

Renegade parfumeur Trojan Huge has a problem...

Constance Boltzmann has vanished and so has the only bottle of his new fragrance, the one that was going to solve his financial worries (he borrowed big time to buy the ingredients and now Clyde-coast gangster Panda Angry wants an arm and a leg as down payment - literally)

He skips town and heads for Rug City, where the world-famous literary carnival is in full swing - if Constance is anywhere, that's where she'll be, and the precious phial of fragrance with her.

In the sultry carnival atmosphere of the South-coast book-town, the streets are teeming with revellers in fancy dress - but why are so many dressed as eighteenth-century French aristocrats?

Then Trojan wakes in a ladies' washroom, clad in knee-breeches with matching brocade waistcoat, silken hose and a tricorn hat. He feels the same inside, but the face in the mirror is not his, but that of his notorious ancestor, rakehell gamester Ralph Horneckock*.

All he can remember is that he found Constance and the perfume - he caught a whiff of it before he passed out - but now he's lost them again, and

...he just isn't feeling himself!

*pronounced Rafe Hornco. We don't go for cheap laughs here.

The Salon of Death

a Literary ZIHS novel

by

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(written with the occasional aid of a random sentence generator)

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Chapter one - the sudden departure

GNATHIC HERMIT IN PANTYHOSE DISASTER

As soon as he saw the headline, he knew he had to leave that place. He got in a car and drove. When the car gave out, he got on a bike and rode. He rode like a monk in a nunnery, or rather like the popular misconception of the concupiscent monk that has entered the libidinous vulgar imagination through the lubricious imaginings of repressed puritans intent on reforming the church. When his legs grew heavy, he threw the bike over a hedge and waited for a bus. The first that came had 'Rug City' on the destination board.

He had to laugh.

Some might call it Fate; he preferred Destiny, but either way he wasn't going to hang around to find out. When he read that headline, all he knew was that he had to get out; he hadn't given a scintilla of thought as to where - yet now this bus, a 1952 Leyland Tiger, had become, through its destined destination, the vehicle of his own destiny.

Rug City! If Constanza was any where, it would be that where - and the perfume would be in the same where. He was as sure of that as he was that his name was Trojan Huge and that he was the most daring independent parfumer of the modern age.

Constanza! that infuriating, passionate, wild-eyed beauty with her dirty blonde hair streaked with aubergine and topped with blueberry ice-cream and redcurrants and her delicate oval face, half China doll, half Taiwanese sex-worker - if she had been here, he would have cupped that face in his hand; it was awkward doing it one-handed, and rather destroyed the image of the two hands placed like a chalice on either side of the jaw, the wrists fused into the stem, but that was the way she liked it, and what Constanza Boltzmann liked, she generally got.

The only other passenger was a man with a strong, moulded chin. Right now, it was rocking awkwardly at Huge's feet, through the juddering motion imparted to it by the rough surface of the road and the inferior suspension so characteristic of the Leyland Tiger. Huge stopped to pick his chin off the floor and return it to his sleeping hand, not without a twinge of pity: a traveller in maxillary prosthetics - he knew the type; he had been in that game once himself.

That had been before he met Dr T. Albemarle, the curious wizened person of indeterminate sex who had introduced him to parfumerie. It had seemed innocent enough at first, a kindly act to indulge a dotard at a party that wasn't going anywhere - 'here, take a whiff of this and tell me what you think, young man' but after that first hit of fragrance he was hooked. He smiled ruefully at the recollection - he knew now that the good Doctor had made his choice with care - it was shredded wheat topped with chopped hazelnuts, lingonberries and natural yoghurt, the most instantly alluring perfume to men between the age of twenty-three and thirty-eight: at 31 - bang in the middle of the demographic - he hadn't stood a chance; he would have had to be anosmic to get out of there unscathed.

That was twenty years ago.

It was only when he had relaxed his rangy but muscular frame into the prickly velvet of the back seat conveniently near the emergency exit, which in the Leyland Tiger is located on the right-hand side, behind the rearmost twin seat - that he allowed himself to reflect on his

reaction to the headline. GNATHIC HERMIT IN PANTYHOSE DISASTER : it didn't really make sense - almost as if it had been generated from random words by some patent software - but a Harvard symbologist had once told him that great headlines communicate before they are understood.

'Pantyhose,' with its American flavour and distinctly feminine associations clearly meant Constanza, who was American and distinctly feminine, and the 'disaster' was her disappearance with the flask of scent on which his fortune - and possibly his life, now that Panda Angry wanted his loan repaid - depended. That made *him* the hermit; which was fair enough, because of late he hadn't gone out much. But why 'gnathic'? what had jaws to do with it? could it be a misprint for 'gnathonic', flattering? Parfumerie was, in many ways, the quintessence of flattery.

Then it hit him, but not literally - the ride was not that rough - the moulded chin he had picked off the floor! Of course, he himself had once been a traveller in maxillary prosthetics , a pedlar of plastic jawbones - which confirmed him as the hermit, but somehow in a previous existence...

what could it all mean? Still pondering, he passed into an uneasy doze, lulled by the characteristic rattle of the **five-cylinder direction injection Atkinson-Gardner diesel**.

Ch 2 Rug City in the Rain

I woke from a dream of sparrowflesh. The streets of Rug City glistened in the wet, like a wet slick thing I could find no simile for. The traveller in maxillary prosthetics was gone, as if he'd never been, or as if he'd served his purpose as the signpost to my destiny; an auxiliary signpost, one that did not indicate the main destination, but rather an added attraction, like an historic building or a mediaeval jousting competition. The kind of signpost that in Scotland are of the colour brown.

Brown, my favourite colour. Apart from all the rest.

Looking down, he slipped back into the third person, and saw that the firmly-moulded chin was again on the floor. A talisman. He stooped to pick it up then stepped down from the coach. The streets were thronged with revellers, heedless of the brown rain that fell incessantly like an overdressed girl's dress, petticoat, petticoat, petticoat, slip, underskirt, bloomers, french knickers, silk knickers and white cotton panties at a prom, leaving her clad only in a pair of old workmen's pants and hiking boots.

The hell with that, he thought, where's Constanza? And where's the perfume?

Tilting his head back at an angle of forty-seven degrees to maximise intake, and dilating each nostril in turn as the Chinese parfumeurs did of old - a secret lost to the world till Dr T Albemarle rediscovered it and passed it on to him, Trojan Huge, his/her last pupil and the inheritor of all his/her secrets - he filtered the raw night air through his finely-tuned nostril hairs, smelling:

dog turds, still warm	plasticine, probably light green in colour	the cobwebby member of an elderly gentleman
a wet felt hat	a singer sewing machine	a variety of hats and caps, all damp
a cuban cigar	a calfskin boot	a guillemot-skin handbag
French cigarettes	glacé cherries	A Hermès scarf
the distant odour of decaying sewage	Demis Roussos	A ploughman's hempen underdrawers
bitumen	a palimpsest	three varieties of moss
sycamore leaves	a greyhound called Gordon, but not the one responsible for the turds	rhubarb
a trumpet	two archbishops	Tweed, by Lenthalic
a final demand for electricity	a streetwalker	Charlie, a fragrance for the young woman about town
another trumpet	pomegranate seeds	à rebours by Joris-Karl Huysmans

sawdust	a nurturing woman with a large bosom	Gold, by Yardley
pork scratchings	polyanthus	Amarige by Givenchy
stale beer	goatskin boots	the smoky, spicy odour of warm Constanza...
the faint tang of urine	winter jasmine	...and the slightest nuance of a unique scent...

He began to run, forcing his way through the revellers, noting that many of them seemed to have come dressed as eighteenth century French aristocrats.

Interlude: A little local history

As Trojan weaves his way through the throng of brocade-clad revellers, his nose hooked to the silken filament of Constanza's scent mingled with his own manufactured one as firmly as a marlin to Robson Green, let us soar heavenward on the drone's eye of the imagination to take in the singular nature of the place he finds himself.

Few towns in Scotland occupy a more delightful situation than Rug City. It is "a city set on a hill" and commands a beautiful prospect of the estuary which bears its name, and of its picturesque shores. There is a peculiar, quiet air of antiquity about the town, and the stranger strolling through its streets cannot help being amused at the architectural peculiarities of the Burgh, particularly the curious **fenestration** in the **Town square**, where each window is etched with the image of a **concubine** in delicious deshabillé. Scarcely two of them are alike - no surprise, as they depict no fewer than seventeen different women. Some have large fronts; some are adorned with neat 'door-pieces' (as the merkins of the day were called); one has its front smoothed and neatly painted; another has been left rough and unadorned, like the side of a dyke.

These are the rude foremothers of the hamlet, who bore between them some sixty-seven illegitimate children. These - having as their sires the prosperous merchants, gentry, nobility and churchmen of the town - were given sinecures in burgh offices when they attained adulthood. In all, twenty-four of the male offspring served on the town council, which earned the popular sobriquet 'the shower of **bastards**' - the origin of a Scotch tradition of referring to elected officials that survives to this day. It was this august body that was responsible for memorialising their mothers thus, a filial **debenture** etched in glass rather than inscribed in ink on parchment.

When not on their backs, these pious women liked to foregather in the tiny chapel at the top of the hill, where the confined space and their generous proportions, allied to the fervour of their devotions, made for a somewhat heated atmosphere - the source of another saying that has passed into popular parlance and even literary use.

Ch 3: a lyrical pause, or ‘it pays to know your dwarfs’

A sudden waft of **Old Spice** came out of nowhere with the force of a blow, bringing him to a **breathless** halt. It reached inside his nostrils like an **oleaginous** tentacle, slithered down his throat like a **lascivious** boa-constrictor and wound itself round his **entrails**, making him want to hurl. ‘Man this **sucks**’ came a voice from behind an untidy stack of **crates**. ‘Sure does,’ agreed Huge. ‘That damn fragrance should be banned by law!’ he exclaimed, needlessly.

Peering over the crate-stack, he spied a **malodorous dwarf** clad in a **badly**-stained **Craghopper** fleece. A quick visual check confirmed that his hands were not on backwards, nor did his eyes weep pus (though something *was* **oozing** from his ragged ear) so it wasn’t *that dwarf*. Then his hand darted to the pocket of his fleece and produced a face-flannel that might once have been white but was now dirt-grimed a uniform gray. Huge gave a knowing smile - of

course! ‘You ain’t no Ruby Tuesday,’ he gritted. ‘I sure as hell could pin a name on *you*!’

Huge expected him to wipe his ear, but instead he fondly polished the miniature black vacuum cleaner which he had been using to Hoover up the breadcrumbs scattered about him like his sins. It was a purposeful-looking piece of kit, with a kind of deadly beauty.

Huge recognised it as a vintage **Glock**, a rare survivor of the brief but unsuccessful attempt by the notorious arms manufacturer to diversify into domestic appliances - that had been in the early nineties, when the Hoff had brought the Wall down by the force of song. ‘Happy times - hopeful times,’ he thought, with a wistful smile. ‘Not like that now.’

He leaned over the crates and said in a husky whisper, ‘Hey, ~~uj qt v'uw h~~, you’ll never guess who’s coming down the street.’

The **dwarf** looked up from his **Glock**-polishing, gray flannel frozen in his hand. His **cold steel** eyes were big as **mellons**. ‘Who is it?’ he croaked0

Huge noted with distaste that the trail of matter from his ear had begun to **solidify**.

‘Dame on a motorsickle,’ he said. ‘looks like a black madonna - regular two-wheeled gypsy **queen**. Seems to have some kinda ghost riding pillion, all over studs - *silver* studs.’

With an eldritch screech, the dwarf jumped up, stuffing the **Glock** in his **reticule**, and ran off **screaming**. Huge laughed, hugely. ‘Gets ‘em every time,’ he grinned.

4: A Hot Time in the Old Town

My trousers are a cage and my two legs twin wild beasts determined to escape - or at least that's how it seems to feel for a moment in the inside of my brain, but then the moment is passed and I'm spread out like a **Martyr** on the **Highway**. The fetid reek of **Old Spice** hangs in the air like a **crass trespasser** on the well-mowed lawns of my olfactory mansion. The thin thread-like filament of scent that tied me to Constanza like a slender strand of nose-silk is broken off and ruptured.

I sit on an upturned crate and watch the passing throng as it **prances** by. I try to **extrapolate** but my heart's not in it - I'm like a guy with a pulse **fetish** and an empty packet of **lentils**. Maybe I could start over, I muse, go someplace **geographic** and settle down with a sweet next-door girl, like a **whistleblower** in a protracted witness scheme - 'yeah, and if I had sturgeons' air-bladders I could make **isinglass**,' I rebuke myself. 'Come on you dainty **muff**, take your questing digits out of your mangina and grow a pair!'

I jump up and eye the crowd with renewed vigour.

Again my eyes are struck by the many of them that seem in costume like French aristocrats, with powdered wigs and tricorne hats, long sumptuously-embroidered tail-coats with deep cuffs, brocade waistcoats and elegant knee-breeches ending at the knee with silken hose below, tied with a **garter** at the knee and shod with a buckled shoe at the foot. 'Leg-end' I mutter unable to resist the merry quip even in that deadly place.

Because it does feel deadly, as deadly as a **Glock** or a **Beretta** in the hands of a master shootist only twice as lethal though not in the same man-killing way. It's their eyes. Slowly it suddenly dawns on me that they're an unnatural green like emeralds or chalcedony, if chalcedony is that colour. 'What the -?' I demand sternly of myself without expecting an answer but to my surprise get one - they are **dead**!

But that can't be right. **Dead** people don't move around and dress like eighteenth-century French aristocrats, unless they happen to be **dead** eighteenth century aristocrats, which I suppose they would be after all these times, but these guys are moving around and the **dead** definitely don't do that. Then it hits me, like a flipper hits a **pinball** - they're not **dead**.

They're **undead**.

And slowly, suddenly, I think I know how - or so it seems.

The perfume - the one Constanza stole, the one I hocked myself to the eyebrows with Panda Angry the Clyde-coast pirate to buy the ingredients for - there was one ingredient I didn't buy.

I stole it from a tomb.

Not just any old tomb - the tomb of my ancestor on my mother's side, rakehell gamester Ralph [pronounced Rafe - editor's note] Hornecock [pronounced Horncowe - ed.]

Ralph Hornecock had done a deal with the devil, or so it was said, to make him irresistible to women. The secret was buried with him in a silver phial. A silver phial that I stole when I rifled his tomb and the ingredients of which I added to the other ingredients that I had used as ingredients to make the perfume that I made. And Constanza stole.

Costanza! I exclaimed, shortening her name in my excitement.

With a sudden involuntary movement I found myself of my own volition pointing like a **Kooikerhondje** at a duck's layer. Simultaneously I was at the same time aware of a **tumescant** stirring below stairs, only this time it wasn't my legs that were twin wild beasts in the cage of my trousers - the old twig and berries were that, except there was only one - at least as far as the twig was concerned, the berries were and always would be two, only now the twig was a branch and the berries succulent plums.

Constanza stood before me, her luxurious embonpoint heaving in delicious déshabillé like a galleon in full snail.

'well hello, lover,' she breathed huskily, her **lavish** dirty blonde hair cascading like drifting clouds over the twin honey-gold harvest moons of her **magnificent** bosom. Her voice chimed like a **clarsach** in my whorlèd, whore-led ear. The rustle of her petticoats was its own **onomatopoeia**, whispering that the buck of her undergarments stopped with them, that she was like an art-class that had run out of **cartridge** paper - no drawers.

Then she clamped on my lips like a lamprey on a shark - or did I mean a remora? - and for one long instant that seemed like hours I knew only deep purple **tumescant** joy.

5: Where am I, and whom am I?

When I awoke, my co-pilot was unconscious and so was I. Then I woke properly with a slow yet sudden start and realised that I had no co-pilot - I wasn't even in aeroplane. Instead I was in some gleaming place where the scent of fine perfumes teased each of my nostrils in succession and interesting sink-fittings gleamed in the bright yet suffused light like the glint of a repentant prostitute's sad eyes as she implores forgiveness in a darkened church.

Throwing my arms out and down, my hands encounter an unfamiliar fabric. Why am I wearing a deep-cuffed tailcoat of cream silk embroidered with gold and discreetly studded with amethysts and sapphires? Why do my trousers end at my knee, tied with a ribbon of blue? Why do I show a manly calf close-clad in shimmering silk, a buckled shoe on my foot?

These were not the clothes I had set out in.

Throwing my right hand up and back in the direction of my face, I stroke my chin and am surprised to find it firm and oddly smooth. A vague yet sharp recollection of donning the prosthetic chin in the heat of passion comes back to me as I stumble to my feet.

In the heat of passion – ?

Costanza – ?

A man is watching through the window above the row of marble sinks. When I raise my hand to stroke my chin, he does the same, as if in mockery. His face looks oddly familiar yet entirely strange. I cock my head and he does the same and the light catches his eyes - they have an odd glint.

A green glint.

Like emeralds, or chalcedony or some other gemstone that is a green colour that eyes aren't, usually.

I take a step towards him, but he doesn't back off, instead he comes on as if to challenge me.

A faint bell rings, not outside my head but in my brain, and not a real bell, more like the sound a memory has.

I know that face.

It is the face of my ancestor, rakehell gamester Ralph Hornecock. But what is he doing behind a window in a sumptuous washroom? He has been dead for over two hundred years. And why does he mock me, imitating my every move and gesture?

There is only one way to find out - I throw my self at the glass, not before throwing my hands and arms upwards to protect my face. There is a sudden shock of contact and my self strikes against the glass and rebounds back to the floor.

Of course! The glass must be bulletproof!

Staying below my opponent's line of sight, I make a bee-line for the door.

Just as I reach it, it opens, and some guy trips over me and we go down in a tangle of limbs.

'Hey, what the – ?' shouts the guy and I see that he is brandishing a Glock 7.65 with automatic laser sight and twelve-shot magazine.

Then I see his face.

It is 'Beast' Macfarlane, one of Panda Angry's worst enforcers. He can only be here for one thing and that thing is the me-thing: he raises the Glock and I feel like I'm an *anachronism* - out of time.

In a split second that seems like an eternity I see him squeeze the trigger with the required two and a half foot pounds of pressure and the automatic sight clicks as it ranges on my face.

BLAM!
POW!
SPLAP!
ZING!
SPLUCK!
GASP!
GURGLE!
SIGH.

The bullet has struck my prosthetic chin rebounding back in a recrochet and plugging my opponent square between the eyes, the eyes of which are now glazed in death as his red life blood - now his *death* blood - pools on the floor like the urine of an aging courtier overcome by incontinence at a Royal levee but unable to leave his post because the monarch will dismiss him though he'll be dismissed anyway now for wetting himself. Such is life, my friend.

Rising to my feet I find I am still *viable*, and so is my ancestor, who is starring at me ungodlily while stroking his chin just as I am stroking the chin that is now mine.

Then it hits me - each of our chins are both the same.

He is me and I am he and the window is not a window but a mirror.

I step over the prostrate body lying stretched out supine on the floor on its back and throw my right arm with my hand at the end - my right hand - and lay my palm against the mirror and the palm of my ancestor whom is also me and my palm.

It's all a bit of a mystery but I think I understand it. The headline comes back to me and I see it is all true - GNATHIC HERMIT IN PANTYHOSE DISASTER.

What it really means is that Costanza (=PANTYHOSE) has run off with my precious phial of perfume (=DISASTER) and I (=HERMIT) have persuade her and been saved by my prosthetic chin (=GNATHIC) but in so doing have also mysteriously become my ancestor, just as I was once a traveller in maxillary prosthetics like the dude on the bus whose chin I stole and whom saved my live (=GNATHICx2 because I have become what I once was (ancestor/ traveller in maxillary prosthetics) and again the chin but on the bus this time not the washroom).

With a vague smile of understanding that might be a grimace, I breath on the mirror and draw the icon of a hand with its thumb up and write beside it LIKE=AGREE. My ancestor does the same. We exchange grins like men with *nerves* of steel who have *hoodwinked* fate. At the door I turn and wave to him as one might wave to La Rochefoucauld if the street were time and he at the end of the street and the street was a marble washroom in the Rug City Ritz-Carlton, a marble washroom fraught with interesting fittings.

Stepping like a high-bred fucking racehorse - you might say I *pranced* - I enter the *vomitorium*, but being *erudite* - the thousands spent on my education were not *squandered* - I don't throw up, but debouch with the rest of the crowd.

The Next Chapter after the one before: fear th'all-dreaded thunderstone!

Suddenly my brain slowly shrank to the size of dwarf's foetus in an armadillo-skin hand-basket.

I could hear it shrinking with my ears: *shrink-shrank-shrunk*, like a mouse walking over cornflakes.

Then there was a blinding blue flash and a couple of minutes later I was all right again.

Man, this was some crazy ride!

The vomitorium of the Rug City Ritz-Carlton was paved with astro-turf. I recalled a memory from my past with a whimsical smile of my lips: *It reminded me of Mardis Grass In the winter, back in the days when men were men and the women were not. That MTV programme from the 80's had a lot of answering too do. That's where I first saw Costanza, or George, as she was known then.*

I shook my head to free myself of the memory but it clung on like a demented crab in a rock-pool that some madman is trying to raise to boiling point by zapping it with a thermal lance. I was in a bad place and it was getting worse - there coming towards me at a slow gallop like a fucking racehorse was Quintin 'Badface' Maclehose, Panda Angry's no2 enforcer. How I wished I had taken the Glock from the man he was certainly looking for in all probability, the man that lay killed by me in a dead state like a corpse in the elegant but bloodspattered marble washroom I had just left, the man whose name just then I could not remember.

The crowd pressed around me and I couldn't have reached the Glock even if I had it which I did not and Badface was coming right at me as if his thick-soled boots had a mind of their own and that mind was one with his own mind and had no single thought other than to confront me and kill me dead.

His face was in front of the face on my head and a little to the right and his eyes starred viciously at me as he flung up his arm towards his face and scratched the end of his nose with one of the fingers on his hand.

'Eh, excuse me, but could you point me in the direction of the little boys' room? It's not that I'm a pederast, I just need a wee.'

I starred back at him in amazement, surprise and shock. I can tell his tone is genuine but he could be lying. Why had he not recognised me? I could see as he

took the hat from off of his head that he had a picture of my face taped inside it, yet his face registered no more recognition than if it had been a boulder and I had been another boulder he just didn't know or recognise except as just another boulder and not the special one he was looking for.

Then it gradually hit me - of course! the face on the front of my head was no longer mine but the face that was that of ancestor Ralph Hornecock - but as the thought occurred to me I felt dizzy and my head reeled some, like I had vertigo.

I was now out on the steps and the cool night air was humid and warm yet fresh at the same time, like a young girl's breath just after she's brushed her teeth and providing she hasn't been chewing garlic or onion recently or has bad tooth decay. I could smell the cicadas after the rain. Where was I? who was I? and to whom?

A slow rumble of thunder tingled my ear and moments later a flash of forked sheet lightning split the sky illuminating the buildings momentarily with a light that was at once white and at the same time blue or yellow bathed the town before my watching eyes -

then it hit me.

And this time it did, literally. The lightning bolt dove into my head and went crackling through my veins and arteries and out through the thick soles of my boots. I seemed to split literally in two and be in different places simultaneously in the same instant.

One of me was in a room of polished steel lined with banks of flashing lights and the huge reel-to-reel tapes that they only have in really top-level secret military establishments or villains' lairs under volcanoes. Men in high ranking uniforms and hats were gathered round a table as if they had just been looking at a grid but it was no longer there. the lights dipped, then came up again. They seemed to be waiting for something but maybe they always looked like that.

"Bythell, codenamed Gladiator; Inmate McElwee, codenamed Rampage; Francis-Ward, codenamed Armageddon; Bell, codenamed Silver Strike; Inmate Vernon, codenamed Vindicator; O'Driscoll, codenamed The Reaper; Abercrombie, codenamed Hangman " said the computer voice as the grid reappeared. "Sir, what was this?" Chris Vaughn, a short, muscular man with brown hair and pale, sunburned skin asked. "That is what these seven targets has been labelled," replied the director as he turned the monitor on to off and re-set the controller down. "It is for the next stages in our operation." "And what operation are that, sir?" Chris Vaughn crisply asked. "It is time to fulsomely inter- activate the Pert Shoe Program."

"Pert Shoe, sir? said Chris Vaughn paling beneath his muscular tan, isn't that some kind of a nancy-boy codename that a girl might make up? he murmur"

“Get used to it, girlfriend, the General gritted through clenched teeth, his eyepatch starring furiously at the man.” These order are from the highest place!

At the same time the other half of me was in my mother’s bedroom. She was dying and I was a small boy too small to understand. She was propped up on a mass of pillows and I had to bend close to hear her whispered words.

‘They were twins - identical twins born on the same day but with very different natures though the same face was on each of their heads.’

‘Who was mother? she wasn’t making sense,’

‘The Hornecock boys. One was called Ralph though he said ‘Rafe’ and pronounced his surname Horncowe.’

‘wasn’t he a rakehell gamester then mother. I didn’t know where I got those words from i must have been channelling my older self?’

‘No, Gary - she called me that even though my name was Trojan, I don’t know how or why. Ralph was the good twin, he rode around the countryside rescuing fallen women and planting trees, doing good acts like that. His brother was the evil twin.

‘What was his name? I whispered’

‘Rakehell gamester Roger Hornecock,’

Her words tingled in my ears with shock as my first self joined with the other of my two halves and reunited together on the steps of the hotel: she had pronounced the surname as it was spelt. My own mother, dying on her deathbed. That had to mean something.

I felt calm but panicked at the same time. Which one was I, do-gooder Ralph or rakehell gamester Roger? Only time would tell.

And what in every kind of hell was the Pert Shoe program?

‘get used to it, girlfriend,’ I gritted, punching myself in the face. Time will tell you that as well,’

I ran slowly down the steps. I had to find Costanza before it was too late.

Her eyes were two wild goats, bucking to free themselves from the stern halter of my starring gaze. Then they were bats fluttering and I was porridge in her hands.

'Bastard,' said Costanza, flatly, in a voice that sounded like a computer if it would have a voice but was broken.

I had found her, but where was here and whom was I? And how had I got to this where?

I had a faint yet strong recollection of being with my mother. She had called me 'Gary'. And now Costanza...

'Gary Bastard? was that who I am? I pandered then sat up',

I was strapped to a table with Costanza beside me. I stood over her and wrestled with her eyes some. all the ambience floating around tingled my neck-hair on my arms and back. I hadn't noticed I was striped to the waste. I looked down and my lean, pale sunburnt body. Man was I ripped! I didn't know who Gary Bastard was, but he must work out some.

Costanza was trying to say something but her voice was thin and weak like a reed in a broken organ pipe. I swivelled the head on my shoulders to one side and lowered my right ear close to her beautiful yet awful mouth. the scent of decay was strong. So strong I could hear it. There was an undertone of another scent too, one I thought I recognised as something I knew that I was familiar with.

'I'm completely shagged out, Costanza breathed huskily in a high fluting voice.'

'I patted her shoulder. you should rest now I said,'

'No, I mean literally she breathed I shagged everyone one of those bastards and it's killing me,'

'What I gasped in strong amazement?' Why did you do this.

'It was the perfume that Trojan made - Trojan Huge, my lover of whom that I betrayed, the finest independent parfumer in the world she husked' like a culinary guru shelling cardamoms,

'it was evil. As soon as I put it on I knew. I had to shag everything in sight but when I did something happened to they're DNA and they became Aristo-Zombies, she added,'

'Aristo-zombies I exclaimed!' what are this?

I needed good information because I knew then what I had been born to do - or reborn, depending on to whom you asked. You see, the perfume had worked differently on me. I was no longer Trojan Huge - Costanza's failure to recognise me told me that much - but as Gary Bastard I had a mission, a mission to kick Aristo-Zombie butt as high as it would go and then some.

How do I kill them I gritted through clenched nostrils?

'You can't she said' except in three ways,

What are them ways I queried, questioningly?

1. a shaft of rapier-like wit

2. a nail gun loaded with nails made from meteorite iron...

he seemed to be looking down at myself from a great height in a high place through a trapdoor in my brain. He would have to stock up on repartee - at most he had six, maybe

half-a-dozen ripostes, and some of them were pretty ropy. As for meteorite iron - looking down into the room that is impartially ajar he sees my hand brushes against my upper leg and strikes something in my pocket. I dig in and pull out some sort of storage device I think.' But no it is a lump of meteorite!

"But where would he find a nail gun in August? he wandered, stealthily closing the trapdoor with a loud slam,"

Suddenly I slowly came back to myself in the room with Costanza. We were both still strapped to the table only I was free and standing up starring at her with both of my eyes, my ear close to her mouth and my legs akimbo.

‘You said there were three ways I said’ what are they apart from the first two that you’ve already explained. I added?’

Please let it be something simple I prayed to whatever god I or Gary Bastard - or whomever I might be - might or might not have believed in depending on to whom you ask. My ears tingle as I strain to hear her dying gasp. Please let it be a Glock I pray,’

‘The third way of killing aristo-zombies....

yes yes I exclaim gently?

‘it’s the strange new music played...

‘what can it be you mean I shake her roughly tell me I shout?’

‘....on a Glock -’

her voice fails her and she dies falling almost at once into putrid decay and deliquidising before my eyes but with her last breath she points to a package on a chair that I have not noticed in the dim light that floods the room.

It’s something long and black warped in some sort of cloth, bombazine maybe, or a rough organza. For a Glock it’s a mighty big one and then some. It seems to have an ambience of its own that tingles my knees. I eye the package shrewdly, weighing it up, first with one eye, then with the one on the other side of my nose,

It’s not a 3.17mm with skeleton grip and seven-shot magazine - too small
or a 7.65 with automatic sight, ditto
though the extra length might be a stock extension so the 7.65 is back in the mix
but I really hope it’s a .500” maxi supercannon with self levelling suspension, steadycam attachment and ultra express cartridge feed, but there’s only one way to find out -

I strip off it’s wrapper like I might strip off the dress off of a willing schoolgirl at the Proms.

It's the strangest Glock I ever saw - a long flat deadly wedge-shaped rectangle to which are fixed transversely other long flat deadly rectangles of varying size, only not so long, but more rectangular, in two rows, side by side. Also there are two short vicious-looking sticks with rounded heads that look lethal in they're own rite. It's one mean bad-ass instrument.

But it isn't a Glock.

Its a Glockenspiel.

And the aristo-zombies are flooding into the room, drawn by the scent of Costanza's deliquidising flesh.

Man am I in a hole!

There couldn't have been more AristoZombies than if this was St Peter's Square and he, Gary Bastard - if indeed that is who he was - had been elected AristoZombie Pope, and it was Easter, with the sun shining out of the blue Roman skies.

The sun certainly wasn't shining here though - the cramped space of the cavernous hall was suffused with a flood of brilliant yet dim light. Behind him, he could smell Costanza rotting, and hear the regular drip and plop of her deliquidising flesh as it hit the parquet floor in punishing drops, like a perverted schoolmaster spanking a schoolgirl with a spoon - a *pewter* spoon.

It was the smell that drew the AristoZombies. He was still finding his way in his newly-acquired Gary brain, but at least he knew that. What else did he know? it was time to find out - the leading three A-Zees were almost up to him now. The leader was an old dude in a powdered wig with a black ribbon, a blue surcoat with cream damask embroidery and deep cuffs, and a waistcoat of rose satin embroidered with pearls and silver filigree.

'we are here to feed, he declared' step aside!

To buy time, Gary responded with a laugh, to which in his surprise, came out, like the tinkle of silver bells. He could see the old dude didn't like that. His face grimaced like wet cloth.

'How now, sirrah, do you laugh he gritted?'

'I do laugh Gary temporised'

'At me, sir?'

'Not so sir!'

'At what then he puzzled?'

'I laughed to see a monkey's penis speak thrust back Gary',

'How now do you call me monkey-penis he slammed?'

Like a sizzle of lightning his Gary-brain supplied the answer and he heard his lips say,

'pray forgive me - in this poor light I mistook you for something with a useful function. I see now that a monkey's foreskin is all you are he quipped lightly',

"GNAAAAH the old Dude shrieked' clutching his temples!

His brains spurted from his ears like marrow and his body melted like wax and ran out his trouser-ends to form a faintly-perfumed pool on the floor.

The other two stepped back and he had time to reload and give them a quick one-two -

'what you lookin at jobby-pus he vernacularized?'

'And you, if you fall asleep in a pool of your own vomit you should remember to wipe your face before you come out.'

It was crude close-combat stuff, but it was enough to take out both A-Zees.

Two down, 3,407 to go he mused. He didn't think he had enough ripostes in his hurt-locker. Besides, even at 2 seconds a riposte - and that was one hell of a rate of fire, he'd have to be really smokin' - that would take 6,814 seconds or 113 minutes 34 seconds, which was just shy of a couple of hours. Too long.

He set up the Glockenspiel.

The front wave of the A-Zee vanguarded onto him, all lace handkerchiefs and quizzing glasses, and not a few painted fans - these bastards were tooled up, all right.

'Mmm, the exquisite aroma of decaying flesh fluted one!'

'I hunger exclaimed another!'

'La, are we coarse country peasants that we eat our meat fresh-slaughtered Gary temporized?'

'What do you propose said the first with a low screech?'

'why, that we dance first, like courtly gentlemen rejoindered Gary!'

If I knew any dance tunes!

'Help me, Gary-brain he implored!'

The hands on the end of his arms seemed to have minds of their own, but fortunately they were thinking the same thing, though they hadn't let Gary in on it - if that's who he was, now. He watched as his own lean muscular fingers seized the hammers in a delicate grip and began to play - what was that?

'A Rameau gavotte Gary-brain answered' We're buying time?

The A-Zees stopped in their tracks, charmed by the music, bowed to one another, and began a courtly dance. 'Of course he muttered' Rameau is very much their period - as is Couperin. But we can't dance all night he thought',
'What was it Costanza said he self-interrogated?'

Her voice spoke to him as clearly as if she were standing beside him and not forming a malodorous sticky pool of decayed matter on the floor a little behind his back and to one side.

'The strange new music of the Glock -'

' - new music he asked him self questioningly?'

What could that be?

All at once the two hands at the ends of his arms - the hands that were Gary Bastard's but were now his, if that's whom he was - launched into the unmistakable strains of Mozart's *Rondo alla Turca*.

It was a risk, but he had to take it - Wolfie had penned this particular ditty around 1783, so it was still in period, but judging by the A-Zee demographic it would seem new to them, a bit like Chumbawamba's 'Tubthumping' would to those who had only known their 'English Rebel Songs' from nearly a decade earlier.

The tinkling notes raked the room like silver needles sprayed from a Gatling and the A-Zees went down in a slither of wax and marrow. A curious fragrance filled the air and as the second rank came on his hands threw caution to the windows and of their accord launched into a daring improvisation on Beethoven's Fifth, adapted to the limitations of the silver-toned instrument. It took him a moment to recognise it then a moment later he did -

'Yay, Bat-honker Vee - eat that, carrion he yelled gleefully!'

The AristoZombies went down like a schoolgirl on her Prom-date, only more like skittles.

He could get to like this, he thought, giving them a savage blast of early Schubert.

‘Come and get it, undead he shrilled!’

Now I'm on the street with my deadly glock(enspiel) under my arm and a lump of meteorite iron in my pocket and all the A-Zees from here to kingdom come in my sights, if a glockenspiel had sights and wasn't a musical instrument but a deadly instrument of death all the same at least if you were an Aristo-Zombie.

All at once a shapely figure rears up behind me and I turn my head to face her bringing my body with it. She has her back to me but I'd know those curves on a dark night in a coal cellar with both my eyes poked out with a sharpened stick or maybe a metal skewer.

'Constanza turned quickly around quite slowly. She had a tattoo of a gibbon on her back where before had just been skin with no tattoo. 'Your back!' I exclaimed flatly. 'Yes, I'm back, and this time I'm back from the undead.' She screamed flatly.

Then I noticed, too late but just in the nick of time, that she was clad in flowing crinolines with multiple petticoats supported by some internal hooping - probably whalebone, for lightness and flexibility - and that the dress she wore on her body was embroidered silk in three different shades of blue with detail worked in gold and silver thread and seed pearls.

'You weren't wearing that earlier - when you were still alive, I gritted softly!'

'No and I won't be wearing it in a minute, big boy, this being undead has made me horny as a goat she husked huskily in a sweet soft voice!'

'A cashmere goat I temporized to buy time?'

'Silly boy as if it matter what kind of goat she whispered suavely and began to disrobe?'

I looked down at my tight knee-breeches. Either Gary was as erotic as a stallion and then some or he had a cucumber in his pants, but either way he dressed to the right.

I punch my self in the face to bring it back to the present tense.

'Stay focus, I self rebuke - if this is indeed Costanza then she too is an AristoZombie and however difficult that may seem, she has to die, I muttered addingly!'

She is naked now and her capacious body is like a fine city where I'd like to book myself in for a few days in a luxury hotel, take an afternoon stroll by the river, maybe buy a few books and nibble a fried-egg roll, spend an hour in the jacuzzi then go out for a light salad washed down with copious tankards of sparkling gewurztraminer. All I want to do is cup her face but instead I say, hatting myself with ever syllabub,

'You call that a body? I never would have believed a walrus and a sack of offal could have viable offspring, but I do now!'

'Forgive me I want to add!' but do not. Then I see the marrow spurt from her ears and I know I've done the right thing. It's a tough life, Babe, I intone, turning from the stinky pool of putrescence that she is once again.

And there in my face is another face, a bad face, the face of Quintin 'Badface' Maclehose of whom I have last seen in the vomitorium of the Rug City Ritz-Carlton looking for someone that used to be me but fortunately is no longer.

'Man who are these guys with the green eyes and fancy duds he entreats in a commanding tone?'

Then he sees me and how I'm dressed and takes a step back starring at my eyes?

‘Whoa there are you - he questions with his eyes and words from his lips?’
‘look-out I say coolly but urgently because an A-Zee has come up behind him!’
‘What the - he exclamates turning and landing a punch in the A-Zees’ damask waste coat which rebounds?’
‘Not that way I whisper sternly in a mild voice!’ try this,

Steeping up to the A-Zee and a bit to one side I stand on my feet and say, ‘How now, fellow, was it you’re mothers’ intention to get with child by a wart-hog I interjecute?’

The barb goes home as if it was a child on its way from school and his heart was where it lived. His ears spurt marrow and pretty soon he is no more as if he had never been except a mound of fancy clothes and a faint but strong fragrance lipping from them. My knees begin to tingle.

‘Ah dae ken wha ye are, vernacularizes Badface, but I reckon I owe ye wan, he adds!’
‘Know any repartee I riposte lightly?’
‘Gien a cunt a slap in the pus is mair ma line he intones solemnly’,
These Zombie bastirts - if that’s whit they ur - they done for ma freen ‘Beast’ Macfarlane, shot him doon like a dug in a black-pudden shoap ‘he wept’ Old Beast that yoostae share his garlic an rosemary focaccia wi’ me of a Friday night, eftir the sewin’ class,
‘Don’t suppose you have a nailgun I say to seal up his mangina and help him grow a pair?’
‘O aye he startles!’ Never travel without - but it’s nae yiss against these bastirts: ah’ll tell ye that fer nothin an the bus fare hame he quips couthily!’
‘It will be if you can make nails from this I say’ handing him the lump of meteorite iron. Find a street forge and nail-making machine and I’ll give you cover with some Wolf-Ferrari on the Glock(enspiel) I add’
‘Wolf-Ferrari he queries questioningly with his mouth?’ Is that no kinda late, despite his conservative style?
‘well what would you recommend wise guy I exacerbate?’
‘Yoostae be a big fan o Johann Nepomuck Hummel, me - him or Carl Maria von Weber - cannae ge wrong wi either o those guys he makes answer!’

It’s a tough lesson but I know he’s right - Wolf-Ferrari’s just too distant in time to risk. The A-zee’s might not recognise it as music at all. If there’s one thing I’ve learned it’s that it needs to be close enough the music of their own time to be recognisably in the same tradition, but just a step or three further than they’d be prepared to go - like a Dixieland fan hearing Bebop, rather than out and out free-improvisation jazz.

But even as I begin to play I hear up in the sky overhead above me the unmistakable drone of updated Allison T56-A-15 turboprops and know that somewhere up there there is a Lockheed-Martin C130H Hercules or I am the brother of a monkey’s mother (or father). Very soon the parachutes are drifting swiftly down out of the dark night sky overhead like flakes of fast snow, only bigger. Much bigger. And black, so they are invisible. They have the look of Special Forces and I see on their jumpsuits the ironic crossed lavatory brush and Domestos bottle of the Sanitary Squad, with their grim motto ‘here to clean up shit’.

The Pert Shoe Program has activated.

Let me tell you about Sanitary Squad. You won't have read about them in the papers because no tabloid journalist is able even to think of them without having a spontaneous orgasm; presenters of TV documentaries about toughness have died of excitement at the thought of doing one about them - one was even brought back to life and died again from sheer ecstasy; attempts to portray them onscreen foundered when it was discovered that, to attain the requisite degree of toughness, each Sanitary Squad soldier would have to be played by Chuck Norris AND a second tough-guy specialist, such as Stephen Seagal, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Dale Winton or Jason Statham. Their motto is 'we clean shit up' and their prized badge is the winged lavatory brush and Domestos bottle. Spurning the usual berets worn by second-division tough guys like the paras, the SAS and the Marines (or the despised navy SEALs), they favour a tough dimity hood which each man hand-embroiders with a depiction of himself in battle action in strong thread using a variety of colours. They have been known to kill people simply by dreaming about doing it. For breakfast they have a glass of cobra poison, barbed-wire shredded wheat in scalding-hot water and a thick slice of gruff toast, which is wholemeal bread with seeds eaten without butter or any sweet conserve. They sleep naked on a bed of nails in bare unheated breeze block cells that have the entrances bricked up every night so that in the morning they have to run through a brick wall in order to get their breakfast. The selection test consists of being gathered in a room and machine-gunned - only the survivors are admitted. That's how tough these guys are.

Close by in the impenetrable dark I can see Quintin 'Badface' Maclehose bent over the street forge he has luckily located making nails with the nail-making machine he also fortunately found from the meteorite iron I just happened to have in my pocket.

Up ahead of me a swarm of Aristo Zombies is circling warily like a wave in mid ocean as I hold them at bay with a succession of Hummel's piano sonatas on the big Glockenspiel. Over and above my head and also around me on the ground those epitomes of toughness, The Sanitary Squad, are dropping out of the sky like schoolgirls' panties on prom night, leastways if their panties were black stealth parachutes with ultra-tough men o' war slung underneath, each one wearing an embroidered dimity hood as he chews on a bit of barbed wire and brandishes his AK-97 antipersonnel cannon with triple magazine crammed with uranium-tipped bullets.

I remember in vague yet precise detail my strange vision when I was struck by lightning on the steps of the Rug City Ritz-Carlton - this is the final activation of the Pert Shoe Program, that girlishly-named yet lethal drive against six or seven of the universe's most deadly renegade superheroes - 'Gladiator' 'Rampage' 'Vindicator' 'Armageddon' 'Silver Strike' 'Reaper' and 'Hangman' - Hardly are those words out when a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi* troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand; a shape with lion body and the head of a man, a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, is moving its slow thighs - it is Captain, the Bookshop Cat, at the wheel of a B-type bus, the London open-topped omnibus pressed into service in the Great War.

Captain wears a jaunty bus-driver's cap, and for a cat, he drives the bus quite well, which is not very well at all - it comes groaning up the hill in an erotic zigzag through the impenetrable blackness, acetylene headlights blazing with a soft, harsh glare in the eerie twilight as Aristo-Zombies go down like nine pins, only it's more like a thousand pins there are that many of them, and not really pins either, more like undead eighteenth century French aristocrats being mowed down by an antique bus, which is just what it is.

The unmistakable rat-a-tat of a nailgun tells me that help has arrived and I can ease up on the Glockenspiel. The last notes of Hummel fade into the inky blankness like wilted cabbage on an abandoned allotment and 'Badface' Maclehose stands, legs akimbo, knees tingling, as he braces for slaughter. A deadly rain of meteorite iron spews from the smoking muzzle, the fresh made nails glinting in the strong moonlight as they whizz with deadly elan through the thick fog that has suddenly descended, like a schoolgirls' dress on Prom's night.

The Sanitary Squad are nowhere to be seen, but I guess that is part of their plan, and besides, it is dark. My fingers are stiff from playing Hummel, with his rigid Clementi-style discipline, and I wish they were cupping Costanza's face except the last time I saw her face it was a sticky pool of putrescent liquid which you'd need an actual cup to cup - and all at once I have one crazy idea - it's a long shot on a dark night with a home-made bow-and-arrow and the wind blowing against me, but for some mad reason I think it might just work.

Seizing a near by tupperware container, I worm my way across the cobbles, through the maze of pipework and piles of crates that have mysteriously appeared. Uranium-tipped bullets, meteorite-iron nails, axes, knives, tomahawks and stones fly overhead but I don't let them deflect me. I may be Gary Bastard - an unknown person into whom I have not yet been introduced to, but the nose on the front my face - or the face that is now mine, on the front of my head - is that which was of renegade parfumer Trojan Huge.

It guides me unerringly through the impenetrable gloom and soon I see the glint of a foul pool that is all that is left of Costanza. My ears tingle with the ambience as I cup her face and indeed all the rest of her but not in my hand, in the tupperware container that is in my hand. With one deadly gulp I slowly drink the putrescent liquid that burns like acid in my throat. It hits my stomach like a sledgehammer hits a toad and I writhe in shock and pain but I hold on, my limbs spasming and twisting as I lie rigid and stiff but in an upright position.

My brain is a crowded station waiting room and I am one among many passengers - I am Trojan Huge, I am a prosthetic chin, I am Rafe Hornecowe, I am rakehell gamester Roger Hornecock, I am Gary Bastard and now I am Costanza Boltzmann too - and I'm ready for anything.

...He came on a strange sight: a promising young singer was being torn between two gloves - one a rich vicuña in a delicate shade of mauve, the other a dark enigma; giant gloves, they were, almost gauntlets, the vicuña about man size, the other a real monster. The odd thing was that the gloves wore masks, as did the girl. 'I guess everyone wears a mask, thought TrojanRafeRogerGaryBastard Costanza as the girl tore in half before his very eyes, spilling her delicate feminine entrails on the roadway in a lather of gore'.

'Well, that story was different from the one I thought I knew, he mused. Ain't unfulfilled creativity a bitch?'

'Hey ma new-fand auld freen! Im near outta meteorite iron nails here!'

The harsh vernacularism cut through the delicate fabric of his muse like a paramedic's scissors through a poor man's underpants when he receives roadside attention after being struck by a car, probably due to his inebriated condition. The underpants have seen better days, but at least they cover his particulars, and now his pathetic twig-and-berries are exposed for all to see.

'Aye that's all verra weel but that's the last yin fired noo! Maclehose gritted softly.'

'I'm on it, Badface, he riposted, plunging forward to kick some A-Zee butt.'

Too late he saw behind the ranks of elegantly garbed Aristo-Zombies the row of hand-emroidered dimity hoods and below them the serried array of multibarrelled mega cannon trained on him at point-blank range. For some unknown and inexplicable reason which he understood only too well, the invincibly tough Sanitary Squad were fighting on the AristoZombies side!

It was like they had been hypnotised by an evil saucer or something!

'I really do not need this right now he gritted softly through clenched nsostrils!'

The mega-cannon were already spitting their deadly tide of uranium-tipped death bullets at hyeprsonic speed - he could see them arcing and twisting towards him in a deadly rain of lethal proportions as he ran headlong towards them across the cobbles, and he realised with a sigh of resignation that he had no chance of avoiding instant death unless he could miraculously split into five different people in the next few minutes so that the bullets passed in the spaces between.

The bullets came on, a deadly tide of death pointing like an arrow straight at his heart.

'But wait a minute! he pondered - he was five *different* people!'

He waited a minute. The bullets came on, each one like an individual plague bacillus carrying its lethal burden of mortal death, only they were bullets, not chemical weapons. Yes, he reasoned at the end of that time, I am five people!

PRFAANFF! LEEUWHANNOCK! CORICOPAT! TRANK!

With an eldritch shriek, he tore himself apart, instantaneously becoming not one man, but five - or five men and one woman, because Costanza stood in naked glory in the middle, like a curvaceous huge-breasted thunderthighed centre-forward in the old-fashioned WM formation, flanked by good twin Rafe at inside right and evil twin rakehell gamester Roger Hornecock at inside left, with Gary Bastard at left-wing outside forward and Trojan Huge his counterpart on the right.

‘What a team he shrieked from his five throats!’

A horrific spattering and a ghastly shriek told him that Costanza had copped the full load of uranium-tipped bullets in her ample bosom and been effectively cut in half.

‘Shit, babe, your dead again whspered Trojan loudly’ Ain’t life a barrel of monkeys?

The remaining quartet advanced in echelon in a straight line towards the wildly firing cannon and the remaining A-Zees, arms akimbo and knees tingling, a red mist blinding their eyes as they plunged clear-sighted into hell. Alongside ran Quintin ‘Badface’ Maclehose, the ancient hielan battlefury coursing like fire through his veins as he whirled the empty nail-gun about his head and yelled the immemorial battlecry of clan Maclehose,

‘Erra fishel macaroon bar ana spearmint chewing gum!’

The five men plunged as two into the unyielding ranks of AristoZombies and Sanitary Squad, Gray bastard leading the way alongside the others

‘Take that, Zombie mackerel, he shrieked irrelevantly!’

To say that AristoZombie Butt was kicked and Sanitary Squad keister caned would be like saying a freshly canonized saint was a pretty good guy: one A-Zee shot up so high he exited the stratosphere and burned up on re-entry, showering the warring tumult in the square in a shower of sparkling stars.

But one man who is actually four men plus another man who is a fierce Scotch gangster armed with an empty nailgun can only do so much. Slowly but swiftly the tide of AristoZombies and mega-tough Sanitary Squad soldiers began to overwhelm the gallant duo/quintette.

‘Ach, man, a hate tae say it, but we’re all doooooomed intoned Badface!’

‘It would take a miracle to save us now agreed Gary!’

Trojan and the Horncow-Hornecock twins nodded their grim assent with their heads.

They were ringed with greeneyed aristo-zombies standing shoulder-to-shoulder with tough elite Sanitary Squad soldiers all spraying them with an incestuous hail of uranium-tipped bullets when a strange noise made them all look round and up and behind them, twisting their heads to do so.

It would take the pen of a Bethany W Pope - a quill-pen brushed with fairy-dust yet dipped in blood and bitter chocolate, a pen from which poetic prose flowed with the liquescent luminosity of a mink stole - to limn the scene that unfolded as the twin suns rose on Rug City bathing them in their weird pale-green alien light.

Hurling through the darkness, splintering the scattered crates to matchwood and sending the pipes boingling hither and yon, its soft acertylene headlights blazing harshly in the dark dawn of a new day, the B-Type Bus came clattering over the cobbles, not piloted by an erratic cat, but a dwarfish red-haired giant in a fetching snood. On the open upper deck a gaunt yet burly figure swung a deadly noose, while beside him, rugged as an Irish tractor, svelte as a banshee, a pale dark figure stood, legs akimbo, a Joan Collins turban on her head; in loon pants, tie-dyed cheesecloth shirt and platform shoes, with the feline grace of a panther and the sturdy muscularity of an elk, a majestic female figure brandished her weapon of choice, the single blade of a Spitfire propellor; next to her, lithe yet stocky as a brick shithouse but moving with the nimble grace of a schoolgirl, a silver-headed figure in a Hamilton Accies top glared threateningly with deceptive mildness; there was a space beside him, a mysterious absence in the shape of a Celtic warrior queen on a horse, now occupied by a gracile sharp-tongued valkyrie, something between Brigitte Bardot and Brunnhilde with a light sprinkling of Noel Coward; while in the rear slumped a morose untidy creature in shapeless tweeds husking cardamoms as if his life depended upon it. It was the renegade superheroes from planet Bookshopfacebook!!!

But where was Captain?

A glance upwards to the starlit canopy overhead supplied the answer: suspended above them, a ghostly shadow in the first strong rays of the rising sun, was a splendid fire-balloon, which the intrepid feline held level with dexterous use of his tail while with both paws he hurled turgid volumes of deadly prose down on the upturned heads and faces of the startled AristoZombies and their ultra-tough companions, the Sanitary Squad.

It was all over in an instant, a few brief moments, then a period of several days during which the fighting raged incestuously without cease and never stopped.

Then suddenly, it was over.

‘Hey, Babes, breathed Trojan Huge as the warm musky figure of Costanza leaned over him!’

‘Hey yourself, big boy, she excalamted huskily!’

‘I had the wiredest dream, Babes, smiled Trojan’ I thought you were dead and I was fighting AristoZombies and all sorts of wired shit,’

‘You were, Hun, breathed Costanza a little sadly with a wry smile.’ This are the dream!

‘Then what where is this where that I find myself in which husked Trojan?’

‘Dunno Babes husked back Costanza fading as she spoke.’

But I think it might be some kind of battlefield container and you’ve been kidnapped for further experimentation.

‘Then she was gone’

With a wild he woke to find himself unconscious in a long oblong box made of aluminium and tied with leather straps where he could see nothing except the darkness all around.

It seemed like the end, but maybe it was also the beginning...