

*The fly in the ointment ...*

“Look, Jinny, you’re gettin’ me all hot and bothered sittin’ there like that. Then you’re takin’ it all away with your damn critic’s business. Make up your mind!”

“I’ve made up my mind, CM. You’ve got a bigger problem here than the one in your pants!”

Cedros scratched his head and tugged at his pants, rearranging his confused and discouraged manhood. He flopped back onto the bed in a gesture of full-stop hopelessness.

“Oh, come on, CM! Prick yourself up! Jinny will take good care of poor CM in a minute. But first let me show you what the problem is. And, as I said, it’s a big one!”

With the prospect of shagging Jinny O safely tucked away in his reptilian brain, CM crawled off the bed and stood behind Jinny, who was hunched over the computer. This is not to say that CM’s reptile brain was inactive, however, since the very reptile itself was rubbing against Jinny’s back.

“Come on, CM, knock it off! Get your mind on the business at hand!” And she shrugged him off. “Look at this!” she said, quite annoyed.

The problem Jinny had referred to originated in the fact that, as she said, he was a panster. He had been accused of many things in his life—“slacker,” “dredge-bucket,” “keg of spit” and the like—but panster seemed to exceed even Cedros CM’s range of debased epithets.

“You make it sound like I’m some kind of pervert, Jinny,” whinged CM.

“Well, you are that, for sure, CM. A regular, registered pervert, like. No, I’m talkin’

about this, this, *thing* you're writin' like you was some bloody Hemingway or something. It's so obvious you're faking the whole bit, CM. I just know it's gonna come round and bite you on the arse when you don't expect it. Take my word for it. Why, when I wrote *Tales of Langhosen*, didn't I fall into the same trap you're falling into?"

"What kind of trap do you mean, Jinny?"

"I mean the kind of trap you run into when you don't plan ahead, like I didn't with Lord Langhosen, and like you're not—like the part, here, for example, where you've got this old bugger Compton chilling his flanks like a side of beef, down at Metropolitan! Don't you think he's going to come around to bite you? You can't just fly off in your space-suit and leave Compton there at Metro, CM!"

For emphasis, Jinny closed the laptop lid rather too emphatically and it slid along the slick tabletop toward the edge. As she whipped around in her swivel chair to catch the device, she knocked CM's legs from under him and he toppled on the floor, sweeping the computer and the salt-shaker along with him.

"Hey! Look out!" shouted CM, amidst the tinkling of the shattered glass screen, the cracking of the plastic case, the popping loose of the hinges and Jinny's screaming as she jumped to her feet.

"You clumsy bastard, CM, look what you've done! You've busted up me brand-new computer! Oh, me compuuuuter!" she wailed.

"I didn't do nothin' to it, Jinny, I swear it!" CM scabbled backwards toward the door.

In a flash, Jinny seemed to have been overcome by a malevolent spirit. Her face twisted into an evil grin and her eyebrows, normally arched and cheery, bunched together

with evident malice.

“Now you’ve done it, CM. Now you’re going to pay for this bit of carelessness. Oh, I’ll make you pay, all right. You’ll pay until you weep bitter tears!”

CM had never seen Jinny like this—Jinny, the warm-hearted, big-bosomed barmaid. Was it really she who threatened him with such vitriol, such defilement?

“Take off your clothes, CM,” she ordered.

“What?”

“C’mon, CM, don’t play the fool. You heard me. Take off your bloody clothes! Every stitch! C’mon now!”

CM was approaching a fine state—a paroxysm of confusion, fear and lust.

“You mean now, Jinny? Here?”

Enraged at his insolence, Jinny O snatched at the neck of CM’s shirt and tore it violently off his torso. Buttons flew and bounced on the floor. His white, flabby chest heaved like a flounder in a boat.

“Off!” she commanded. “Take them off!” And she made as if to reach for his trousers but CM jerked into action, peeling out of his remaining clothes post-haste, until he stood naked and shivering, awaiting further orders.

Jinny pushed him onto the bed and ordered him to stay, as if he were a mongrel on a leash.

To CM’s amazement, Jinny then went to a Victorian wardrobe he hadn’t noticed before and pulled the doors open. Inside was a glistening array of black patent leather, along with an arsenal of chains, hooks, straps, ropes and other devices of dark utility.

CM watched goggle-eyed as Jinny tore off her flimsy robe and wriggled into a costume—the only word for it—consisting of a few cups and thongs, buckles and clasps. Then, to his horror, she withdrew what could only be two whips—one a horrible flicking thing with a small barbed hook on the end of a string, the other a more robust model consisting of knotted leather thongs fastened to a spring-steel shaft on a leather handle—a modern version of the venerable cat-o'-nine-tails.

To complete the outfit, she grabbed a black mask with red-ringed holes behind which the eyes lurked. Having donned the mask, she then flashed a sudden look at CM that made him jump. He came close to bolting for the door, but the look on Jinny's face, not to mention her menacing posture and upraised whip, convinced him not to move. He lay still as a cottontail faced with a rattlesnake.

Thus began Jinny O's "school of discipline" for naughty CM, who had broken her new laptop, and therefore the rules of the household, and so she would have to teach him better manners.

As a means of making a strict point, she began by tying him up with ropes and singled out his member for special attention, the same member he had enlisted earlier in hopes of performing special feats of prowess on Jinny's behalf. By skillful use of the whips and other pieces of tackle, she had CM both sweating and shivering within minutes. After twenty minutes, Jinny herself was sweating. She had not drawn blood. That was the beauty of it, the art of it—not to draw blood. But she extracted her pound of flesh in the most exquisitely precise ways, and with inexhaustible inventiveness.

At last Jinny tired of her exercise and threw the whips on the bed. CM had closed his eyes and was drifting somewhere, lost and befogged. But he heard the sound of snaps

and buckles being released, and when he opened his eyes Jinny stood naked before him, sweating and voracious. When she climbed on the bed he feared that she would devour him, which, in a manner of speaking, she did.

Only when she was quite finished with him did she untie the knots of his ropes.

“You stay put, CM. I’m going to freshen up.” And she disappeared into the tiny converted closet that served as a loo, squeezing into the shower for a hot rinse. Some time later she emerged, smelling of lavender.

“Now, CM, you’re going to go swab yourself, then you’re going to take me to the computer store and buy me a new laptop to replace the one you ruined.”

CM was too spent and too cowed to argue.

“I’ll have to put it on me credit card, Jinny.”

“Well, that’s fine with me, you buffoon, just so’s you pay for it.”

Jinny’s application of discipline upon CM had done wonders for her mood, and when CM had finally cleaned up and they stepped outside, it was as if the horrors of the Inquisition had never been visited upon CM at all. As they walked, she took his arm and talked excitedly about ways he could re-structure his narratives to avoid the unfortunate consequences of sloppy, undirected pantsner fiction coming back to bite him.

“Now about this Arthur Compton, love. You really can’t just leave him at Metro to rot, you know. He’ll come after you for sure. I think you need a plan ... ”

*CedrosCM thickens the plot ...*

Following Jinny's surprising lesson in body dynamics, Cedros took to heart her admonition to "do something" about his abandoning Compton at the Metro, else he imagined not only would Compton come biting after his arse, but he would be subjected as well to Jinny's bites with those oversized fangs he saw hanging in her cupboard.

He'd not only replaced Jinny's computer, but he bought himself a spiffy new laptop as well and equipped it to the hilt. If he was going to do this, he may as well do it right. His favorite table at the Bucket O' Blood had been repaired following his brawl with Arthur Compton and now he was ready to go: laptop open, ready to receive his every hunt-and-pecked text. CedrosCM never had learned to type, feeling that typing was for the girlies. But now, girlies or no, he had to get going on today's submission and try to change himself from a pantsner to a plotter.

But how the hell?

He'd pantsed his whole life, and though he would not claim any more than typical self-insight, he couldn't find any plot at all to his life, let alone anything to serve as a guide to what he promised to do under the thrashings of Jinny's whips.

Think, man. What's a plot? OK, a series of events. One leading to another. Twists and turns. Ending up in some place not known at the start. Yeah. That doesn't sound so hard. Jinny said Compton can't just be left at the Metro. A "next" needs to be written. Maybe a whole plot is not required just yet. How about just writing a "next." He could do that. Yes, he could. Anything but just leaving him at the Metro.

Cedros took a slug of brew, munched a few chips, wiped his fingers on his pants,

and closed his eyes. In his mind's eye he saw Compton, still in that hospital garb, arse exposed for all to see, and raging and snorting like a bull coming on. He was gripped by two burlies and they were having trouble keeping him in their clutch. He was not cooperating in the least with their attempts to photo and print him. All at once, Cedros knew what was next. He began writing.

*One of the burlies, holding the squirming bull named Compton, yelled out at the deskman, "Call Thompson to get down here quick."*

*The deskman complied at once. The call was answered on the first ring and the deskman said, "We've got us a situation down here. Doc, we need your help, quick, quick. In the mug room, quicker than quick is best."*

*Thompson was there in a flash and sized up the situation. "It's the loony bin for you, sir, and now I'm going to give a little something to make the ride over to Grabblestone a bit easier on life and limb."*

*Thompson took a syringe case from his pocket as well as a small vial, took out the syringe and loaded it with the "solution to all difficulties" as Thompson was fond of saying, and approached the roaring Compton with needle held high.*

*"Hold him now, you brutes. Steady as she goes. That's the ticket," said Thompson, as he brought the needle home and pushed the plunger, while doing a bit of a dance step in something akin to a professional ballet exercise.*

*"Call Grabblestone, and have the wagon pick him up. He'll be no trouble now for a few hours. Tell them to assign him to Dr. Mary Twigglesby at my request. This looks like a difficult case and we want the best."*

*Wow! Cedros had impressed himself as he hit the send button, forwarding 226*

words to the Narrative Section of the Deathling Crown Lottery. Then he remembered it was currently under siege from those aliens he'd narrated, and he realized he'd better get started right away on another "next." Had he plotted or had he pantsed? He'd let Jinny decide when she came in. Whether he'd be tortured or pleased, right at the moment he didn't care. He'd done his deed, was ready for more, and isn't that what a writer's for?

DCL 26 (PM) The Gates of Grabblestone ...

*The Gates of Grabblestone ...*

"Easy there, Mick, easy does it. One more buckle, Mickey lad, that's my boy. Now, then, Mr. Compton, how does that feel? What's that, you say? I can't hear you, Arthur. May I call you Arthur, sir? Too loose? Tighten that strap then, Mick, for our dear Mr. Compton here."

The two white-coated orderlies, Nelson and Mick, hefted the unconscious Arthur Compton, gurney and all, into the diesel-powered van. Nelson was fond of talking to unconscious or delirious patients, knowing full well they either couldn't hear, or couldn't understand, a word he said. In either case, a reply was impossible.

During loading, the van's driver had left the engine idling, claiming it was too hard to start otherwise, it being a diesel and this being London—though the London angle was hard to follow. But Nelson and Mick were accustomed to the exhaust fumes and didn't complain. Once inside, they continued to labor over Arthur Compton in a workman-like

way, making sure he was as well-secured as a grand piano, while Nick the Driver sat in the cab, worrying his molars with a toothpick.

The trip from Metro to Grabblestone took only twenty-five minutes, including a stop at the Pick and Shovel for a quick pint. As they approached Grabblestone, Arthur Compton had begun to stir, but he hardly qualified as conscious. Nick the Driver reached for the handset hanging from the overhead radio, to notify the gatekeeper at Grabblestone they would be arriving shortly.

“Yeah, this is, uh, Medical Transfer Service—over.” The radio crackled as the Grabblestone guard gave the go-ahead. Nick resumed: “Uh, yeah, this is Nick with incoming freight on the way. Got a live one for you, mate.” Nick strained to hear the guard’s reply. “What’s that, mate? Yeah, that’s right, Mr. Arthur Compton. Naw, he’s a right bleedin’ lamb, he is. Yeahhh, Doc Thompson took care of this one, slick as a whistle. Say again? Hang on a sec, mate.” Nick reached for his clipboard and scanned the order sheet. “Okay, mate. Says here he’s to see Miss Twigglesby. Marked ‘Urgent.’ That’s right, you heard me, mate: Dr. Mary Twigglesby, none other. Yep, Doc Thompson’s orders. Looks like it’s nothing but the best for our bloke Mr. Compton. OK, then, see you in two. Over and out.”

Nick replaced the handset on its cradle and whistled as he turned the corner, proceeding toward the delivery entrance to legendary, hulking Grabblestone. A uniformed guard opened the massive, shuddering iron gates and the lumbering van rolled through the opening, into a cobbled courtyard designed for horses and wagons.

Built in the late 1700s as a detention house, interrogation center and fortress during the first wave of “the Troubles,” Grabblestone still bore traces of its dark past: forged

iron bars, heavy chains, hooks and other inspired implements of late-medieval persuasion and restraint. Converted to an insane asylum in the 1800s and operated in those days by a religious order, “Grabble,” as it was called by locals, took its name from a hard local stone well-suited for cobbling streets, deflecting arrows and thwarting explosive *pétards*.

Now considered a major model of the modern medical approach to mental deviance, Grabblestone no longer employed the block-and-tackle techniques of earlier, darker times. Today’s methods centered exclusively on the enlightened use of powerful, psychotropic drugs. “Pills and needles—that’s all we need to turn out tractable clients,” boasted chief administrator Geoffrey W. Thurston II. “Give me a lion, and I’ll give you back a lamb. No more hot coals and branding irons, not in this modern day and age.”

Thurston, along with Dr. Twigglesby, had been called away from a staff meeting to greet his new guest, a term he used for all the patients under his care—“guests.” It was the *keystone*, he liked to say, in the arch of his enlightened administration.

“Excuse me,” said Thurston, glancing at the name-tag of one of the orderlies rolling Compton through the armor-plated freight doors.

“Em, Mr. Nelson, is it?” said Thurston.

“Sorry, sir, Nelson’s me first name, after Lord Nelson, ‘course. Me last name don’t fit the tag. I wouldn’t bother you with it, sir.”

“Oh, yes, of course not. Well then, Nelson, would you please just slip this camisole restraint onto Mr. Compton before you release him altogether?”

“Say again, sir? The cama—”

“Camisole restraint,” Thurston quickly interjected. “You probably know it as a ‘strait jacket.’”

“Oh, them, sir. Sure, we use ‘em all the time. Even tried one on myself once, but Mick wouldn’t let me out of it. I like to beat his bloody brains out afterwards, sir, if you’ll pardon my English.”

“Yes, yes, Nelson, I quite understand,” said Thurston, anxious to get on with it. “It’s just, you see, that when Mr. Compton comes around we don’t want him to become too—restless.” Thurston always found it wise to use gentle terms whenever possible, part of what he called ‘the therapeutic approach’ favored at Grabblesstone.

Under Thurston’s watchful gaze, Nelson and Mick unfastened the straps confining Arthur Compton to the gurney and pulled him into a sitting position. Mick held Compton upright while Nelson threaded his arms into the canvas sleeves of the camisole restraint, fastening the thick leather straps in the back with enormous, industrial-strength buckles.

“Doesn’t seem like too bad a chap, does he?” murmured Thurston observantly to Dr. Twigglesby, who stood next to him, officially presiding over the unloading.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that just yet,” said Dr. Twigglesby. “Looks like a queer fish, if you ask me. Just my professional opinion, of course. See that foam around his mouth? Now what does that tell you? Let’s just give him a drop of Adjustal—get him up to speed on the Relaxation routine here at Grabblesstone.”

Dr. Twigglesby flourished a syringe she carried in a long narrow case. She filled the instrument from a small vial tucked into her pocket. Dr. Twigglesby, who banked on her reputation for foresight, added, “Can’t be too careful with our guests. We don’t want Mr. Compton getting too upset on the first day of his recovery, now do we?”

“No, of course not. And after all, you’re the doctor,” said Thurston proudly, glad to be relieved of responsibility for this Compton bloke—

The narrative broke off abruptly. CedrosCM lifted his hands from the keyboard, leaned back and rubbed his eyes. He swiveled around on Jinny's chair and called out.

"Jinny, you still there, love? I think I need some plottin' help here."

"Hmmm?" said Jinny, who had fallen asleep. "What, CM?"

"Said I need some help with the bloody plot."

"Crikes, CM, it ain't brain surgery. Make it up!" Jinny sat up and stretched.

"Now look, Jinny. You're the expert, tellin' me I'm a pantsner and all that. Now I got my plots goin' in two directions. I'm like some poor bloke on roller skates and his feet are getting farther and farther apart." CM was rather enjoying his new role as whinging writer.

"OK, CM," said Jinny, as she hauled herself onto her feet. "What's the prob?"

"OK, love. Compton's out of Metro, right? But now he's at bloody Grabblestone, for fook's sake. And he's out cold. Meanwhile, there's an alien spaceship about ready to blast Truffington's headquarters! I don't think I can control this beast, Jinny!"

"You're not *supposed* to control it, silly. You're supposed to *follow the flow* of it. Let the characters drive the story, you know? If your skates are gettin' too far apart, why then just bring 'em together."

"What do you mean?"

"Bring 'em together, the two skates, 'til they're movin' in the same direction. Look, CM, who's to say you can't send that spaceship over to Grabblestone and have the teenie-weenies pick up Arthur Compton? Let 'em probe old man Compton while they're probing Truffington. Probe 'em both. Two-for-one, eh? Why not?"

"Why would they do that? Pick up Compton too?"

“Who cares why, CM, it’s fiction, don’t you get it? You’re the *creator*. Let the games begin!”

“Oh, that’s great, Jinny. Now *you’re* the pantsler! You’re not plotting, for crikes sake, you’re pantsering!”

“Oh, but you’re wrong, CM. I’m doing both! Plotting and pantsering at the same time. Best of both worlds!”

“Explain, please.”

“Look. Putting Compton and the teenie-weenies together makes a great plot point. And if Truffington is there at the same time, why, you can’t beat it. Think of the blurbs on the dust cover: Tightly woven plot. Breakneck action. Couldn’t put it down. This season’s No. 1 thriller. Must read. Stuff like that. That’s the kind of ad-copy you’ll generate, no question.”

“Well, Jinny, you’ve got a silver tongue, sure enough. OK, I’ll give it a go!”

And within fifteen minutes of furious typing, the menacing spaceship had swallowed up Truffington and shunted him across London, to hover over the grimy towers and battlements of Grabblestone. A trail of wrecked cars and buses marked the course of the enormous craft, as panicked drivers, suddenly engulfed by the dark shadow cast by the ship, looked up, then lost control and smashed into whatever lay in their paths.

In an effort to splice the two narrative threads together, CM wrote—no, he dictated—the words that issued from the ship’s speakers and echoed in the cobbled courtyard at Grabblestone where Compton had been admitted:

*“Attention, earthlings! This is an order. Bring the creature you call Arthur Compton to our spaceship loading bay at once. If you comply, you will be spared. If you*

*defy this order, you will be vaporized!”*

It was a virtual repeat, of course, of the message by means of which the aliens had extracted Truffington from the safe confines of his office and trundled him into the ship. And, just as with Truffington, soon after this second announcement Mr. Arthur “Jonah” Compton appeared at the armor-plated freight door, still wearing his hospital johnny, accompanied by the two terrified orderlies, Nelson and Mick. Although he was thoroughly stupefied by drugs, Compton managed to shuffle up the ramp, disappearing into the bowels of the great gleaming leviathan from outer space.