neck all the way down to the warehouse. Jago could see the white marks on the youth's neck where the troll's fingers had dug in. Still, it was no less than the lad deserved. For

preying on his fellow man, and spreading the evil opiate dream, of course. For that and nothing more.

‘Wu’s in there,’ the lad had croaked.

Schtek had wanted to kill him. Andrews had argued against it, and meanwhile Jago had advised the boy to run.

There had been some discussion about how best they should progress. Schtek had favoured the direct approach. Major Andrews had favoured being more cautious and sending a street Arab for some more of his department. That had led to Schtek suggesting that he could destroy Andrews’ entire government without breaking a sweat, which hadn’t gone down particularly well. In the end, Jago had suggested they go in and deal with what they found.

None of them had been expecting it.

He sat in the middle of the warehouse floor. His skin was pale, and his hair and his nails had grown much longer than any true gentleman would allow. His eyes were milky and white, and only half made the effort to focus on whoever was speaking. Rats were starting to nip at his thighs, but Wu gave no indication that he could tell: he looked for all the world as if he had been dead a week or more.

‘You’re here,’ Wu had said. ‘Who are you, then?’

‘My name is Major Thomas Andrews.’

Neither of his companions felt the need to introduce themselves.

‘Are you alright?’ Jago asked, pathetically.

‘I believe . . .’ Wu snorted. There was a silence. ‘Who are you?’

Even Schtek said nothing.

'I know you,' Wu said. 'You are here to punish me, I think. You are too late, I think. I had such big ideas. I had ever been the servant. Even as my master died, I had to drag him to the poppy palace. But that could've ended there. Mindless . . . Mindless . . . I could have . . . I would've been your king, Professor. But that I could keep my nose out of the . . .'

And then he'd died, calmly and quietly.

'So that ends that,' Schtek had said.

And then, suddenly, Wu's body had jerked.

His leg had kicked out, and then his arm had followed. Major Andrews looked across at Jago for reassurance, but he wasn't a pathologist: all he could tell you happened after death was that your enemies suddenly became your greatest admirers. Despite that, he felt he could be fairly certain that the dearly departed didn't suddenly sit up and stare at you with two marble-white eyes.

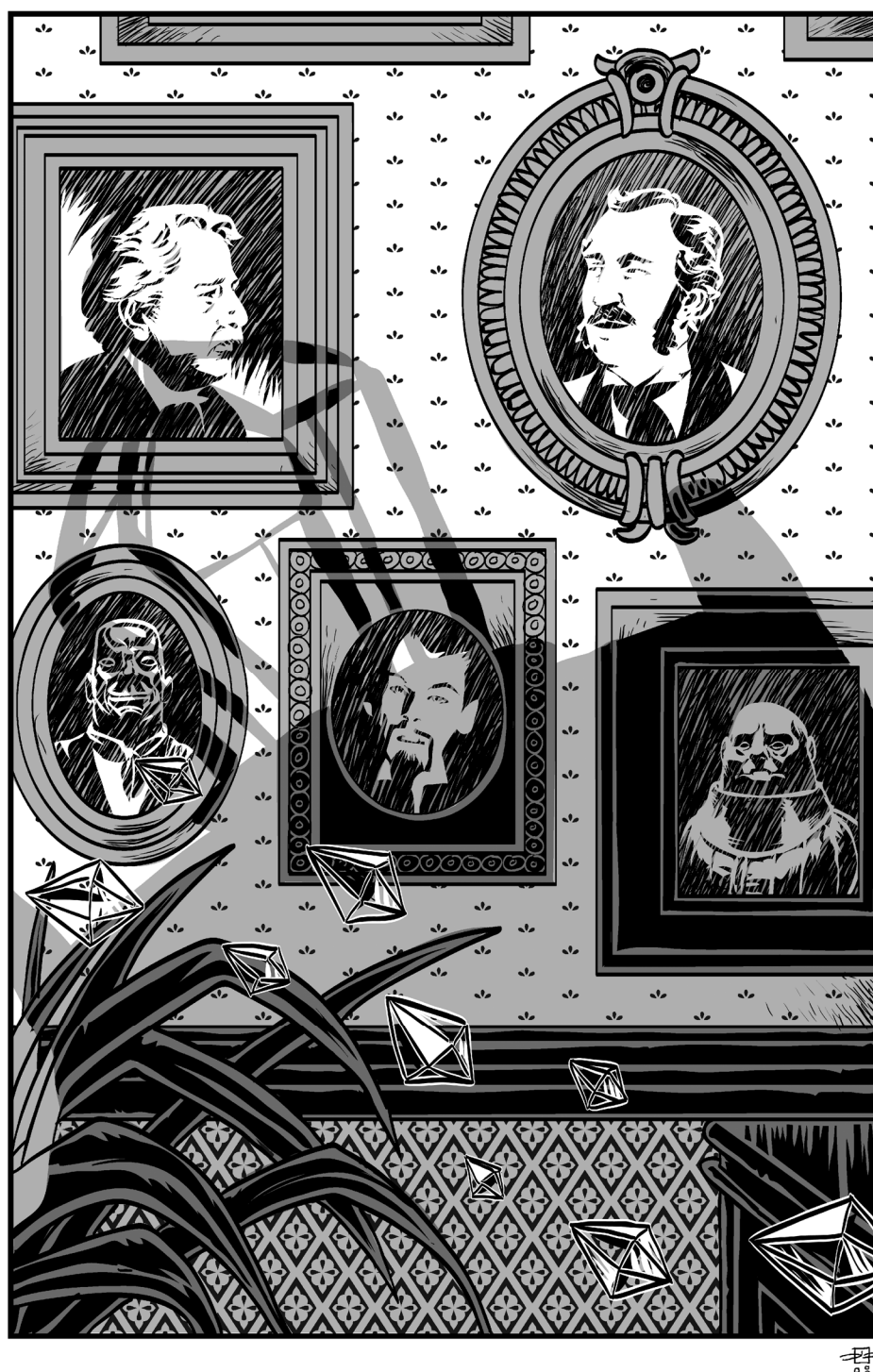
'It's the opium,' Major Andrews exclaimed. 'We suspected he must have been an addict.'

'And we were correct,' agreed Jago. 'But our own Mrs Hart is safely away from here. So who's pulling this fellow's strings?'

Jago suddenly felt his stomach turn, and he was forced to look away: Wu's skin began to develop large round blisters, which then danced around his body under the skin. It looked for all the world as if a nest of spiders had made its home under his flesh, and was now trying to find its way out. What kind of horrors had George gotten him into now?

'Fascinating!' Schtek breathed. 'Observe.'

Against his better judgement, Jago turned back.



Wu's eyes burst open, and disgorged a stream of clear crystals.

'Thank you, my good troll,' Jago said faintly. 'I shouldn't have wanted to miss that.'

The lumps on Wu's body were all streaming to his face now, having found their exit. The face was so distorted by the hideous motion that Jago

would've sworn not even the chinaman's own mother would have recognised him. Jago was going to be ill, he knew.

'What are they?' Andrews asked. 'Diamonds?'

'They have independent motion,' Schtek noted. 'and they combine. Observe.'

The troll was right: all of the smaller crystals pouring from the chinaman's body were starting to group together once outside of his body. With a pale flash, they merged together into larger crystals which then began to merge with others which then . . .

'I'm afraid I need a breath of fresh air,' Jago mumbled, and headed for the door.

'Don't let them escape!' Andrews called.

Jago didn't answer, just headed to the door with his stomach making some rather disturbing sounds. He feared he might be having a relapse of his previous problem, not quite cured by a stay with his sister. Once in the fresh air, he could do little more than stand bent double retching onto the dirt. His was a delicate constitution, he told himself, and with his years and background there was no shame in leaving the corpses to the professionals. Particularly when their skin danced so.

He looked up.

'My word!' he exclaimed shakily. 'Major Andrews!'

'A little preoccupied, Mr Jago.'

'Major, I assure you, you will wish to see this.'

The Major appeared beside him in the door, and looked. His mouth fell open. The docks were awash with crystals the size of a man's fist, all rushing

this way and that: the poor sailors, tarts and dock workers were running this way and that trying to avoid them, or else trying to beat the tide back with a broom or a docker's knife. As they watched, the crystals bumped and merged just as they had seen inside the warehouse, this time forming a most unusual shape.

Schtek ran from the warehouse behind them, chasing their own crystal, but soon stopped himself when he saw the others. Before their eyes, the crystals formed a large blocky form with rudimentary claws extended before it. Parts of it appeared to be made of metal, but Jago had seen only crystal go into its manufacture. Its head was a giant clear crystal, light reflecting in its pristine facets.

'What is it?' Andrews breathed.

'A warrior,' Schtek said with no little admiration. 'A challenge.'

The creature paused, and seem to look at them.

'It is a Kroton,' Schtek said.

London, Strand, 1899.

Litefoot backed away from his assailant, looking for a weapon. The billiard cues were at the opposite end of the room in their rack, and besides which he wasn't a common ruffian. It was Marquis of Queensbury, a good elephant gun or nothing with him. The doorman with the extraordinary eyebrows seemed to prefer knives, since that was what he brandished as he stepped ever closer. He licked his lips.

'I'm glad you broke in: I get to do what I want with trespassers,' he said.

'I think maybe a fricassée.'

'Now, sir,' stammered Litefoot.

The doorman grinned, saliva trickling down his chin.

To be honest, it was hard to judge which of the two of them was the most surprised when one of the billiard balls lifted itself from the table and flew across the room to connect with the doorman's head. He turned, perhaps expecting to see some accomplice, but instead he saw two cue balls flying themselves into his cheekbones. He dropped his knives and started flailing his arms around for protection, but to little avail. There were three tables in the room each with three balls apiece, which – once they had struck – simply picked themselves up and struck again.

'Professor,' called Albert.

Litefoot looked to the window he had entered by and saw two black tentacles snaking wildly through it. He hurried over and let them grasp at him, fighting his natural discomfort. Within seconds, he found himself lifted out of the billiard room and placed gently on the street in front of his comrade. Through the window, he heard the sound of two billiard balls clacking together, and then there was a loud crash and a flash of light. Smoke soon started pouring from the window.

'Well,' Litefoot said, dusting himself down. 'I suppose we should be thankful the club's proprietor ignored the stories of the explosive properties of celluloid billiard balls. If he'd had ivory balls like any true gentleman . . .'

'You are safe?' Albert asked, the tentacles slowly dissolving into his normal bulky but human shape.

'I am safe,' Litefoot confirmed. 'Thank you, Albert.'

The ebony creature smiled, like a child.

'And I have information which may prove to be important. This way, please Albert.'

'Where are we going?'

'Home,' Litefoot said.

London, Isle of Dogs, 1899.

The crystal monster, Schtek's Kroton, stood silently in the docks, the winter sunshine glinting off its newly constructed body. The docks had cleared: only the great ships remained, everybody else having run from the strangeness of the day. Except for Schtek, who panted in anticipation as he checked and rechecked a tubular device hanging from his belt.

'Is it dangerous?' Jago asked.

Schtek simply smiled as broadly as his tiny mouth would allow.

'Can you defeat it?' Andrews asked.

'It will be a challenge,' Schtek grinned. 'For the honour of the Sontaran Empire, I shall try. What more can any warrior want, but to die in glorious battle?'

'If I make it home today,' Andrews replied grimly, 'I'll take my son in my arms and tell him it's a fool's game being a warrior: he can find some more sedate occupation, like pleasure cruising.'

'Major Andrews,' Jago whispered. 'I think it's moving.'

And indeed it was: it spun around on his heavy tracks and started to trundle at a remarkable speed back the way that Jago and his companions had walked down early that day. Into the heart of London. The Major's face went pale as he watched it. He checked his pistol.

'We won't be able to stop it without proper armaments,' he said.

'You won't be able to stop it at all,' Schtek hissed.

'All the same, I must try,' Andrews said. 'For the British Empire.'

Jago felt his heart flutter: really, he wasn't meant for this kind of adventure. He was an old and weak man. The creature was almost away from the docks now: Jago felt a great temptation simply to watch it go, and then make his exit in the opposite direction.

'Jago,' Andrews said. 'You and Schtek follow that thing and try to slow it down. I'll go for reinforcements.'

And then he was gone.

God help an old showman.

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899.

Professor Litefoot snuck as quietly as he could manage through the corridors hidden in the depths of Alexandra Palace. The obsidian bulk of Albert pressed close to his shoulder in what Litefoot presumed the creature thought was a protective manner. The evening was wearing on, and the rooms were darkened: if George was completely honest with himself, he'd have to admit that it wasn't excitement that was making his heart pound so.

He listened as hard as he could for some clue of others in the building. The Palace was as silent as the grave.

How he wished he hadn't thought that.

'Professor,' Mrs Hart said icily. 'Have you come to report?'

Litefoot let out a breath, and drew himself upright.

'Mrs Hart,' he said, turning to greet her. She stood in a darkened doorway, dressed elegantly, as if for a night at the theatre. She raised an eyebrow as she readjusted her white lace gloves. 'I suppose that I have, in one way. I must confess I was hoping to avoid you, however. I'm looking for a Doctor Smith. He is with you, I presume?'

Mrs Hart didn't answer, concentrating on her gloved hands.

'I am right in thinking that your claims to be working on behalf of Her Majesty weren't entirely true?'

'I never said I worked for her,' Hart said, flashing green eyes at the Professor. 'I simply said "the highest power in England", and there's none higher. It was Mr Jago who mentioned Victoria.'

Litefoot shook his head.

'Silly old fool,' he said. 'All this time, and we've been doing exactly what you wanted of us. Finding this drug. Not, I presume, to destroy it? No, I suppose that would be too much to hope. You wish to market it, no doubt. The docks will be awash with mindless slaves before the week is out. Have you no soul, madam?'

Hart smirked at that.

'You still imagine this is about drugs, Professor?'

Litefoot looked up at Albert. The creature didn't move, perhaps waiting to take its cue from the pathologist. Between the two of them, they should easily be able to overpower Mrs Hart, even with her mesmeric powers. Always assuming that Albert was still with him, and hadn't been on Hart's side since the very beginning. The creature's innocent ebony face gave nothing away.

'Perhaps you would tell me what this *is* about?'

Hart paused.

'Some months back,' she said cautiously, 'a meteorite struck in Ashbridge. A crystal meteorite, shattered to powder by the speed with which it hit. InTUIT tried to claim it, and then the Crown were interested: my principal managed to claim the remains, convincing both sides that the other had possession.'

'Doctor Smith,' Litefoot said.

Hart nodded.

'He discovered what he'd already suspected,' she said. Her face had such an unpleasant coldness to it, Litefoot shivered to think he'd once felt pity for her. 'Under the right mental influence, the crystals could reform in any combination. *Any* combination, even down to the most minute detail. Gold, oil, diamonds. Opium. Before we could perfect the process, that disreputable Wu stole everything he could take.'

Litefoot felt Albert shift behind him.

'The fool,' Hart spat. 'No greater ambition than replacing the tongs and feeding his own greed, when we . . .'

'Mrs Hart,' Litefoot said firmly. 'This cannot go on any longer.'

Hart looked at him strangely, and then stepped to one side. Litefoot looked questioningly, but she simply waved him through the doorway into the darkened room beyond. There was a strange smell coming from the room, which eventually he managed to identify: poppy smoke. Litefoot drew himself up and stepped into the room, Albert following silently behind him.

'My dear Professor,' came a rich voice from inside. 'How long has it been?'

For a moment, Litefoot couldn't place it.

'My dear Professor,' echoed Mrs Hart. 'How long has it been?'

Litefoot turned back to her, only to see the poor woman suddenly collapse into a faint, her head hitting the floor with a sickening thud. He rushed to her, and was surprised to find that her skin was chilly to the touch. He felt for a pulse, but couldn't find one. She was already dead, her life turned off as easily as a gas lamp. Albert knelt and touched her skin with his tar-black hand.

Litefoot looked back into the room, and saw a figure in a bath-chair wheeling itself towards him.

'Forgive me, Professor,' the figure said. 'I'm afraid Mrs Hart was only ever a puppet of this unworthy.'

The bath-chair moved out of the shadows. A scarred figure sat hunched within it, one leg missing below the knee but still retained some kind of nobility to him. He had a long face and neat beard, and hooded eyes that Litefoot recognised only too well. He gasped.

'Li H'sen Chang!' he cried.

London, Hackney, 1899.

Jago ran as fast as he could manage, but Schtek was still far ahead of him, chasing after the Kroton and occasionally firing on it with that stubby little tube he kept on his belt. So far, the troll hadn't managed to hit the crystal creature, and so far it had ignored them both. Instead it just kept powering onwards, parting the crowds before it and sending man, woman and child screaming for the brandy.

What Jago wouldn't give for a quiet club and a cigar now.

Jago paused by a wall to catch his breath, and saw a gentleman dressed all in black watching him with a most disquieting look on his face. There was something about the man that looked familiar, although Jago would've sworn he hadn't set eyes on him before. Such an expression of malice would certainly have made an impression.

'Not to worry,' Jago panted at him. 'All under control.'

The gentleman didn't look like he believed him.

'Quickly, human!' Schtek barked at him. 'I have acquired transport.'

Jago looked up: the troll was hanging off the back of a hansom cab, with the cabbie holding the reins and looking most bemused. Jago took a deep breath and climbed up into the carriage, trying to give the driver a reassuring look.

'Don't worry,' he managed. 'I'm in the theatre.'

The cab drove off.

The gentleman in black watched it go.

‘I would’ve thought this would have brought him out,’ he said to himself.
‘Apparently not. San Francisco, then.’

And then he vanished inside a strange blue box.

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899.

‘Forgive me, Professor,’ Chang said, inviting Litefoot and Albert into his room. ‘Both for my actions, and my continued survival. Believe me, I am just as distressed as you. It seems that one of the many indignities the false god Weng Chiang has subjected me to is immortality. It is most . . . unwelcome.’

‘This is extraordinary,’ was all Litefoot could manage.

‘You are most kind,’ Chang said, bowing slightly in his chair. ‘But excuse me if I do not find it so. He has left me all my capacity to feel pain, and only one crippled leg. I fear I have been forced to barter the pain for an eternity of addiction. Still, all this too shall soon be corrected.’

‘I don’t follow.’

Chang raised an eyebrow.

‘Is it so? Forgive me, Professor. I am remiss in my explanations. I had expected you to understand without them. No matter,’ Chang took a draw on the opium pipe in his hand, and seemed to relax. ‘My former master, the false god, had a cabinet of wonders, Professor. You held it for him, for a while. A cabinet that could take him anywhere in time. I would use it to take myself back to the moment I met him, and destroy rather than aid him. All that stands in my way is a unique key . . . you understand my interest in the crystals now, yes?’

Litefoot's mouth hung agape.

'I was there when Chiang tried to escape using that cabinet, sir,' he said. 'I was told that if he had succeeded, he would have destroyed London in his wake.'

'Indeed, and so shall I,' Chang said softly. 'But once I have changed history, that too will change.'

Litefoot looked at Chang then, and realised that the Chinaman was quite, quite mad.

'Alas, that despicable Wu did not leave me enough of the crystal to recreate the key, and I had to involve you in my plan. I cannot apologise humbly enough, Professor.'

'Professor . . .' Albert said.

He was looking out of a curtained window.

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899.

The Kroton thundered down the roads, leaving those that didn't flee it quick enough dead in its wake. Either it fired on them using its bulbous weapon, or else it simply crushed them beneath its massive bulk. There was no doubt now that it was heading for their erstwhile headquarters at Alexandra Palace: perhaps the strange creature was a deliberate attack on them, set loose in response to their own mobilisation to investigate its genesis.

'You will jump,' Schtek shouted at the cabbie.

The poor lad gave the troll a disbelieving expression. He looked to Jago for moral support, but the old showman was too busy trying to keep hold

of his lunch as the hansom cab hurtled after this Kroton creature, its horses sweating and the carriage threatening to overturn at each corner.

‘You will jump,’ Schtek growled.

The cabbie obeyed.

‘What now?’ Jago asked.

‘Now,’ Schtek announced with a glimmer in his eye, ‘we ram!’

Jago looked at the grey-skinned troll, but didn’t see a hint of humour in his face. His stomach gave a very nervous growl, and Jago joined it with a whimper.

‘Now are you certain –’

Schtek swung the carriage around another corner. The horses were charging straight for the Kroton at a breakneck pace, their lips flecked with white spittle. He wondered if they even had the sense left to save themselves. Certainly Schtek didn’t seem to have. Fortunately, that was just the one kind of sense that Henry Gordon Jago had never been in short supply of. He closed his eyes and clambered to the back of the carriage before whispering a quick prayer and looking down to the cobblestones racing by underneath him.

If only Casey could see him now.

He dropped.

‘Die!’ screamed Schtek, and the hansom carriage slammed into the crystal bulk of the Kroton.

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899.

Dust filled the air of the street.

Jago pulled himself painfully to his feet and stood waiting for it to clear so he could see what damage the crash had caused. He could see the horses bolting into the distance – at the last minute they had ignored Schtek’s urgings and changed direction to save their own skin: the carriage itself, however, couldn’t escape the momentum and had slammed straight into the crystal beast, shattering itself to matchsticks.

The dust cleared.

The Kroton stood unharmed, holding Schtek in the air with a single claw. Its crystal head seemed somehow to scrutinise him. The grey troll’s head was bleeding, a dusty, dirty blood. Jago wondered just what it would take to scratch that crystal armour. Schtek was laughing asthmatically, and struck the Kroton with a three-fingered fist.

‘Wait!’ Jago shouted.

The Kroton turned to observe him.

‘I mean . . .’ Jago backed away.

‘Fire!’ yelled Major Andrews.

There was a loud crump, and then the air filled with whistling before the Kroton and Schtek disappeared into dust again. There was another crump, then another, and Jago felt himself thrown to the floor. Suddenly there were red uniforms all around him and the crack of gunfire. He had never in his career played Hamlet, nor for that matter played much of anything on the legitimate stage. He could see Major Andrews guiding his men’s fire through the smoke.

There was a crackle of electricity, and two of Andrews’ men flew through the air. The smoke cleared again, and the Kroton was there. It had a

massive fissure down one side, but otherwise it seemed unharmed. There was no sign of Schtek – was there any hope that the troll could have survived the initial assault? Jago was very certain that he was going to die, without having the opportunity to thank his friend George for the last few years of happiness.

‘Again!’ Andrews yelled.

Cannon fire filled the streets again.

The Kroton disappeared again into the smoke. This time when it reappeared, it rolled with renewed vigour towards the gates of Alexandra Palace. Jago saw the look of panic on the Major’s face – if the creature made it inside, then they wouldn’t be able to attack it without bringing the building down around its ears. He frantically ordered a fresh volley of cannon-fire, but to no avail: the creature disappeared inside.

‘Private,’ Andrews yelled. ‘Run and get us authorisation to destroy Alexandra Palace.’

‘What, again, sir?’ the private smiled.

‘Now!’

Jago wondered if they’d notice if he went home.

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899.

Litefoot had just decided that he had no choice but to tackle Chang when the wall at the far side of the room burst inwards. There was a rain of rubble and dust, and when it cleared both Litefoot and Chang looked on with open mouthed amazement. Standing in the ruins was a giant crystal-headed

creature, that seemed to look this way and that despite a distinct lack of facial features. It was roughly the same size as Albert, and probably just as strong with it.

‘Good heavens,’ Litefoot exclaimed. ‘What is it?’

‘I . . . am uncertain,’ Chang admitted.

The creature turned to him, its arms outstretched. The Chinaman gave a cry, and his hand went to his breast pocket: at first, Litefoot suspected he was having some kind of coronary attack, until he pulled out a crystal which was the smaller twin to the creature’s head and eyed it suspiciously. The crystal was pulsing with a strange alien light, and he seemed to have to hold it still with great effort.

‘It would seem we have an answer to the mystery of our powder,’ Chang said. ‘Most . . . remarkable.’

RETURN MYSELF TO ME, the creature barked metallically.

Chang looked up to Albert.

‘My apologies, Mr Albert,’ he said, and his eyes glowed.

As did Albert’s.

Suddenly the obsidian giant launched himself at the crystal creature, striking it with fist as hard as sledgehammers – the creature visibly rocked back its arms waving before it began to retaliate. A bulbous protrusion on the end of one of its arms started spitting smoke at Albert, and wherever it touched him the tar-black plastic of his skin began to bubble and blister. Albert did not seem to feel the pain, although Litefoot could see Chang’s face contorting as smoke touched plastic.

Litefoot had no idea what to do – he couldn't join Albert's fight, that much was certain: the two giants were tearing the very room down around their own ears in the efforts to destroy each other. Albert's limbs flowed and changed as he tried to gain some kind of advantage over the crystal monster, but his opponent seemed to have brute strength and weaponry on its side. Litefoot thought that his only hope to save Albert was to fight Chang, but the Chinaman had already had the same thought:

'Forgive me, Professor,' he said humbly.

A plastic limb snaked from Albert's back and knocked Litefoot to the floor, before trapping him beneath a giant five fingered hand.

DESIST! The crystal monster urged.

Albert paused for a moment, watching as his skin bubbled under the strange effects of the creature's smoke. Then his entire body seemed to liquefy, flowing around the monster until it was completely encased. Albert seemed to inflate, and then just as suddenly his entire body collapsed with a devastating *CRAK!* Litefoot couldn't help but think of the force exerted when two elephants charged. Albert's body opened, and the crystal creature was no longer inside. Instead, a fine white sand cascaded out onto the floor.

'At last,' Chang cried.

Albert looked to Litefoot, still trapped inside his plastic cage: there seemed to be a look of almost apology on his face. Then he bent to scoop some of the sand into his hand. By the time he reached out to pass it to Chang, the Chinaman's mind had already transformed the dust into a small round artefact the size of a cake of soap.

The key.

‘Chang, please,’ Litefoot urged. ‘You’ll kill us all.’

‘No, Professor,’ Chang shook his head. ‘I will save us.’

Change wheeled himself over to an ornate lacquered cabinet standing ominously in the corner. Litefoot recognised it, of course: it had been his family who had brought it into the country, thinking it to be a simple Chinese puzzle-box. But it wasn’t: it was the Time Cabinet of Weng-Chiang, and no amount of subtlety or intelligence would open it without the unique crystal key that fit its lock. Or a perfect facsimile of the destroyed key.

Chang pressed the crystal against the lock.

The crystal glowed, and the cabinet slowly unlocked itself.

The front panel slid slowly to one side, revealing a small alcove filled with flashing lights, wires and darkness: wherever Weng-Chiang had hoped to travel in his time machine, he clearly hadn’t been intending on taking any passengers. At least, no human ones. Litefoot shouted and tore at the plastic bars of his cage, but to no avail. Albert sat beside him, all the life apparently drained from him.

‘Chang, I beg you . . .’ Litefoot said.

Chang reached into the forbidden knowledge granted him by his link with Weng-Chiang and pressed a button.

The machine began to power up.

‘It will be better,’ he said. ‘I promise you, Professor.’

Chang turned back to the innards of the machine, and then was distracted by a sound. The machine began to whine in a most distressing manner, and embedded deep in the controls was something that shouldn’t have been there. A small black star of metal had sank its sharp teeth into the

control panel. It hadn't been there before: Chang's brows knit together in confusion. Blood was starting to drip onto the controls. This indeed was most strange.

His hand went to his chest, and found it wet.

'George! Are you alright?' shouted a voice.

Chang turned as quickly as his chair would allow, and saw two figures in the doorway: one was the theatre manager, Henry Gordon Jago. That was good – Chang had always wanted to apologise to him for leaving him without a star turn all those years ago. But Jago wasn't alone: he was holding up a squat figure with a bulbous head, thin yellow blood seeping from a thousand cuts all over its body. The grey troll had hatred in its piggy eyes, and another metal throwing star in its hand.

'You have killed me,' Schtek announced. 'I have killed you.'

'You have killed us all,' said Chang sadly, then died.

London, Alexandra Palace, 1899.

Weng-Chiang's time cabinet began to belch out thin white smoke, and filled the air with a high pitched whine that Schtek in particular seemed to find intolerable. The troll leaned against the wall as Jago hurried to try and release Litefoot, but to no avail.

'Turn that noise off!' Schtek growled.

'I can't,' Litefoot cried. 'I don't believe anyone can, now. It's just as before: the machine is building power at full stretch. Soon it will snap, like an elastic band, and half of London will be destroyed in the explosion.'

Schtek licked his lips.

There was a dull thud as Jago slapped Albert hard across the face. The celluloid giant's head didn't move, but the theatre manager began to dance up and down holding his injured hand.

'Albert, please,' Litefoot said softly.

Albert shook his head slowly, and suddenly Litefoot's prison was gone.

'I'm sorry, Professor,' he apologised.

'Remove yourselves from the vicinity,' Schtek barked.

Jago and Litefoot looked at each other.

'We'll never get away in time,' the Professor said.

'Now!' Schtek hissed.

They didn't argue. Jago forgot his injured hand and rushed over to help his friend the Professor to his feet. Together, the two of them were scooped up into the arms of Albert, who raced them both to the door. For a moment, the lumbering plastic monster paused and looked back. Schtek had pulled himself to his feet and was watching them unsteadily.

'Goodbye, grey-man,' Albert said.

Then he was gone.

Schtek tried to pull himself into some state befitting a Sontaran, but he was in a bad way. He had lost a lot of blood and was still bleeding, and the battle against the Kroton had left him with many broken bones. If he had his ship, he could survive. But without its life-giving energies . . . Schtek shuffled painfully over to the time cabinet. Without his ship's life-giving energies, he thought, he would just have to improvise.

He licked his lips.

London, Hammersmith and Fulham, 1900.

The tent was remarkably warm, given the inclement weather and the lateness of the hour. But then perhaps, Professor Litefoot considered, they were being protected from the worst ravages of the weather by the alcohol in their veins. Henry Gordon Jago had quickly set upon a pair of bottles of a particularly fine Rioja, and even Major Andrews had allowed himself a few pints of Best bitter. They were, after the trials of their recent endeavours, relaxing – and there was nothing wrong with that. They deserved the opportunity to see in the new century however they saw fit.

They were all there: Albert, Jago, the Major. Schtek was sitting next to the Professor drinking from a bottle of brandy and watching everyone through slitted eyes, looking non-the-worse for his near-death experience. Only poor Mrs Hart wasn't with them . . . but then, Litefoot supposed, she had never really been with them at all. Right from the moment she stepped into Weng-Chiang's lair, she had surrendered her life to the control of Chang.

'When shall we begin finding my ship?' Schtek asked.

'Soon, my friend,' Litefoot assured him. 'After your quick thinking saved London, I'm sure Her Majesty will put her finest men on it.'

Schtek swigged at his bottle.

'I did not do it to save your city,' Schtek grumbled. 'I did it to save no-one but myself. If it would kill one Rutan, I would gladly have destroyed a thousand of your Londons.'

Litefoot smiled politely.

‘Gentlemen,’ Major Andrews shouted. All turned to look at him. ‘You have saved your country, and earned the gratitude of its government and its Queen. And now it is time to tell you how that gratitude has manifested itself.’

‘Oodles of doubloons, I should hope,’ called Jago, with a laugh.

Andrews smiled.

‘Better,’ he insisted. ‘You shall all be given permanent employment for as long as you are able, seconded to InTUIT to protect the world from the strange and unusual threats you have proved yourself so adept at handling. My friends, I congratulate you. Cheers!’

Jago blew a loud raspberry. Even Andrews had to smile.

‘And on that note: don’t drink too much tonight. In the morning, you will be transported to the site of the new “Marble Arch” underground station. Construction has halted because the workers have uncovered a most strange thing: some kind of mechanical creature, as I understand it.’

There was a moment’s silence.

‘Well, Mr Jago,’ said Professor Litefoot, holding aloft his glass. ‘It appears that there is indeed no rest for the wicked.’

‘None whatsoever, Professor,’ Jago agreed good-naturedly. ‘None whatsoever.’

And so they saw out the century, together.