

Taina's eyes bulged in horror as she beheld the giant bumblebee looming over her. She cried out in alarm, but Gellen assumed her outburst was inspired by ecstasy, not fear, so he kept going, plunging even faster into the orifice between her shapely, twitching legs. He did not sense the presence of the interloper; surely they were safe from prying eyes, lying on the lawn in the middle of the master's hedge maze with only the moon to bear witness – and She would not be shocked by the carnal acts She herself inspired.

"God gods, Gellen, there's a monstrous bee over us!" Taina shrieked, thrusting an arm at the sky. "Look at it! Look!"

His lust-crazed brain still did not comprehend – until a shadow suddenly draped itself over them. Then, at last, he paused and looked over his shoulder.

"My gods!"

He pulled out of Taina and spun around, gaping at the monster hovering a hundred feet above them. But his fearful scream quickly turned into a laugh as he realized the truth: The bee was actually a big wicker basket, about eight feet long, sporting bold yellow stripes, with a spinning propeller sticking out of its butt and big, fan-shaped wings protruding from its sides – wings that, oddly enough, were not fluttering like a bee's wings should, or flapping like a bird's, but strangely stationary. And stranger still, there was no gas bag above the "bee," yet it hung in the night sky, suspended by some force he could not fathom.

"Silly girl," he said, "it's just an airship of some kind. See? There's people sitting inside."

"People!" she cried. "Oh lord!" She grabbed the maid's uniform lying beside her in the grass and draped it over her naked body, her face blushing in mortification...

And inside the big wicker basket, the passengers regarded the scene below with great amusement, chortling at the servants scrambling desperately to clothe themselves.

"I think those two need to cool off just a tad," said Sir Waldraff Fammory Bleen, the pilot, as he reached into the breast pocket of his leather flight jacket and took out a silver flask. He uncapped it, held it over the side of the cockpit and turned it upside down, yelling "Cheers!" as the liquor rushed toward the target below.

Kersplash!

The whiskey missed the man but got the maid square in the face, eliciting a gasp and a yelp, and the young man responded by shouting foul oaths and shaking a fist at the "bee" – while his other hand tugged at his boxers, trying to pull them over his turgid prong.

Guffawing with glee, Sir Waldraff shoved the throttle forward and the airship buzzed off into the starry night. But one of his passengers was not amused.

"Now why did you have to go and do that?" Languid Bleen said. "What a waste of perfectly good whiskey!"

"Fear not, my dear," Sir Waldraff said as he pocketed the flask. "There's plenty more where that came from. I wouldn't dream of leaving you high and dry."

He pushed the joystick forward, sending the airship into a shallow dive, his passengers cringing as the moon-bathed scenery rushed by – the wide cobblestone streets and huge, manicured lawns and sumptuous gardens and delightful hedge mazes and turreted rooftops of Poshba Hill, Bombalay's most exclusive neighborhood. The airship flew over the wrought iron fence of the Bleen estate, passed the lumbering steam elephants and the high brick wall surrounding the back yard, then banked toward the landing zone, marked by a ring of glowstone lamps mounted on bamboo posts in the center of the garden.

Sir Waldraff adjusted the throttle and the whirr of the spring-powered motors subsided, the tail rotor slowing, the airship losing speed till it hovered directly over the landing zone. He

pulled another lever and the wings folded in halfway, like the sections of a fan, and the airship began to descend. As it neared the ground it was caught by a gust of wind and drifted to the left, knocking over one of the bamboo poles before landing atop a rose bush.

Crunch.

Sir Waldruff killed the motors. The tail rotor spun to a stop. The wings folded up completely, swinging down and in, flattening along the airship's sides. Sir Waldruff climbed out of the cockpit, hopped to the ground and stood there with hands on hips, watching with great amusement as his passengers disembarked. His secretary, Gaston Pertwee, came out first, then reached out to assist Languid, who tripped over a branch and nearly lost her balance, until Gaston caught her in the nick of time.

*Not the first time she's fallen into his arms*, Sir Waldruff mused. *But it damn well might be the last.*

"Oh, look at my rose bushes," she lamented as her feet found purchase on solid ground. "I swear, Waldy, an acre of ground to choose from and you had to land in the roses!"

Tamonash Manjit was the next to exit the Bumble Bleen – his slim, dark frame slipping fluidly over the side like a cat – followed by Vernon Jales, of slightly more husky build, who jumped nimbly to the ground. The last man out was Cadmius Moroque, who showed remarkable skill in extricating his corpulent form from the basket's confines.

Sir Waldruff pulled his goggles off his head, draping them around his neck (which he would soon regret) and strolled toward some chaise lounges on the far side of the garden, his passengers following close behind.

"That was magnificent, Sir Waldruff!" Cadmius puffed. "Simply magnificent! I must say you gave me the fright of my life, but it was well worth it. You've made history tonight, sir. I daresay the Bumble Bleen shall revolutionize the field of aeronautics, and I'm delighted to be a part of it!"

Sir Waldruff picked up a bottle of champagne from an oak ice bucket sitting atop an octagonal glass-topped table.

"I concur, sir," Vernon said, stroking his well trimmed beard. "Your contributions to civil aviation will earn you a spot in the textbooks. Generations yet unborn shall sing your praises for all time."

"Thank you," Sir Waldruff said. He popped the cork and filled a series of long-stemmed crystal glasses before returning the bottle to the bucket. He handed the glasses to his guests, who raised them high.

"To Sir Waldruff!" Cadmius said.

They all echoed his words, and drank a toast to their host.

Sir Waldruff smacked his lips, looking quite satisfied with himself, then turned to Cadmius and said, "I must correct you on one point, Moroque. The Bumble Bleen will, indeed, revolutionize aeronautics. But you won't be a part of it."

Cadmius' smile dimmed slightly. "I don't understand."

"I may not be an aeronautical expert like Manjit and Jales, but I do know this. For an airship to fly most efficiently, it must be streamlined and lightweight – nothing unnecessary hanging on, dragging it down. So tonight I'm streamlining and lightening. You're not pulling your considerable weight and you have to go. I'm terminating your employment, effective immediately."

Cadmius' mouth fell open. It took a few seconds to get it working again. "Are ... are you joking?"

“Certainly not! I never joke about business.”

“What do you mean I’m not pulling my weight? I’ve busted my ass for this company!”

“With an ass like yours, that would require more TNT than exists on the planet.”

Sir Waldruff sat down in one of the chaise lounges. Cadmius loomed over him.

“You can’t do this to me!” Cadmius bellowed. “I built that textile mill up from nothing. I’ve worked twelve hours a day, five days a week, ever since the buyout. You know that!”

“And I work fourteen hours a day, seven days a week,” Sir Waldruff said. “That’s what’s required in this business, and you just can’t cut it any more. So don’t bother showing up at the factory tomorrow. I’ve left orders with Bulzar that you’re not to be admitted.”

“This ... this is outrageous! Just last month you said everything was fine.”

“Yes, everything is fine. But fine isn’t good enough. I’m a man of superlatives. You are not. It’s as simple as that.”

Cadmius’ face turned red, like a boiler about to blow. His hands clenched into meaty fists.

“You bastard! You dirty bastard!”

“Calm yourself, Moroque. Have a drink.”

“Pah!”

Cadmius hurled his glass to the ground, then yanked the champagne bottle out of the bucket and threw it as hard as he could. Its flight ended abruptly when it collided with a brick barbecue a dozen yards away and exploded in a shower of shards.

“You know, I was going to offer you a thousand pounds in severance pay,” Sir Waldruff said.

“A thousand pounds!” Cadmius sputtered.

“But now it’s down to nine hundred. I’m deducting a hundred for that very expensive bottle of champagne you just broke.”

“Why you...”

Vernon touched Cadmius’ arm. “Calm yourself, sir. These things happen in the business world. You should learn to roll with the punches.”

Cadmius jerked his arm away. “Easy for you to say!”

“Always the peacemaker, eh, Jales?” Sir Waldruff said. “But I must correct you, also. Your reference to civil aviation is a tad out-of-date. You saw how I was able to sneak up on that couple tonight. No noisy steam engine to give us away. No giant gas bag to attract the eye. And if I paint over those yellow stripes and make the basket all-black, the Bee will be practically invisible at night. Imagine how effective my airship will be on reconnaissance missions and commando raids! All I have to do is install a couple of Rattling guns in the nose and a bomb rack underneath, and my Bee shall carry a very nasty sting indeed!”

“You can’t be serious,” Vernon said.

“Of course I’m serious. I intend to sell my design to the War Department. And it shall be called the Bleen Bee, not the Bumble Bleen. A bit more dignified for a war machine, wouldn’t you say?”

“But you assured me the Bumble ... the Bleen Bee was being developed for peaceful purposes, a means of transportation, not annihilation.”

Sir Waldruff took another sip of his drink and replied nonchalantly, “I’ve changed my mind. Now that the instability problem has been solved, there’s no reason to limit my craft to such mundane functions as transportation when it can serve as a stable, and highly mobile, gun platform.”

“Gun platform! To mow down our fellow human beings!”

“To mow down our enemies.”

“But that is not my vision!”

“Vision? Hah! I’m the only one here who *has* any vision! The rest of you are blind. Deaf, dumb and blind.”

Tamonash touched Vernon’s arm. “Tough luck, old chap, but we must face facts. Having the Bleen Bee in Vindania’s arsenal will make our country more secure. And how can you have peace without security?”

Sir Waldruff snorted. “Vindania? What makes you think I’m selling my invention to the Vindanian government? A bunch of rug salesmen grown too big for their britches, that’s what they are. No, it’s the Foggish War Department I’ll approach first.”

“But...”

“The Foggish!” Vernon roared.

“Of course,” Sir Waldruff said. “Don’t you feel a sense of loyalty to your homeland, Jales?”

“Our bloated empire has enough weapons of war. We certainly don’t need any more!”

“An empire can never have enough weapons.”

“This is an outrage! If you do this, I shan’t re-sign my contract. In fact, I hereby resign, effective immediately. Contract be damned!”

Sir Waldruff smirked. “And I suppose you’ll go crawling to Waversham, eh?”

“You’re damn right I will! He has no intention of getting into defense work. You lied to me about that. But now my eyes are open.”

“Your eyes are open, my dear Jales, but you’re myopic. With the Bleen Bee I’ll conquer the airship market, both military and civilian, and by the time I’m through there won’t be any more Waversham Aerodynamics. I’ll be the only game in town.”

“We’ll see about that. Maybe I’ll help Waversham run *you* out of business instead!”

Tamonash shook his head. “Don’t burn your bridges, Vernon. Sir Waldruff is right. We live in a dangerous world, and new inventions with military applications must be developed and deployed. Although I’d prefer to see the Bleen Bee flying Vindania’s colors, I don’t mind seeing the Union Jack on the side of the basket.” He looked at Sir Waldruff. “And there’s no need to repaint the Bee, Sir Waldruff, or confine it to nocturnal missions. Once my new formula is perfected, the Bee will be truly invisible, even in broad daylight. It shall be the most feared weapon in the world!”

Sir Waldruff chortled. “You’re still working on that stupid invisibility formula, I take it?”

Now it was Tamonash’s turn to scowl. “Of course I am. Why do you call it stupid?”

“I apologize. A poor choice of words. It’s not stupid. It’s insane.”

“I thought you were impressed with my new project.”

“Yes, impressed that a grown man would waste his time on such balderdash. If that’s how you want to fritter away your life, go right ahead, but you’ll get no financing from me.”

Tamonash’s eyes hardened. “You can’t mean that. You gave me assurances.”

“No, I was humoring you. But now that your work on Cloudanium is done, I see no need to continue the charade.”

“But I’ve run up a huge bill with Mackleduff Alchemicals, with the understanding you would pick up the tab. If you back out now, you’ll ruin me!”

“That is none of my concern.”

Vernon touched Tamonash’s arm and said, mockingly, “Tough luck, old chap, but we must face facts.”

“Oh shutup!” Tamonash snarled.

Languid staggered toward her husband. “Aw, come on, Waldy, quit being such a prick. Why do you always have to come down so hard on everybody and everything, huh? Friends, servants, employees, dogs, cats, rose bushes, you crush everything in your path.”

“Only if they get in my way.”

“Bullshit,” Cadmius said. “Some men are ruthless because they have to be. They crush obstacles because it’s the only way they can survive. But you do it for sport. You do it to satisfy some sick, sadistic urge to humiliate and destroy.”

Sir Waldruff set down his glass and rose from the chaise lounge. “I suggest, Moroque, that you leave the psychoanalysis to Zigmund Froyt. It’s not your forte. What the devil *is* your forte, anyway? In all the years I’ve known you, I’ve never been able to figure out exactly what you’re good at, besides eating and blathering and wheezing like a leaky gas bag on a sinking dirigible.”

For a moment, Cadmius stood stock still. Then his beefy right arm lashed out with surprising suddenness, his fist connecting with Sir Waldruff’s face, just below the left eye, his Chuffield College class ring slicing the flesh. Sir Waldruff staggered back, swaying to the right, just in time to get a face full of champagne from his wife. He seized her by the shoulders and shoved her toward the glowering Cadmius, who tried dodging to the side but stumbled over the chair and fell to the ground with a loud thud. Languid landed on top of him, emitting a hen-like squawk.

Sir Waldruff started to walk around the duo, heading for the telegraph device mounted on a steel post on the far side of his chair, but Cadmius bucked Languid off and rose to his feet with surprising agility, blocking the way. Sir Waldruff glanced at the outer wall, where a steam elephant was lumbering by, its engine emitting a low, hissy growl, the glowstone spotlight on its forehead sweeping slowly back and forth. But the driver’s attention, and his light, were focused on the fence line, not the garden, and he passed by, oblivious to the drama unfolding so close at hand.

Sir Waldruff had another way to summon his guards – the whistle hanging from his neck. But as he reached for it, Tamonash lunged forward and grabbed it, snapping the chain and hurling the whistle to the ground. Sir Waldruff gave him a shove and Tamonash stumbled sideways, colliding with the octagonal table, grabbing its sides to keep from falling. Tamonash spied the pick sitting in the ice bucket and started to reach for it, but Sir Waldruff darted a hand into his flight jacket and whipped out a pepperbox pistol, cocking the hammer. Tamonash froze.

Sir Waldruff’s head whipped to the right as he spotted Vernon Jales near the magnolias, bending down and reaching for a rock.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Jales,” Sir Waldruff said, swinging the gun toward him, and Jales immediately lost interest in garden decor. He straightened up and turned around, his dark eyes glowering.

Sir Waldruff turned back to Cadmius and Languid.

“Get away from that telegraph,” he barked. They complied.

He walked over to the device and grabbed the lever, shoving it all the way forward, then pulling it back till it pointed to “Security.” A moment later the bell on the telegraph rang and a red lever swung around to the same position. Help was on the way.

Relieved, Sir Waldruff smiled grimly at his guests. “The party is over. In more ways than one. For all of you.”

“You bastard,” Tamonash growled. “If you didn’t have that pistol I’d...”

“But I do have the pistol. As usual, you’re outmatched.”

“You son of a bitch,” Vernon rasped. “Someday I’ll...”

“‘Someday’ is a term used by losers,” Sir Waldraff said. “How fitting it’s such a big part of your vocabulary.”

“Bleen,” Cadmius growled, “I’d advise you to reconsider your actions. Other men have tried to cross me in the past, and they...”

“And they all ended up far more successful than you.”

“You insolent cur, I’ll...!”

“Silence!” Sir Waldraff commanded. His eyes darted from one hate-filled face to the next. A sneer curled his mouth. “That’s better.”

He reached inside his jacket, pulled out a blue silk handkerchief and ran it over his moist face, then held it against his bleeding cheek.

A moment later the back door of the house opened, flinging light onto the lawn, and two men trotted toward the garden – Conron Fasloff, a young, uniformed guard, and Dake Jerrington, head of security, a beefy man whose head resembled a chunk of badly chipped granite.

“What’s the problem, sir?” Jerrington said as he and Fasloff entered the garden.

Sir Waldraff gestured at his guests. “Escort these people off the premises, Jerrington, and put them on the blacklist. If they ever return, shoot them on sight.”

Jerrington and Fasloff exchanged a surprised glance. “You want all of them on the list, sir?” Jerrington said.

“All of them.” Sir Waldraff turned to Languid. “And tomorrow, my dear, I intend to visit my solicitor and initiate divorce proceedings.”

“Why you dirty...”

He turned to Gaston. “She’s all yours, Pertwee. You lucky man. And you needn’t bother cleaning out your desk or your rooms. Javes has already attended to that. You’ll find your belongings by the side door. Take them” – he gestured at his wife – “and that, and get the hell out.”

Gaston’s twerpy little face actually registered an emotion: befuddlement. “I’m being ... let go?”

“No, I’m firing your bloody arse!”

“Might I ask why, sir? I thought I was discharging my duties in a satisfactory manner.”

Sir Waldraff came toward him, his eyes cold and sharp as the shards of glass twinkling in the grass near the barbecue. In a gelid voice he replied, “You discharged your duties just fine, Pertwee, but I can’t abide you discharging your dick inside my wife. I will not tolerate a cuckold – although I can’t imagine what you see in this cheap, gold-digging, over-the-hill booze-bag. Go ahead and bang her fat ass off, for all I care, but do it on your own time.”

Gaston’s thin nostrils flared slightly, and the muscles of his puny jaw clenched. For a moment Sir Waldraff thought the man might actually have a backbone and exhibit a modicum of anger or defiance, but instead Gaston spun on his heel and slunk off, heading toward the house. Languid hurried after him. The other guests followed, casting murderous glares at Sir Waldraff as they passed, with Jerrington and Fasloff bringing up the rear.

Smirking, Sir Waldraff pocketed his pistol, then went to the table, picked up his drink and strolled over to the brick wall, letting out a contented sigh as he gazed up at the heavens, reliving his flight. Oh, how glorious it had been, zooming through the star-sprinkled sky, the landscape spread out below him, the crisp night air brushing bracingly at his face and tousling his hair. He had been a god up there, looking down upon the mere mortals of this world, knowing he was above them all, in every way.

He glanced over his shoulder at the little airship, squatting amidst the ruined rose bushes. The blood stains were still clearly visible on the wicker pilot's chair – the blood of Seno Nirad, who had died in the crash of Prototype 1 six months ago. Sir Waldruff could have had the chair cleaned or replaced, but he'd kept it the way it was, a grisly reminder – to himself and others – of the price one paid for failure. But that was all over now. Tonight's flight had been a resounding success. No more need for painful reminders.

He lifted his glass to the moon, toasting the bright orb.

*My future is as bright as the moon. With Cloudanium I can make the smallest airships in the world. And the biggest ones, too. Without the need for gas bags, ships can carry ten times the cargo and passengers within the same envelope space. And make ten times the money. I shall dominate the aeronautics industry, and run Waversham and those other fools into the ground.*

He downed the rest of his drink, smacked his lips.

*Someday I shall conquer you, too, Mr. Moon. I shall build a craft capable of traveling through space, and I shall claim you as my own. Perhaps the planets, too, even the stars. Then I shall truly be above it all. I used to say, 'the sky's the limit,' but there are no limits. Not any more. Look down, Mr. Moon, and tremble in awe. Look down and behold your conqueror, Sir Waldruff Fammory Bleen!*

Thuck!

He felt a pang. And looked down.

*There's a knife in my chest. I'll be damned.*